Mariya Krivoruchko, University of California, Los Angeles

**Winnie the Pooh and Vinni-Pukh: An Animated Comparison**

The visual differences in the American and Soviet animated versions of the A.A. Milne book *Winnie the Pooh* (1926) are noticeable without animation expertise. Though the story of the silly plush bear is largely the same, the varying interpretations provide insight into the differences between American and Soviet animation. Walt Disney’s *Winnie the Pooh and the Honey Tree* (1966) and *Winnie the Pooh and the Blustery Day* (1968), which preceded *Vinni-Pukh* (1969), *Vinni-Pukh idet v gosti* (1971), and *Vinni-Pukh i den’ zabot* (1972), certainly influenced their Soviet counterparts, though the Russian versions are sometimes called anti-Disney. These variations will be explored in this paper, which focuses on the broader cultural contexts of the animated films.

American animation began in the 1920s because of its potential to make profits at a time when the cinema industry was booming. Disney soon became one of the most successful animators, largely due to its conflation of art with business and profit.¹ Disney cartoons were famous for their retrogressive nature that consisted of capturing the spirit and innocence of childhood. The Disney animation style displayed aesthetically minded Baroque mannerisms: characters running around through colorful frames with musical accompaniment. Disney

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animation was also visually realistic; the rotoscope in *Snow White* (1937) set a new standard for characters’ movement, which could now be traced directly from a live actor. Realistic arcs and secondary motion also helped set a standard for realism in American animation. The use of cel-animation in features like *Winnie the Pooh and the Honey Tree* allowed the animators to be more efficient, no longer having to draw out tedious background details over and over; instead they would vary the celluloid paper with the foreground. Multiple layers for each frame added to the realistic three-dimensionality of the cartoons. Besides setting a standard for realism (not to be confused with Soviet Socialist Realism) Disney’s ability to tap into the childhood spirit was perhaps what made the studio so successful in the capitalist market. Ever adaptable to the times, Disney gave people what they wanted to see: retrogressive fairy tales that allowed the paying audience to escape the realities of the world for ninety or so minutes.

*Vinni-pukh, Vinni-pukh idet v gosti,* and *Vinni-pukh i den’ zabot* were produced in a state-sponsored system with zero profit incentive. The *Soiuzmul’tfil’m* (Animator’s Union) studio, founded in 1936 under the name *Soiuzdetmul’tfil’m* (Children’s Animation Union) produced 1,530 films during its existence.² These films, some of which have been incorporated into Soviet pop culture such as *Cheburashka* (1969-1983), *Nu, pogodi!* (1969-2006), and *Ezhik v tumane* (1975), did not have to compete in a commercial market. The animators were paid the same amount regardless of success. Many of the cartoons, the *Vinni-pukh* trilogy included, are much

shorter than the typical Disney production. The tedious pen and ink work (as opposed to cel-animation) took a long time to produce, giving animators no reason to produce a ninety minute film when a nine minute one would receive air-time and do just as well.

To begin the comparison, I will discuss how the contrasting visual elements in Disney’s *Winnie the Pooh* and the *Vinni-pukh* trilogy portray reality in different ways. While Disney’s *Winnie the Pooh* and just about all the other characters are photographically realistic, characters in *Vinni-pukh* are not. They are fashioned from a Soviet Socialist Realist aesthetic, which dictates that form should be subordinate to content. In Socialist Realism, art became a means of disseminating Socialist propaganda, and cultivated an oppositional stance toward bourgeois capitalist values from the time of the October Revolution. This was understood to be a logical culmination of Russia’s socially responsible Golden Age. In the 1890s, troubles in Russia’s cosmopolitan, capitalist society led to the decline of realism and the rise of modernism in Russian arts. This was emblematic of the growing separation between art and the masses. Meanwhile the Realist tradition continued to develop largely in the West. When the Bolsheviks came to power in 1917, they imposed new standards for artistic expression that were aimed at extolling the nascent ideological system. The concepts of *klassovost’* [class consciousness] and *narodnost’* [national character] began to merge, and artists began to create artwork that looked forward toward a brighter Socialist future. They wanted their characters’ inner qualities to be

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evident in external portrayal. Aleksandr Isaevich Solzhenitsyn illustrates the attitudes of Soviet Socialist Realism in the words of one of his characters in his novel *The First Circle* (1968): “If I look at the person whose portrait I am painting and discern potential qualities of mind or character which he hasn’t so far shown in life, why shouldn’t I depict them?”

Soviet animators rejected the Disney tradition of photographic realism achieved through cel-animation and sketching using the rotoscope. Even today, the most respected modern cartoons by Yuri Norshtein (*Ezhik v tumane*, 1975) are created manually with pen and ink. This rejection is slightly counterintuitive; Socialist Realism is supposed to accurately represent reality, and photographs are usually the most effective means to this end. However, the portrayal of characters in the Soviet tradition emphasizes inner qualities. This was their manner of capturing a sharper snapshot of reality.

In the cartoon based on the first chapter of Boris Zakhoder’s translation, *Glava 1, v kotoroi my znakomimsia s Vinni-Pukhom i neskol’kimi pchelami* [Chapter 1, In Which We Are Introduced to Winnie the Pooh and Several Bees] (1969), Winnie the Pooh encounters bees in the honey tree. Compared to the visually and acoustically realistic bees in the Disney version, these insects are larger in size, more exaggerated in color, and scarier in general. This could be attributed to the long-standing tradition of Socialist Realism in the Soviet Union. Other characteristics of Socialist Realism in *Vinni-pukh* include the bear’s soft, plump lines and

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simplistic movements as well as Piatochok’s very small, fast moving frame. The bear is nice, simple, not very bright, and likes to eat too much honey. Piatochok is frantically neurotic in a cute way and relies on his best friend Vinni-pukh rather than exercising independence. The good characters are portrayed as especially nice and cute while the villains do not hide their antagonistic natures.

Another visual difference between the Disney and Soiuzmul’fil’m versions of Winnie the Pooh is the complexity of the animation. Khitruk had allegedly never seen the Disney version before making his own, though many visual aspects seem to disprove this claim. It is likely that if Khitriuk did not see the Disney version himself, someone from his animation team did, intending to differentiate the Soviet animation style from the American one. This would explain the blatantly contrasting visual techniques. Vinni-pukh is also a product of the Post-Stalinist period, which conditions its aesthetic. The simplicity and bareness of the cartoon could be an attempt to veer away from the monumentalism of the Stalin regime (1928-1953). This effort to change was evident in architecture and other art forms as well. Stalinist architecture was a mix of Greek classicism, the Baroque, and traditional Russian elements. It was marked by extremism — immense pale-colored buildings, heavy balconies, huge arcs, and incredibly tall towers. This same grandeur was present in Stalinist art, much of which featured Josef Stalin in monumental

statues that took thousands of workers years to erect. The monumentalism and grandeur of Stalinist art is completely absent in Vinni-pukh, which contains little more than a sketch background and a bear whose paws are not even attached to his body. Perhaps this was one of the ways that Soiuzmul’fil’m strived to break away from its Stalinist past, and move toward the future. It can be argued that Vinni-pukh was not anti-Disney, but rather post-Stalinist.

In the Disney version, framing fills a vast majority of the shots. In the honey tree scene, the tree occupies the left side of the frame and is shaded in a realistic manner with a knot and cracks in the bark. Branches, leaves and a realistically shaded sky with a sunlight source fill the other corners of the frame. There is little or no white space left. Characters are constantly running around, filling the frame with Baroque mannerisms. On the other hand, the framing in the Soiuzmul’fil’m version is bare; in the same honey tree scene, there is nothing in the shot besides Winnie the Pooh, the balloon, and the bees. No branches frame the characters. There is no complex layering or light sources and the close proximity between Winnie the Pooh and the tree is not explicitly evident in each shot. The scene design is simplistic; no additional visual information is provided other than the characters and a simple background. White space is always present.

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Christopher Robin, the main character in the original A.A. Milne book, is present in Zakhoder’s translation, but not in the *Vinni-pukh* cartoon. It can be argued that he was omitted from the film because his human presence detracted from the level playing-ground established by including solely animals. The lack of class distinction among the characters reflects Socialist values. Apart from this omission very little about *Vinni-pukh* is visually striking. The lighting is not realistic — the sunlight’s angle is not clear, and the source of lighting is a mystery. The camera angle tends to focus directly on the main character instead of varying camera angles by looking down from above or up from below. The scene design is extremely simplistic; no additional elements are present other than the characters and a simple background. There are no complex layers (just a foreground and a background) and no illusion of a three-dimensional reality. The color scheme is not bright, nor is it pastel like the Disney version. It contrasts sharply from the pale blue sky to the dark brown bear to the dark blue balloon. The animation remains honest about its pen-and-ink nature, and does not strive to be anything visually exceptional.

Even though *Vinni-Pukh* is not particularly captivating visually, it has remained extremely popular over the decades. Its absurdist humor appeals to both child and adult audiences. Perhaps the remaining popularity of his mumbling can be traced back to the OBeRIu - *Ob”edinenie real’nogo iskusstva* (OBERIU – Association of Real Art), which is generally regarded as the last Russian avant-garde. Attributed largely to the works of Alexander Vedensky,
Daniil Kharms, and Nikolai Zabolotsky, the literary style of the OBERIU in the 1920s and 1930s involved scrambled narratives, the destruction of semantic coherence and linguistic realism, and the portrayal of parts of the story as separate from the whole. OBERIU was quickly denounced in Soviet newspapers as a counterrevolutionary protest against the struggle of the proletariat, and was called meaningless and transrational. Even though public activity by the “literary hooligan,” OBERIU, died down after the conservative press’ reviews, the absurdist tradition seems to have had a lasting impact on Russian culture. The works of the OBERIU became popular after decades of silence in the 1960s and 1970s, around the time Vinni-pukh was being produced. The avant-garde tradition of the OBERIU was known as bessmyslitsa or nonsense — something that the character Vinni-pukh was also famous for. He frequently walks around uttering nonsense rhymes such as this one:

Если б мишки были пчёлами  
То они бы нипочём  
Никогда и не подумали  
Так высоко строить дом  
И тогда  
(конечно, если бы пчёлы – это были мишки!)  
Нам бы, мишкам, было незачем  
Лазить на такие вышки! 

Vinni-pukh is ironic, philosophical, and nonsensical at the same time. Perhaps the lines in Zakhoder's translation have remained popular enough to spoof because of absurdism’s

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widespread presence in Soviet culture. Absurdist poetry is still prevalent today, through works such as those of Eduard Limonov.

The cartoon’s remaining appeal can be attributed to the time period of its production, the Leonid Brezhnev regime (1964-1981). The mid 1970s under Brezhnev was a reversal of the sharp growth seen in previous decades, and is considered a period of economic stagnation. Shortages of consumer goods occurred frequently, and the economy and society were seeing little change.\(^{10}\) Perhaps the absurdism characteristic of the little bear’s simplistic utterances captured the interest of audiences much like the avant-garde art of the past did because it created the illusion of movement in an otherwise stagnant society. On Russian websites today, the cartoon remains a reported classic, receiving 3.87 out of 4 stars in unofficial user ratings.\(^{11}\) \textit{Winnie the Pooh} on the other hand is not regarded as such a pop culture phenomenon in America, though it was once also popular. Perhaps this is due to its lack of dual humor, or because it fails to stand out among all of the other Disney cartoons at the time.

The elements of \textit{Vinni-Pukh} — the visual simplicity, Socialist Realism, and absurdism — are not anomalous, but indicative of Soviet trends in animation. \textit{Toptyzhka} (1964) by Khitruk presents a bear whose movements are similar to that of Vinni-Pukh. His body parts are almost detached, his motions unrealistic. \textit{Dariu tebe zvezdu} (1974), also by Khitruk, has a very similar

\(^{11}\) KinoAfisha. “Vinni-Pukh”, http://kino.ukr.net/movie/1712/, (accessed June 1, 2010).
visual aesthetic. There are only two layers, the foreground and the background. The characters are the only animated entities. There are no complex layers or camera angles. The colors are dull. The framing begins bare, though the shot composition changes once the automobile and synthetic fabrics have been invented, for they hasten the speed of life. Likewise, the frames start moving much quicker. The visuals also become more absurd. Cupids emerge and lift up the cars; strange colors flash. The animated absurdist tradition is also present in *Ostrov* (1973), an allegory about the loneliness and isolation of the individual in modern society. It portrays a man stranded on an island in an extremely simplistic shot lacking in color while all sorts of strange things pass him by. There is no storyline or semantic cohesion. It is almost like a visual representation of an OBERIU-style poem. All of the *Soiuzmul’tfil’m* productions follow a similar visual style, affirming that the simplicity and absurdism of *Vinni-Pukh* are not anomalous, but rather accurate representations of Soviet animation trends.

The same can also be said of *Winnie the Pooh and the Honey Tree* and *Winnie the Pooh and the Blustery Day* in relation to other Disney films. *Robin Hood* (1974) for example, looks extremely similar. The complex forest background, the multiple layering, the pastel and light coloration, and the animals’ realistic movements are all Disney trademark details. The Baroque style characterizes each scene. All cel-animated Disney films around this time period can be identified based on these criteria.
Though the visual differences between *Vinni-pukh* and the two *Winnie the Pooh* films are striking, the reasons behind the variations run deeper. The busy, realistic, retrogressive cartoons made infamous by Disney were profit-driven in the capitalist market and catered to their audience. The simplistic, unmonumental, progressive, Socialist cartoons produced by *Soiuzmul’tfil’m* on the other hand, were state-controlled and had no market push. They were striving to diverge from their impersonal post-Stalinist past, using duality in humor to appeal to audiences immersed in the absurdist tradition. Perhaps it is not fair to say that *Vinni-pukh* was anti-Disney. Instead, like other *Soiuzmul’tfil’m* productions, it was an attempt to create art on par with the caliber of Disney, yet in a different style that reflected its Soviet cultural context.