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Identifying Impressions of Baba Yaga Navigating the Uses of Attachment and Wonder on Soviet and American Television

Baba Yaga. Her name conjures up images of dark forests, glowing skulls, grotesque bodily features, cannibalism, and her iconic flying mortar-and-pestle and chicken-legged hut. Many of these images were introduced to Western audiences through the exquisite artwork of fin de siècle Russian artist Ivan Bilibin, and her stories reached Western audiences through translations of Aleksandr Afanasyev's *Narodnye russkie skazki* (Forrester, xiii). Baba Yaga is the most "popular and complex figure in Russian tales," a "truly national" Russian, and "virtually all Russians are familiar with her through books and animated films" (Balina et al. 13). Her story has been passed down through generations, wars, and revolutions. Although Baba Yaga is firmly associated with Slavic traditions, her popularity and presence have been on the rise globally at least since the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991, facilitated by print and audiovisual media forms.

Baba Yaga is probably the most well-known and evocative Russian folklore character in the West. Although she rarely is the protagonist, her presence is felt and appreciated in books and film and on television and the Internet—from children's TV and supernatural drama to fairy-tale blogs, YouTube channels, and GoodReads comments. Online blogs and reviews develop a recurring theme of Baba Yaga appreciation and fascination. People identify her as an intriguing, ambiguous, dangerous, and memorable figure. For instance, GoodReads reviewers point out the ongoing ambiguity and enjoyment evoked by Gregory Maguire's *Baba Yaga* in his 2014 middle-grade novel *Egg and Spoon*. A few readers complain that contemporary American references, such

as when Baba Yaga anachronistically mentions the breakfast cereal Cheerios, are “a bit jarring” or “ring false” because they do not represent her in her native Russia. Still, most of the reviewers claim her as a favorite character (“I loved every scene with Baba Yaga”), with several lamenting that she does not appear until later in the book (“*Egg and Spoon Reviews*”).¹ In an interview Maguire also relished Baba Yaga’s eccentric character and confessed that he himself “took dictation whenever Baba Yaga decided she had something to say” (Diaz, n.p.).²

There could be many reasons for Baba Yaga’s enduring presence and popularity. One cause is pure curiosity and wonder about her character. Baba Yaga is ambiguous, and her “personality and function change from tale to tale” (E. Warner 73). She can be a child-eating ogress in one tale, and in the next she can possess the knowledge of immortality or help the protagonist find his missing bride. Baba Yaga herself “encompasses the paradoxes of nature: life and death, destruction and renewal, the feminine and the masculine” (Balina et al. 13). Perhaps for this reason readers and viewers of Baba Yaga are, as Sibelan Forrester suggests, “intrigued by Baba Yaga’s potent dualities (death/life, senility/fertility, destruction/renewal, villainy/benevolence, masculine/feminine)” and thus “seem as responsive to her magic as previous generations” (xlv).³

Baba Yaga certainly does leave an impression on readers and viewers in the twenty-first century, and her popularity and presence on television allow us to explore viewing practices associated with an intriguing and powerful traditional character. In her book *Fairy Tales Transformed?* Cristina Bacchilega discusses a fairy-tale web that analyzes “reading and writing practices” through intertextual associations, media adaptations, and cultural critique (ix). Although there is wonder in reading traditional tales and their contemporary adaptations, there is also power in viewing stories. Viewing requires intertextual, and intermedial, practices to analyze and interpret how and why stories, particularly fairy tales, continue to leave impressions on their audiences. How audiences identify with specific characters relates to the variety of viewing practices afforded by film and television. Specifically, Jason Mittell focuses his study of television storytelling on contemporary practices such as binge viewing, paratextual engagement, rewatching, and forensic fandom (39–44).⁴ We suggest that such practices invite and may be motivated by viewers’ identification with and allegiance to specific characters as portrayed on TV. The rise of Baba Yaga on international television provides an excellent case study for analyzing viewing practices associated with identification and allegiance because the character is so often remembered by viewers, even though she is not the main protagonist in tales or television shows. To gather information and data about Baba Yaga in Soviet, Russian, and American television, we first relied mostly on word-of-mouth

stories and memories. Not only do memories indicate viewer identification, but word of mouth is particularly useful in finding meaningful and impactful Soviet television shows featuring Baba Yaga, because actual data about what appeared on television in the Soviet period is scanty.⁵

Baba Yaga's effect on readers and viewers can best be described by the Russian word *vpechatleniye*, which most closely translates to "impression." More than any English word, *vpechatleniye* provides a nuanced definition and explanation of the concepts of identification and attachment. This term is particularly useful when describing fairy tales, because Russian speakers often use *vpechatleniye* to describe the effects that a story (specifically a traditional narrative) has on their psyche and memory. In other words, Russians often use this word in casual conversation as an emic term of oral literary criticism (Dundes) to describe a story's effect on them. It has the connotation of an imprint making a deep, lasting impact on a listener, reader, or viewer. Related concepts from American rhetoric, literary, and media studies include alignment, allegiance, and identification (Burke; Clark; Mittell; Smith). Smith's book *Engaging Characters* develops and distinguishes these terms, especially alignment and allegiance, to analyze film spectators' engagement with *characters*. Briefly, for our purposes, Smith examines narrative strategies that cognitively *align* viewers with certain characters, and he also studies emotional *allegiance* to characters resulting from various ways in which viewers experience sympathy. We find each of these terms useful for understanding practices that help viewers take deep impressions from fictional characters they see on television, including Baba Yaga.

Vpechatleniye relates to specific ways of engaging characters and therefore, particularly, to the Burkean idea of identification, which is both a rhetorical mode and a literary mode, described by Gregory Clark as "hope in the capacity of human beings to judge wisely and deliberately how they will interact with each other" (n.p.). Kenneth Burke affirms that "one wants to be affected" by another in discursive interaction, not merely persuaded (284). Media studies scholars consider how the desire to be affected works in parasocial relationships with fictional characters, in addition to real-life interlocutors (Mittell 124). Smith analyzes these relationships at length through the concepts of alignment, attachment, and allegiance, exploring the "level of engagement at which spectators respond sympathetically or anti-sympathetically towards a character" (62). In analyzing Baba Yaga's presence on Russian and American television, we argue that viewing wonder tales leads to *vpechatleniye*, or a deep and lasting impression of identification, attachment, and allegiance. This identification with Baba Yaga is especially intriguing in American audiences, given her foreign, Other status. Such interactive involvement is both a cause for and an effect of viewing fairy tales and foregrounds issues of fantasy and realism.

Baba Yaga's presence on the transnational and transmedial stage allows us to better analyze what Bacchilega calls the "competing uses of magic, enchantment, and wonder across cultural and media platforms" (ix). Although enchantment can certainly lead to consumerism, as Bacchilega argues, wonder can also lead to literal and figurative states of affective and cognitive impression with viewed fictional characters. Baba Yaga's presence and popularity on Russian and American television allows us to explore how forming such deep impressions of a traditional character on television can provide transcultural viewers with the tools to navigate between imagination and reality, thus helping them better understand the ambiguities of life, including transnational cultural politics.

Viewing Baba Yaga with Identification and Allegiance

There is something wondrous about the human capacity for identification and allegiance toward fictional characters. The terms *wonder*, *enchantment*, and *magic* all carry different connotations while similarly denoting something fantastic and extraordinary. Bacchilega argues that magic is "normalized as the mysterious ways in which the world works to produce immediate gratification," whereas enchantment has a "spellbinding" effect on the audience, which usually leads to consumerism (5). The term *enchantment* also denotes being enthralled or enslaved and may have negative implications in fairy-tale scholarship because of the authoritarian aspects of Bruno Bettelheim's *Uses of Enchantment*. Although few dispute Bettelheim's claim that children can use the darker elements of fairy tales to work through difficult issues (which is itself a form of literary identification), many fairy-tale scholars critique his scholarly and interpretive oversimplifications and miscues.⁶ Whereas *enchantment* has ambiguous meanings, the term *wonder* is generally positive, and the terms *wonder* and *enchantment* can be brought together to inspire awe, curiosity, and innovation (Bacchilega 5). Writing of enchantments' "disjunctive temporalities," Kay Turner suggests interpretive practices that unite "critical analysis and self-discovery" and connect with "fictions of identification or disidentification" (44). We add that wonder and enchantment are able to exist more symbiotically when they are connected with the idea of *vpechatleniye*, because they are linked with readers' and viewers' impressions and sympathy.

Because Baba Yaga leaves such an impression (or *vpechatleniye*) on her viewers and readers, she allows us to explore two powerful aspects of wonder and fairy tales: identification and allegiance. Burke's rhetorical theory of identification is an extension of persuasion. He quotes Aristotle: "You persuade a man only insofar as you can talk his language by speech, gesture, tonality, order, image, attitude, idea, *identifying* your ways with his" (56). However, Burke

also asserts that the theory of identification goes beyond the Greek political campaigns described by Aristotle and can have an aesthetic quality found in stories and folklore (Hansen 51). Literature can be “for use” to persuade an audience to identify with a particular character, such as John Milton’s Samson (Burke 4–8). Smith incorporates “a combination of cognitive evaluation and affective arousal” into his conceptualization of how film spectators engage characters through emotional allegiance (62). His ideas are adapted and applied by Mittell to the complex storytelling and viewing practices of television. Mittell favors Smith’s concepts over Burkean identification because “viewers do not literally think of characters as standing in for them . . . or imagine themselves as being characters” (129). Still, as a rhetorical mode, Burke’s concept involves more than a one-to-one correspondence between character and viewer. Identification and allegiance can be powerful tools for eliciting *vpechatleniye* in an audience, with the impression and attachment involving not only the character but also perhaps the story, episode, television series, actors and producers, fans, cultural milieu, aesthetics, and values that viewers associate with the show.

Gregory Hansen elucidates Burke’s theory of identification, saying that “Burke interprets identification as the use of language to negotiate identity within groups” and personal identity (52). If Burke’s “primary interest in ‘identification’ is an end in itself ‘as when people earnestly yearn to identify themselves with some group or other,’” then Burkean theory can help us understand “ways in which people establish and negotiate their identity within a social context rather than simply showing how the speaker uses artistic discourse for persuasion” (Hansen 54). Fairy tales provide a social context in which people, from children to adults, identify, forge, and redefine social mores and identities. Marina Warner confirms this linkage, suggesting that the “genre’s themes are real-life themes and the passions are real-life passions: getting by and getting what you want, knowing that the odds are stacked and that all might be lost. . . . Luck is powerful, but resourcefulness, often amoral, is praiseworthy” (79). The fairy tale offers a safe, distanced place for children *and* adults to identify with and understand themselves and their paths in the world.

Fairy tales and figures such as Baba Yaga can help people negotiate their identity and establish discursive interactions within a social context, even as this social context is transmitted across different media and involves empirical and fictional beings. The change from oral to written tales transforms the way *vpechatleniye* acts on a reader or listener, just as the transition from written to visual narratives influences the way in which imagination, reality, and wonder are brought together. Whereas in oral and to some extent even written performance the audience may not visualize every detail, they create mental images of the story through their own imagination. Although something may be lost

in seeing a wonder tale on-screen (i.e., viewers do not have control over *how* their favorite tale or character is portrayed and brought to life), something is also gained. The viewer has the opportunity to critique the way a wonder tale is portrayed by comparing it with imagined images. One could make the same argument about hearing a storyteller. For example, children object to changes or abridgments when they are told or read their favorite stories saying, “That’s not the right way!” Yet what seems different about modern media, especially in their recent manifestations, is the potential to rewatch and catch all the details, whereas in oral performance it is easier to gloss over some elements. Often, the *vpechatleniye* is made stronger through the combination of seeing, hearing, viewing, and re-viewing the performed tale.

Indeed, Baba Yaga has had a long, transformative, and transmedial life. Oral tales about her date back to ancient Rus’, and the first written tales were published by Alexander Afanasyev in the nineteenth century (E. Warner 73). These oral and written narratives affected many Russians, particularly during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (Johns 2–9). Although most did not believe that Baba Yaga was a living entity who would show up in their village, stories about the forests, rivers, and the creatures who dwelled there fostered many Russian folk beliefs about her social roles and cultural influence (Ivanits 129).⁷ Baba Yaga’s presence on television, particularly in animated cartoons from the 1960s, where she is portrayed as “omnipotent, dreadful, and comical,” further complicates the questions of how *vpechatleniye* affects the divide between imagination and reality (Zipes, “Foreword,” viii) because viewers form real allegiance with this fictional being.

Whether or not Russians believe her to be real, Baba Yaga is a crucial part of Russia’s identity and past. In the tales themselves she senses Russians with her keen nose, and she tests the mettle and wisdom of protagonists who come to her hut (Zipes, “Foreword,” viii). Baba Yaga’s tests and presence probe the hero’s “strength, cleverness, and worthiness as adults” (Forrester, xli). When the hero or heroine faces up to Baba Yaga’s challenges—whether asking the right questions, giving assertive answers, performing impossible tasks, or winning the graces of her servants—he or she finds the passage home and returns with more wisdom and courage. An encounter with Baba Yaga “forces the protagonists to test themselves and not to delude themselves that there is an easy way to reconcile conflicts” (Zipes, “Foreword,” xi). Facing Baba Yaga gives the protagonists the ability not only to survive but also to thrive back in the land of Rus’ as they gain a greater understanding of themselves and the world around them.

Understanding oneself is tied to maturation, and Baba Yaga’s association with that human process is found in many tales. Her hut, far from the influences of Rus’, becomes an important stage of the hero or heroine’s rite

of passage. It signifies that they are “far from [their] original home” and on the “border of another world” (Forrester, xxviii). For example, in the tale “The Tsar-Maiden,” Prince Ivan leaves home to find his lost betrothed. To find her, he travels to the “thrice-tenth kingdom” and soon comes to Baba Yaga’s hut in an open field (Forrester 166). Traveling to the thrice-tenth kingdom indicates a location away from everyday time and space, a place far away from home. It is not by coincidence that the hero or heroine often first encounters Baba Yaga’s hut when starting on a quest. When the hero or heroine enters the realm of Baba Yaga, he or she faces not only the unknown territory of death but also the possibility of attaining his or her goal, whether it is reunification with a loved one, immortality, or marriage. Encountering death also means learning how to live. Learning how to live means maturation and learning to identify with others in different social contexts, including one’s roles as a son or daughter, husband or wife, father or mother, neighbor or friend. An attachment with Baba Yaga through oral storytelling, tale collections, or audiovisual media invites identification with the wondrous human condition itself.

Baba Yaga and *Vpechatleniye* on Soviet Television

By drawing on Marina Warner’s work to make the compelling case that “wonder tales” are associated with “wandering,” or curiosity, and that this curiosity leads to a new way of looking at and understanding the world (Bacchilega 5), Bacchilega contends that the production and reception of these tales can lead to disenchantment, especially because fairy tales are brought into the marketplace of competing vendors for that very sense of wonder (with Disney being the best-known contender). However, not all involvement with the fairy tale leads to mass consumerism, especially if it is tied to a deep, inner sense of *vpechatleniye*. Baba Yaga is a prime example of this process. Although her figure certainly has been used on everything from T-shirts to lacquer boxes (Forrester, xlv), she has not reached—and probably never will reach—the same level of consumerism as Cinderella, Snow White, or Sleeping Beauty. It is difficult to imagine any developer building a “Baba Yaga Land,” complete with skull-lined fences and rotating chicken-legged houses (although it does make for a frighteningly funny image). Furthermore, when she appears on tennis shoes or in Russian artwork, she is almost always recreated as she appears in Ivan Bibilin’s illustrations: as an old, terrifying hag in a flying mortar and pestle. The objects themselves demonstrate and catalyze attachment with Baba Yaga and make her stories part of everyday life. The *vpechatleniye*, or attachment, she leaves runs deeper than money and purchases. This *vpechatleniye* is not just seen on lacquer boxes or in Russian artwork; it is also seen in the comments Russians make regarding old television episodes about Baba Yaga posted

on YouTube, and it appears in accounts of childhood memories about her stories.

It could be argued that television is itself a vehicle for consumerism.⁸ Although that is a compelling position (especially in American culture), it is important to look at the place where Baba Yaga made her first prime-time appearance: the Soviet Union. Television had an ambiguous life in the Soviet Union; it was simultaneously frowned on as a product of bourgeois culture but also seen as a necessary teaching tool for citizens, and Soviet leaders recognized the benefits of state-run television. Like all media in the Soviet Union, television was meant to create and teach Soviet citizens how to be proper socialists. As Kristen Roth-Ey contends, the “USSR was at base a ‘propaganda state’; culture in the Soviet context was always in the business of educating, training, motivating, and mobilizing” (11). In the 1960s and 1970s especially, the leaders of the Soviet Union were concerned with “modernization,” showing both their citizens and the West that the USSR’s standard of living was better than the West’s (Kruk 90–91, 100). Television was both a material symbol of the USSR’s ability to compete with the West and a way to broadcast the “socialist ‘good life’” to its citizens (Chakars 150).

Soviet television shows were meant to teach the ideals of socialism. They were concerned with *vospitaniye* (upbringing) (Kruk 106). In this way, they were not concerned with consumerism but with developed socialism. However, Soviet channels showed much more than lectures on Leninism and Marxism. Part of socialism meant enjoying entertainment, sports, and cultural events, and these events were broadcast on television. A chart of Soviet television programming from 1962 shows that, when “Central Television broadcast 64 1/2 hours a week, 22 percent were taken up by films; 19 percent, literature and drama; 18 percent, music; 17 percent, news; 14 percent, programs for youth; 8 percent, social and political information; and 2 percent, miscellaneous” (Hopkins 239). Soviet programming varied in genre, but the purpose was the same: to shape Soviet citizens into productive, cultured, and happy members of their society.

The function of the state is distinctive in the Soviet examples, and Soviet televised narratives of Baba Yaga served propagandistic purposes. Although the narratives were for entertainment, they also taught socialist principles suited to the Soviet Union. The protagonists, just like those in the traditional tales, outwit Baba Yaga through problem solving, ingenuity, courage, and hard work. These traits were valued in Soviet citizens and in the *vospitaniye* of Soviet youth. For example, the protagonists in the 1939 live-action *Vasilisa Prekrasnaya* (Vasilisa the Fair) vanquish Baba Yaga through their tenacity and courage. Some scenes in the film are blatantly propagandistic, such as a scene in which Vasilisa goes out and harvests the wheat field, swinging her sickle to prove her

worth through her work.⁹ This scene further identifies Baba Yaga narratives with not only nineteenth-century Russian folktales but also Soviet culture and shows that the tools for becoming a productive Soviet citizen are hard work and industry.

Baba Yaga on Soviet television allowed producers to show how these socialist principles of hard work, innovation, and aptitude based in peasant culture could be applied to any time period, including their own. For example, televised adaptations of Baba Yaga narratives also included revisions in the way the protagonist escaped from Baba Yaga, exhibiting a modern Soviet influence on the televised narratives and allowing viewers to identify more with both the protagonist and Baba Yaga. One obvious example of this is the 1981 animated cartoon *Ivashka iz dvortsia pionerov* (Vanya from the Pioneers' Club).¹⁰ In this revision of the classic Baba Yaga tale, a young Soviet boy is kidnapped by Baba Yaga's infamous geese and brought to her iconic hut. Baba Yaga tells Vanya that he will be *ugoshchenia* (the treats) for her birthday party with other dastardly Russian demons, such as Koschei the Deathless, the dragon Gorynych, and an evil tomcat with deadly eyes. Although Baba Yaga traps Vanya, he is not the only desirable wunderkind at the Pioneers' Club. The Young Soviet Pioneers (the closest American equivalent would be the Boy Scouts or Girl Scouts) are learning how to be good citizens by magnifying their talents. As the geese fly over the Pioneers' Camp, there are many talented Soviet children they can choose from (from a violin-playing young lad to ballerinas). However, they choose Vanya, the engineer. These moments show how cultured all Soviet children are—or should be—and also imply that the Pioneers' mantra “Bud' gotov! Vsegda gotov!” (“Be prepared! Always prepared!”) could be applied to many situations, including frightening encounters with an enemy, even a supernatural one like Baba Yaga.

Vanya represents an ideal up-and-coming Soviet citizen for the 1980s because of his ability to use his brain, fearlessness, and tools to get out of a bad situation. For example, Vanya uses his tools to break out of his cell while Baba Yaga is napping, and he then ties her up with duct tape. Baba Yaga—the magical, all-powerful witch—is unable to escape from the all-powerful duct tape. Although Baba Yaga taunts Vanya and insists that her friends will still devour him, the child pays her no heed and uses his intelligence and innovation to thwart his enemies. He creates a remote-controlled mouse to distract the tomcat, uses magnets to disable Koschei the Deathless (who is covered in metal armor), and defeats the dragon with a fire extinguisher.¹¹ Ultimately, Vanya ends up making Baba Yaga's chicken-legged hut blast off into space, and Baba Yaga is forced to give up. She gives him a free ride back to the Pioneers' Club with the same geese who abducted him. This version of Baba Yaga is both different from and similar to traditional tales. Unlike in stories such as

“Geese and Swans,” this Vanya does not need his sister Masha to save him. He only needs good tools and his brain.

One could say that Vanya is reality and Baba Yaga is the imaginary character; yet Vanya uses his imagination to escape the deathly reality intended by Baba Yaga. And although the cartoon is clearly the product of someone’s imagination, the story becomes real through its visualization on the screen, even as the viewer knows that there is a tactile world beyond the television box. The story also hits closer to home with Vanya being a “real” Soviet pioneer from the 1980s. Indeed, this rendition is well suited to the Soviet Union of its time, with its emphasis on engineering and science; and like traditional Baba Yaga tales, it encourages resourcefulness and ingenuity. Vanya shows what developed socialism looks like in children: they appear as dedicated future Party members who calmly work through problems and crises.

However, through contemporary comments on YouTube about Soviet television programs featuring Baba Yaga, it is clear that viewers have a strong attachment to her not because of lessons they learned through those televised narratives but because of an identification and *vpechatleniye* with the character herself. The attachment to Baba Yaga is shown in the sheer number of people who continue to watch and rewatch Soviet shows featuring her. “Vanya from the Pioneers’ Club” has had more than 1 million views on YouTube, indicating that this is a popular television clip, one that viewers want to rewatch. Many of the comments identify with Baba Yaga. For example, viewers enjoy quoting Baba Yaga’s humorous, “Shto ty, shto ty, shto ty, shto ty delaesh?” (“What are you, what are you, what are you, what are you *doing*?”). Another viewer said, “Oh, I feel bad for Baba Yaga on her birthday,” and another one simply said, “Yes, that was the time!” indicating that he identified this animated clip with the “good old days” of his childhood (“Vanya from the Pioneers’ Club” Comments). Although viewers did enjoy watching Vanya outwit Baba Yaga, they also identified with the witch herself, leading them to nostalgia, humor, or even compassion.

It is also important to note the way Russians identify Baba Yaga with the actor who played her in many Soviet productions (including the 1939 *Vasilisa the Fair* and the popular 1964 *Jack Frost*, a film that was also shown on television). This actor, Gregorii Frantsevich Millyar, became a Soviet film and television legend because of his portrayals of Baba Yaga. He was so well-known in the role that he was often called Baba Yaga instead of Gregorii Millyar.¹² The Russian public not only identifies with the story of Baba Yaga but also associates Millyar with her, further showing the way that wonder can lead to *vpechatleniye* and even define someone’s identity. The forms of this strong *vpechatleniye* with Russians and Baba Yaga can vary, whether through a popular actor, the lessons of ingenuity, or even a person’s first encounter with tales

featuring her. This connection helps readers or viewers to understand and reconnect with their past, but it also helps them to form their own identity and gives them the tools to create the bridge between imagination and reality. As Burke suggests with identification, literary works invite listeners, readers, and viewers to identify themselves in fictional situations and apply the traits and actions of fictional characters to their own life circumstances. In this way, Baba Yaga fulfills a function in televised narratives similar to her role in the traditional tales: she is a catalyst for change, growth, and innovation.

Baba Yaga and Identification in American Television

Burke's theory of identification makes room for explaining social contexts through not only realistic settings but also "idealistic" ones (46). Idealistic elements create a "kind of magic or mystery that sets its mark upon all human relations" (46). These idealistic goals can range from helping adults and children create a balance between reality and fantasy to fostering cultural understanding. The figure of Baba Yaga helps promote transcultural understanding through wonder and *vpechatleniye*. Perhaps surprisingly, the way Baba Yaga functions on international television, particularly American television, is similar to the way she functioned in the Soviet Union. However, on American television she is also attached with foreignness. Baba Yaga flies in from Russia's Wild East into American suburbs, whereas in most Soviet television shows the protagonist wanders into her territory. All the same, Baba Yaga teaches values, such as overcoming fear through problem solving and courage, and her presence allows the protagonists, especially children, to discover the tools necessary to cope with fear in their imagination and in reality.

For example, Baba Yaga is used to impress upon children that they should face their fears head-on. In the 1999 episode "What Scared Sue Ellen?" in the American children's animated series *Arthur*, the usually unflappable Sue Ellen fears that the scary noise she heard in the woods was made by Baba Yaga.¹³ She actually believes that the stories she has heard from around the world are "real," whereas the urban legends that her friends Binky, Buster, and Arthur tell are simply "silly, made-up stories." When she tries to convince herself that she is being "silly" by believing that a monster could be in the woods, she says, "There are no such things as monsters. Not here," implying that she *does* believe in monsters, just not in America. She then imagines that something could have "followed us from someplace else. Something overseas." She imagines the treehouse to be Baba Yaga's chicken-legged hut, and her dreams are filled with a leering Baba Yaga threatening to eat her: "I don't like chasing my meals, little one!" Although this sequence might be seen as a little girl's imagination gone wild, because Sue Ellen is so globally savvy, it also represents the effects of

globalization not only on her but also on her classmates. They face the possibility that cultural influences are reciprocal and that American cultural imperialism may actually be part of a cultural exchange that somehow extends to bringing Baba Yaga to their own hometown. It thus shows the *vpechatleniye* of these international stories on Sue Ellen's otherwise phlegmatic psyche.

Furthermore, the *vpechatleniye* that Baba Yaga leaves on Sue Ellen spreads as the child shares her wonder and fear with her friends, suggesting that *vpechatleniye* requires some form of medium to spread—and that it disseminates particularly well through stories. The boys initially make fun of Sue Ellen's fear. Buster suggests that they could “catch” the house and “barbeque” it. Sue Ellen gets angry at the boys for making fun of her, and Arthur chides her: “Why [is *this* story real]? Because it's one of your stories and not ours?” He requires her to question her tidy division of foreign authenticity and local fabrication, and this query appears in connection with stories and, by extension, the very categories of imagination and reality. What *does* make a story real? Is it only real for those who know the story and who accept it as part of their culture? By saying that her stories are real because they come from foreign countries and not Elwood City, Sue Ellen suggests that part of what makes a story real is how we first internalize it. Sue Ellen does not believe her friends' stories. But she does believe the narratives of Baba Yaga. Although the audience never finds out precisely where Sue Ellen first heard the story, she shows a picture of Baba Yaga to her friends from a book, suggesting that the child only believes what she reads—she only trusts the stories that have become attached to her and have elicited a kind of *vpechatleniye* on her through her own literacy as it informs her imagination and sense of wonder, as well as her sense of reality.

By transmitting her *vpechatleniye* to her friends, telling them the story of Baba Yaga through words and pictures, Sue Ellen makes the witch become more than a story to them—she becomes the “thing in the woods,” and something real they too have to face. They imagine the treehouse as Baba Yaga's hut and tracks in the woods as chicken footprints. In many respects, Baba Yaga becomes real through her visualization. Just as Arthur and the gang imagine that the treehouse as Baba Yaga's hut is real, so the animated version of the character and her shelter become real to American audiences through visualization. There is power in viewing stories. Although viewers lose some control over how the story is visualized in their imaginations, seeing wonder tales on television deepens the *vpechatleniye* by incorporating multiple senses and makes it more possible for identification to happen as characters and situations become audible and visible to viewers.

As Baba Yaga becomes real for Arthur and the gang, they have to face their fear of her, just as in the traditional narratives. They face their terror head-on by

preparing with the “proper equipment.” Although this proper equipment is nothing more than raincoats, goggles, and tennis racquets, it gives them courage, which is—perhaps—the only equipment they really needed in the first place. But the actual physical tools help them conquer their fear in reality. Facing their fright helps them realize the value of their friendship, and it also helps them realize that there was nothing to be afraid of in the first place; what they thought was Baba Yaga turns out to be a neighbor’s lost dog. The disconcerting possibility that a terrifying foreign reality could have permeated the local scene resolves in favor of a completely mundane explanation. Although the result is somewhat disappointing (it would be a fascinating plot twist if Baba Yaga did have a summer cabin in Elwood City), it also shows the interconnection between imagination and reality and how we need tools to help us distinguish what is genuinely important.¹⁴ For Arthur and the gang, conquering their fear helps them all realize the importance of courage and determination.

This *Arthur* episode also teaches the power of stories—even those that *aren’t* one’s own but still evoke attachment—and the way stories affect individual and group identity. Sue Ellen, Arthur, Binky, and Buster have a stronger friendship after their experience in the woods (even if their fear was unfounded), and their social identity becomes more unified. They understand each other better and learn to compromise more. Whereas Vanya shows a distinctive strain of Soviet individualism to save himself, Arthur and the gang use an unexpected American communalism for self-preservation. Vanya learns to understand himself and his talents better from his run-in with Baba Yaga, whereas Sue Ellen and her friends learn to understand others better, developing empathy for everyone’s stories, regardless of geography and ethnic origin. Comparing the two cartoons shows that encounters with Baba Yaga encourage an understanding of how the world works. To survive this world, people must understand their own strengths and weaknesses as well as those of others. Doing so increases understanding that the world (like Baba Yaga) is full of ambiguities—fear and courage, harm and help, reality and imagination, death and life, Soviet individualism and American communalism. Facing these dichotomies head-on allows for personal growth and an increase in empathy.

Further, just as Gregorii Millyar is associated with Baba Yaga in Russia, Sue Ellen is associated with Baba Yaga in this narrative. The episode itself is called “What Scared Sue Ellen?” although a Google search indicates that many people call the episode “Sue Ellen and the Baba Yaga.” In fact, Jill Terry Rudy’s 15-year-old son immediately associated the Baba Yaga episode of *Arthur* with Sue Ellen when asked whether he remembered watching it. Her 20-year-old son also associates Baba Yaga with the *Arthur* series. Because Sue Ellen is known throughout the series as experienced and highly competent, it is memorable that in this episode she appears so vulnerable. Those who have seen the episode remember it as

scary. For example, a Tumblr writer who recaps every *Arthur* episode mentions that the dream sequence in which Baba Yaga chases Sue Ellen and then tells her not to be late for school “really terrified me as a kid” (“Susan’s Arthur Recaps”). From personal experience, Megan Armknecht remembered this episode more than other ones, particularly because of the references to folklore. She thought the Baba Yaga character was fascinating, not only for her connection with Russia but because Baba Yaga was a powerful female character who seemed more complex than the typical Euro-American witch. Discovering Baba Yaga whetted her appetite to learn more about fairy tales from other countries, helping her to realize that these stories offered more than just dainty princesses and the iconic “true love’s kiss.” She had a certain attachment to the figure of Baba Yaga, as have many who have seen this episode. This *vpechatleniye* might lead to different reactions, but it strikes an unforgettable resonance. Identifying with Baba Yaga, or with the children she terrifies, leads to a better understanding of individual interests and the outside world. It teaches that the world is not as black-and-white as it appears to be and that opposition and ambiguity might lead to progress.¹⁵

Engaging Baba Yaga

In any tale—oral, written, or televised—Baba Yaga remains dual-natured and a force to be reckoned with. She appears on television in a variety of ways; yet, just as in the traditional tales, she is always complex and fascinating. Thus her presence leaves a deep impression on the viewer. This *vpechatleniye* comes from wonder, and it can lead the viewer to identification and allegiance with the fairy-tale genre and with a certain actor, television character, life lesson, intriguing mix of fantasy and reality, and Baba Yaga herself.

Through these identifications we can see that Baba Yaga performs similar functions in televised narratives across cultures and across history. Narratives with Baba Yaga, whether in 1980s Soviet Russia or 2000s American children’s shows, encourage ingenuity, problem solving, and growth for the characters and their viewers through confrontations with Baba Yaga. Both characters and viewers must acknowledge that she exists, whether in reality or in their imagination, and must be able to use social tools and cultural values to conquer their fear. As in the traditional tales, Baba Yaga is dangerous, but she is also useful. Her presence can prove either death or life, depending on the way the protagonist confronts his or her challenges: thus she helps protagonists mature and find a more secure place in their societies.

Because transnational audiences attach to Baba Yaga in similar ways (specifically in the lessons they learn from her), this identification can also be a catalyst not only for personal growth but also for cultural understanding. Even though Russia and the United States have traditionally competed against each

other on the geopolitical stage (a dichotomy that is starting to reappear), in reality Russians and Americans really are not that different from each other; they share similar fears, hopes, dreams, and values. Although we cannot “fully predict or control which stories mingle with, influence, anticipate, interrupt, take over, or support one another” or the way a story will “act on its listeners/readers/viewers,” fairy tales, specifically their characters, *do* make an impact (Bacchilega 19). Beyond that, allegiance to a televised character can help viewers construct a social identity and find their place within various social and cultural contexts. They are prone to fuel their attachment to the character with further empirical, critical, and creative investigations and deeper viewing, reading, listening, and writing practices. Once viewers are more secure about their place in the world through this allegiance, both on a local and an international level, they will be better equipped to act and promote understanding. As Zipes says, “Fairy tales are informed by a human disposition to action—to transform the world and make it more adaptable to human needs, while we try to change and make ourselves fit for the world” (*Irresistible Fairy Tale*, 2). Identification leads to *vpechatleniye*, which leads to action; and it can bring about change and help us to become more fit for problem solving through multiple perspectives on the characters, people, and world around us.

Will Baba Yaga’s presence and popularity increase? We predict it will, but we cannot divine whether in the future her story will be told more often through books, television, film, or newer media. Whatever the communicative technology, she may remain as she is now: rarely, if ever, the central character in the narratives. Yet many contemporary fairy-tale adaptations play with point of view and provide backstories that could reverse and further complicate her ambiguous, villainous roles. Even if audiences are tiring of antagonists’ backstories, perhaps they will continue to be intrigued to see how someone as ambiguous and remarkable as Baba Yaga could be produced as the protagonist or to consider why she steals the show as a secondary character. There should be more research, analysis, and interpretation involving Baba Yaga. Her power to attach generations of listeners, readers, and viewers to her tales and characteristics is strong, and her ability to identify her audience with her tale could allow for progression and action in the realms of global and cultural understanding.

Notes

1. Maguire includes Baba Yaga in two books for children and middle school readers: *The Dream Stealer* (1983) and *Egg and Spoon* (2014).
2. Maguire also describes this Baba Yaga as “a combination of Auntie Mame and Eleanor Roosevelt played by Carol Burnett” and explains that “at times I felt like I was channeling a deranged Miss Piggy” (Diaz, n.p.).

3. For current information about Baba Yaga on film, consult the International Fairy Tale Filmography (IFTF) at iftf.uwinnipeg.ca/. For televised appearances, refer to Fairy Tale Teleography and Visualizations (FTTV) at fttv.byu.edu/. When I checked both websites on February 26, 2016, I found thirteen Baba Yaga films and five televised appearances.
4. We do not discuss these viewing practices in detail here but note that they all take viewers' time in order to engage with characters. For example, binge watching involves viewing an entire season (or longer) in one marathon session, whereas rewatching, seeing an episode more than once, could involve DVD boxed sets, renting, streaming, or even the old-fashioned rerun. Paratextual engagement involves accessing and possibly contributing to wikis, reviews, databases, interviews, trailers, ads, and websites (both official and fan sites) for content and critical commentary on shows, whereas forensic fandom takes this up a notch to attempt to decipher and predict what has or will happen with plots and characters.
5. Megan Armknecht is particularly indebted to Olya Ohara (email communication, December 27, 2014) and Aleksandr Dolgov (Skype interview, November 29, 2014) for their insights and links to Soviet television programs with Baba Yaga. To analyze *vpechatleniye* (impressions), Megan gathered comments from Soviet, Russian, and American television shows on YouTube to see how people reacted to these shows and characters, particularly Baba Yaga. The interviews Megan conducted with Russian and Ukrainian natives were informal, but they were useful, as all the people she talked to spoke at length about Baba Yaga and about Baba Yaga on television (particularly Soviet television).
6. This also includes controversy surrounding abuse allegations at Bettelheim's Orthogenic School for emotionally disturbed children and inconsistencies in his academic training and credentials. See Vanessa Joosen's chapter on Bettelheim in her *Critical and Creative Perspectives on Fairy Tales*.
7. Another good source on Russian folktales (especially about Russian water and forest spirits) is Paxson (133–36).
8. For an in-depth analysis of this concept, see Hay and Baxter.
9. Many folktales across the world also talk about how a woman must prove herself by working hard, particularly through domestic tasks. However, *Vasilisa the Fair* (1939) puts an agricultural spin on this motif, which is particular to the Soviet Union. The 1930s in the Soviet Union were known for grain and industrial quotas, and showing Vasilisa working the fields highlights her industry, not only proving her worth as a woman but also presenting her as a role model for Soviet workers.
10. The literal Russian translation is "Vanya from the Pioneers' Palace," which is a kind of children's recreation center for extracurricular activities. The Young Pioneers was a children's group in the Soviet Union that featured recreational activities and taught socialist values. Although theoretically not obligatory, almost all children after third grade joined; it was part of growing up in the Soviet Union.
11. All three of these villain-companions (the tomcat, Koschei the Deathless, and the dragon Gorynych) feature in Russian fairy tales, often along with Baba Yaga. Baba Yaga frequently has a tomcat who accompanies her and performs evil errands for her, and she often has advice or the key to defeating Koschei the Deathless.
12. Aleksandr Dolgov, Skype interview with Megan Armknecht, November 29, 2014.

13. *Arthur*, an animated children's show created by Marc Brown, airs on PBS. It features Arthur, an 8-year-old anthropomorphic aardvark, his friends, family, and their adventures in the fictional American town of Elwood City. It is geared toward children and teaches socialization skills as well as providing entertainment and encouraging reading. Arthur began airing on September 2, 1996, and is still in production. It is one of the longest-running shows on PBS, second after *Sesame Street*.
14. Don Tresca and Claudia Schwabe discuss various implications of intersecting television shows with reality, fantasy, wonder, and fairy tales in their *Channeling Wonder* chapters.
15. See Blake.

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