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Studio Melnitsa's *Bogatyr* Cycle: Notes on a Global Approach to Contemporary Studio Animation

With the exception of anime scholarship, studies of contemporary commercial animation remain predominantly focused on Hollywood studios implicitly positioning their output as the dominant and indeed paradigmatic mode of animated cultural production.¹ This article aims to move beyond Anglophone animation studies' often uncritical embrace of an enduring Western canon by advocating for and modeling close analysis of commercial feature-length animation in comparatively understudied national contexts. Specifically, the following pages present a brief examination of twenty-first-century Russian studio animation, which offers an illuminating case study of the ways in which the medium can function as a space for negotiating the parameters of a nation's social, political, and artistic landscape.

Mixing Hollywood animation tropes with recognizably nation-specific narratives, historical references, and visual influences has become a leading trend in Russian animation in the twenty-first century. This is especially true

1 Recent examples include Dietmar Meinel, *Pixar's America: The Re-animation of American Myths and Symbols* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016); and Sam Summers, *DreamWorks Animation: Intertextuality and Aesthetics in Shrek and Beyond* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020).

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of Melnitsa Animation Studio's *bogatyr* (Russian epic hero)² cycle, a series of animated features loosely based on Russian heroic epics that begins with *Alesha Popovich i Tugarin Zmey* (Alesha Popovich and Tugarin the serpent, Konstantin Bronzit, 2004). In their *bogatyr* films, Melnitsa's signature aesthetic is defined by traditional two-dimensional animation shaped by the visual language of caricature. While the Alesha Popovich of oral tradition is described as sly and crafty, Melnitsa transforms him into a bumbling jock, overemphasizing his physical prowess and exploiting his dim-wittedness for comedic effect. His juvenile haircut, combined with his large ears and small nose, contrasts with his barrel-like chest and impossibly thick arms, creating the overall impression of a baby-faced bodybuilder. While a priori amusing, such a representation of the epic hero—which set the tone for the portrayal of *bogatyrs* in subsequent franchise installments—registers as transgressively, irreverently humorous to Russian audiences accustomed to somber, majestic visual depictions of the folk hero, as exemplified by Viktor Vasnetsov's emblematic 1898 oil painting *Bogatyrs*, featuring Dobrynya Nikitich, Alesha Popovich, and Ilya Muromets (all three of whom appear as protagonists in Melnitsa's animated cycle). *Alesha Popovich i Tugarin Zmey* parodies the visual gravitas and pathos characteristic of such traditional *bogatyr* iconography by exaggerating some of its elements (such as the hero's strength) and distorting others (such as his noble steed, which becomes an irritating talking animal). Additionally, as Anzhelika Artiukh has observed, this animation style mocks the ceremonial, government-sanctioned nationalistic fervor of Soviet cinema's heroic live-action epics, which goes as far back as Sergei Eisenstein's *Alexander Nevsky* (1938).³

Alesha Popovich i Tugarin Zmey's embrace of flatness and caricature earned positive reviews, most of which framed it as a welcome resistance to the hegemony of three-dimensional digital animation.⁴ Yet despite the *bogatyr* cycle's efforts to emphasize its home-grown flavor, both within its historically epic diegesis and through its aesthetic links to the historical lineage of Russian drawn animation, its brand of comedy is strongly influenced by American sources. In particular, the films borrow from *Shrek* (Andrew Adamson and Vicky Jensen, 2001) in parodying folklore both visually and verbally. When the familiar Hollywood tropes are applied to a quintessentially native narrative about a folk hero, the resulting humor owes much more to DreamWorks than it does to Russia's legendary Soyuzmul'tfil'm studio. For example, critics have noted more than a passing resemblance between *Shrek's* cheeky sidekick Donkey and Alesha Popovich's wise-cracking horse Yulii, whose incessant running commentary and exasperating demeanor likewise recall his American predecessor.⁵ On a more fundamental level, the Russian series uses the self-referential parody

2 For more on *bogatyrs* and Russian epic folklore, see James Bailey and Tatyana Ivanova, trans., *An Anthology of Russian Folk Epics* (1998; London: Routledge, 2015).

3 Konstantin Bronzit, interview by Anzhelika Artiukh, *Iskusstvo Kino*, no. 8 (2005): 118.

4 For example, see Birgit Beumers, "Folklore and New Russian Animation," *Kino Kultura*, no. 43 (2014), <http://www.kinokultura.com/2014/43-beumers.shtml>; and David MacFadyen, "Alesha Popovich and Tugarin the Serpent," *Kino Kultura*, no. 9 (2005), <http://www.kinokultura.com/reviews/R7-05alesha.html>.

5 Beumers, "Folklore."

mechanisms that were reintroduced into mainstream animation thanks to *Shrek's* success to both verbally mock and visually deconstruct folkloric and cinematic clichés.

To complicate their intertextual and political framework further, the *bogatyr* films owe their approach to physical reality and movement to a different facet of US animation; their visual humor relies on the rules of “cartoon physics” defined during the Golden Age of Hollywood animation.⁶ For example, in an early scene from *Alesha Popovich i Tugarin Zmey*, the titular hero’s plan to drop a giant boulder on an attacking horde goes disastrously wrong, resulting in the boulder rolling down a hill and into his village, where it jumps from house to house, smashing every building to the ground until it suddenly breaks into pieces on top of a church. This recalls the visual style of Tex Avery and Chuck Jones (among others), with its feverish dynamics and its disregard for Newton’s laws of motion. For that reason, it would be problematic to read this film solely as a return to traditional drawn Russian animation. Instead of drawing exclusively on its national artistic lineage, *Alesha Popovich i Tugarin Zmey* mixes American animation comedy tropes (both classic and recent) with a parody of Russian folkloric iconography.

To fully understand the implications and contradictions of the *bogatyr* cycle’s representational strategies, one must take into consideration the political context this franchise was navigating. Scholars have noted the central role that cinema has played—and continues being incentivized to play—in the Putin regime’s continuous effort to “mobilize popular emotions of Russian nationalism.”⁷ Animation did not remain unaffected by this rising tide of nationalist sentiment; in fact, government oversight of animation production became explicit following Vladimir Putin’s highly publicized meeting with well-known animation auteurs Yuri Norstein, Andrei Khrzhanovsky, Leonid Schwartzman, and Eduard Nazarov in June 2011. Following their conversation, Putin publicly expressed support for Russian animation, pledging a significant annual increase in state funding.⁸

The terms of this support are essential to consider. In subsequent reports on the state of the animation industry, the government was said to be prioritizing animation because of its capacity for “propaganda of moral values and patriotism.”⁹ Indeed, the connection between the regime’s push toward nationalism and the style and content of Russian animation features had been noticeable for at least the previous decade. As Stephen Norris has pointed out, animated features released in the first decade of the twenty-first century “used the past . . . to articulate messages about history and nationhood needed for the present.” As he notes, symbolizing Russianness via historical figures or legendary heroes such as *bogatyrs* marks the revival of a

6 Scott Bukatman, “Some Observations Pertaining to Cartoon Physics; or, The Cartoon Cat in the Machine,” in *Animating Film Theory*, ed. Karen Beckman (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014), 312.

7 See Perry Anderson, “Incommensurate Russia,” *New Left Review* 94 (2015): 29.

8 Kirill Agafanov, “Sredstvo Massovoi Animatsii,” *Kommersant*, December 19, 2011, <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc-rss/1832679>.

9 Agafanov.”

century-old propaganda strategy employed by right-wing Russian politicians after the 1905 revolution.¹⁰

Echoing this sentiment, Anglophone animation scholarship has read the *bogatyr* cycle as emblematic of some of the Russian state's most problematic long-standing propaganda strategies.¹¹ Notably, Michel Bouchard and Tatiana Podyakova argue that Melnitsa's franchise affirms "a very nationalist vision of history whereby Kievan Rus was populated by Russians and is considered ancestral to Russia"; they point out that this is not a novel propaganda strategy but "merely an extension of older Russian national narratives that affirm Russia's one thousand year history and view Kievan Rus as the ancestral state to modern Russia."¹² Furthermore, they posit that, in portraying various ethnic groups (such as Asians, Muslims, and Roma) through stereotypes that code them as exotic, dangerous, and inferior to the Russian heroes, the series presents a "Russian for [ethnic] Russians worldview" and promotes "a new vision of nation that is ethnically Russian and Orthodox in faith, with all others being represented as enemies."¹³

In contrast to such critical responses to the *bogatyr* series, the Russian box office has favored the franchise. When *Alesha Popovich i Tugarin Zmey* came out in 2004, it earned more than all its domestic animated competitors combined.¹⁴ Subsequent installments of the *bogatyr* series continued to generate ever-increasing revenue; in late 2012 and early 2013, *Tri bogatyrya na dalnikh beregakh* (*Three Heroes on Distant Shores*, Konstantin Feoktistov, 2012) managed to win the top box office spot during the holiday weekends, eclipsing (albeit briefly) the first part of Peter Jackson's *The Hobbit* trilogy.¹⁵

The commercial appeal of studio Melnitsa's productions inspired the Russian *Forbes* to ask leading figures in Russian commercial animation to unpack the formula behind the studio's success. Most responders pointed to one key aspect: successfully applying a Hollywood-inspired twenty-first-century franchise model to familiar Russian iconography refashioned according to American animation conventions.¹⁶ Animation director Sergey Seregin has noted that Russian viewers respond well to films that are rooted (however superficially) in native culture and history and recognizable visual tropes. Seregin explains that the current film distribution system in Russia,

10 Stephen M. Norris, *Blockbuster History in the New Russia: Movies, Memory, and Patriotism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2012), 215.

11 For a historical discussion of nationalist ideology in folklore-based Russian cartoons (with a relevant emphasis on depictions of Ukraine in particular), see Natalie Kononenko, "The Politics of Innocence: Soviet and Post-Soviet Animation on Folklore Topics," *Journal of American Folklore* 124, no. 494 (2011): 272–294.

12 Kievan Rus refers to a medieval federation that's considered a predecessor state to the modern East Slavic nations of Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus. See Michel Bouchard and Tatiana Podyakova, "Russian Animated Films and Nationalism of the New Millennium: The Phoenix Rising from the Ashes," in *Children's Film in the Digital Age: Essays on Audience, Adaptation and Consumer Culture*, ed. Karin Beeler and Stan Beeler (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2014), 120.

13 Bouchard and Podyakova, 122.

14 Bronzit, interview, 121.

15 Anastasia Zhokhova, "V chem sekret 'Treh bogatyrei,' odolevshikh 'Hobbita' v kino-prokate," *Forbes*, December 27, 2012, <https://www.forbes.ru/svoi-biznes/predprini-mateli/232123-v-chem-sekret-treh-bogatyrei-odolevshih-hobbita-v-kinoprokate>.

16 Zhokhova.

which continues to ensure the omnipresence of American animated imports, “makes it very hard for an animated feature to come out and be profitable, unless it is based on something very familiar like the *bogatyr* stories.”¹⁷

The notion that audiences’ familiarity with the subject matter and visual design of these films was crucial to their success is often introduced in critical discourse on the *bogatyr* franchise. For instance, Artiukh has attributed Melnitsa’s success to the studio’s strategy of drawing on folkloric narratives and a visual storytelling medium that has historically enjoyed mass popularity among Russians, namely *lubok*.¹⁸ Artiukh implies that by evoking an artistic genealogy to *lubok* and presenting themselves as the twenty-first-century successors of that particular art form, Melnitsa’s features tap into a long-standing national fascination with flat, relatively simplistic, brightly colored popular imagery that goes even further back than Soviet caricature. Moreover, as she points out, the “flat *lubok* aesthetic” is a smart branding choice because it immediately differentiates this franchise from Hollywood features, which typically employ three-dimensional animation.¹⁹

Vlad Strukov introduces a more overtly political interpretation of Melnitsa’s success, suggesting that the box office returns of the *bogatyr* films are the result of their “massaging of the national ego of Russian people.” He defines them as examples of “Slavic epos—a cinematic form that may be loosely defined as a fantasy genre based on Slavic/Russian folklore as well as the creatively reworked or vigorously adapted history of early Russia.” According to him, Slavic epos “belongs to the ongoing Russian search for historical lineage and self-definition exacerbated by the metastasis of imperial fatigue.”²⁰

Strukov’s argument reflects the nationalist moods and policies dominating contemporary Russian political discourse, but it does not account for the appeal of Melnitsa’s humor-based approach to epic legends. Elena Gracheva points out that Russian viewers are likely growing tired of solemn, pathos-filled historical propaganda and are thus ready to embrace a low-brow, comedy-based treatment of historical subjects. She writes that “a perfectly heroic hero” is more likely to evoke boredom than sympathy from Russian viewers. She posits that the answer to the “inertia of the state-mandated patriotic tedium” is not Alexander Nevsky or even St. Vladimir but a character like Alesha Popovich, “a goof with the uncomplicated charisma of a ‘simple man’ who is not very smart, but is strong, good-natured, and simultaneously in love with his lady and his motherland.”²¹ Indeed, productions like the *bogatyr* series likely resonate with Russian viewers precisely because they provide an entertaining, pop culture–inflected alternative to more didactic takes on the Putin regime’s patriotic imperative.

17 Sergey Seregin, interview by the author, November 5, 2014.

18 Bronzit, interview, 117. A *lubok* is a Russian popular print dating from the seventeenth to the nineteenth century. See Alla Sytova, *The Lubok: Russian Folk Pictures, 17th to 19th Century* (Leningrad: Aurora Art Publishers, 1984).

19 Bronzit, interview, 117.

20 Vlad Strukov, “Vladimir Toropchin: *Il’ia Muromets and the Nightingale-Robber (Il’ia Muromets i solovei-razboinik, 2007)*,” *Kino Kultura*, no. 22 (2008), <http://www.kinokultura.com/2008/22r-muromets.shtml>.

21 Elena Gracheva, “Novye vremena Konstantina Bronzita,” *Seance*, February 2, 2010, <https://seance.ru/blog/novye-vremena-konstantina-bronzita/>. (my translation).

In conclusion, it is this tension between negotiating the impact and allure of the North American model and striving to honor its own artistic roots, while also adapting to increasingly technologically determined and globalized market forces, that makes Russian animation a productive case study of the complex and interrelated nexus of political, cultural, and industry imperatives that shapes contemporary studio animation produced in the shadow of Hollywood imports. The Russian context not only allows one to analyze animation as a platform for ideological discourse within a specific, understudied national framework, but it also opens up avenues for a larger examination of the various tensions—between national and transnational cultural heritage, independent business and state-run industries, aesthetic traditions and innovation—that non-Western animation studios are often compelled to navigate and negotiate.

Focusing on Russian animation also brings into sharp relief the need to rethink preexisting, US-centric notions of the animation studio and what commercial studio production entails. It is important to note the key ways in which most contemporary Russian studios—and, indeed, many international studios—differ from their Hollywood counterparts. The most readily apparent distinction is their relative size and production capacity. In 2019, Melnitsa's entire full-time staff numbered about three hundred employees.²² For comparison's sake, in 2015 alone, DreamWorks laid off five hundred people.²³ This is at least partially related to the complex funding situation in Russia; animation production in the country has been historically state-sponsored and remains largely dependent on government funds to the present day. While the practice of securing independent investments has become increasingly widespread, many studios still rely at least partly on state support. Since government subsidies cannot compete with Hollywood capital, the budget of a typical Russian studio production constitutes a fraction of that of an American animated feature of comparable length. For instance, *Snezhnaya Koroleva* (*The Snow Queen*, Vladlen Barbe and Maksim Sveshnikov, 2012) cost \$7 million to make, whereas the original *Frozen* (Chris Buck and Jennifer Lee, 2013) set Disney back \$150 million.²⁴

While mine is a limited case study, many of the insights it generates can be generalized toward formulating a broader, more global-minded understanding of contemporary commercial animation production and animation politics. At the same time, this type of analysis not only helps disrupt the US-oriented scholarly status quo and broaden the scope of intellectual inquiry

22 Ramin Zahed, "Russian Studio Melnitsa Celebrates 20th Anniversary at Annelly," *Animation Magazine*, June 7, 2019, <https://www.animationmagazine.net/tv/russian-studio-melnitsa-celebrates-20th-anniversary-at-annely/>.

23 Marc Graser and Dave McNary, "DreamWorks Animation Cutting 500 Jobs; Dawn Taubin and Mark Zoradi Exiting," *Variety*, January 22, 2015, <https://variety.com/2015/film/news/dreamworks-animation-cutting-500-jobs-takes-290-million-charge-1201412212/>.

24 See Amid Amidi, "The Russian 'Snow Queen' Will Open This Friday," *Cartoon Brew*, October 7, 2013, <https://www.cartoonbrew.com/feature-film/the-russian-snow-queen-will-open-this-friday-89439.html>; and Dustin Rowles, "The Return on the Investment of the 10 Most Expensive Animated Films Ever Made," *Pajiba*, December 2, 2013, https://www.pajiba.com/box_office_round-ups/the-return-on-the-investment-of-the-10-most-expensive-animated-films-ever-made.php.

into the subject but also serves to defamiliarize American studio animation aesthetics and politics by providing context that both challenges and complicates existing assumptions about their exceptionality and the nature of their international impact.

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