



Russian Animation Film Screening with Andrei Khrzhanovsky

Thursday, September 25, 2008

2:00-3:30 pm, Georgetown University, ICC 462

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Film director Andrei Khrzhanovsky is a revolutionary figure in the history of Russian animation. In the 1960s he created an alternative to the prevailing official animation style of the 'Soviet Disney' (Soyuzmult film). His first non-conformist experimental films were social parables, and some of them waited for twenty years to be shown to a wide audience. His works are full of visual metaphors; they combine irony and pathos, animation and documentary footage. Khrzhanovsky developed a visual language of animation, treating handwriting as picture: in the 1970s - 1980s he made his famous films based on Pushkin's notebooks. Khrzhanovsky won numerous Russian and International awards for the development of animation. Several films he directed are included in the four-volume collection Russian Animation.



Georgetown Slavic Languages Department's Professor Fedorova and Professor Grenier with Mr. Khrzhanovsky

Introducing Mr. Khrzhanovsky,

Georgetown's Professor Lioudmila Fedorova pointed out that in the Soviet Union in the 1960-70s, animation film enjoyed relative freedom as long as it was considered primarily children's art, which allowed animation artists to "smuggle ideas" that did not conform to the government-proscribed standards. During his presentation, Mr. Khrzhanovsky explained that the possibilities in animation are endless because an animation artist can talk about anything through the use of symbols. He quoted the Russian poet Joseph Brodsky to illustrate the difference between feature films and animation: when Brodsky was asked about the difference between prose and poetry, the poet replied 'it is like the difference between infantry and the air force.' Poetry and animation film, then, are the air force.

Mr. Khrzhanovsky began the film screening with a presentation of his first animation film, created for a graduation project from the All-Soviet-Union State University of Cinematography, where he studied under Leo Kuleshov. The film is called *Жил-был Козявин* (There once lived Kozyavin) and depicts the story of the bureaucrat Kozyavin. Kozyavin is a strict follower of

orders, and when he is told to go in “that general direction” to look for a fellow named Sidorov and tell him that the cashier has come, *Kozyavin* walks in the indicated direction, never straying from his path, until, having walked all around the world (but not found Sidorov), he comes right back to his office, where he unperturbedly resumes his routine work. The film is a commentary on the nature of bureaucracy, and it is universally relevant today as much as it was at the time of its release in 1966.

Inspired by the success of *Жил-был Козявин*, Khrzhanovsky created another social commentary film called *Стеклянная Гармоника* (The Glass Harmonica). This film presents the story of a glass harmonica, which produces music that inspires everyone who hears it to elevated thoughts and wonderful deeds. The film depicts the fate of the harmonica in the City of the Yellow Devil (a reference to Maxim Gorky’s short story of the same name, written about his impressions of New York City), where the citizens are disfigured by greed and other vices. What is easily recognizable in the film is the brutal Soviet reality of denied artistic freedom. The creators had to add the disclaimer of a bourgeois society and the City of the Yellow Devil to make the film more palatable.

However, the inopportune timing of the film’s creation coincided with the Soviet troops’ invasion of Prague in 1968 and the film was not approved for release; moreover, disciplinary measures were taken against Khrzhanovsky and he was sent to serve in the Navy. The film was finally approved for release two decades later, during Gorbachev’s *perestroika*. Even then, the standard cautionary message (which by then provoked a bitter chuckle among viewers) had to be added to the opening credits: “Although the events in this film are of a fantastic nature, its authors would like to remind you of the boundless greed, police despotism, and the isolation and brutalization of humans in modern bourgeois society.” But, at this time there were no funds to release the film to the general public and today only five copies of the film exist.

Next, Khrzhanovsky showed an etude *Шкаф* (The Armoire), which he called an “expression in unexpected form.” In the introduction to the short film, Khrzhanovsky juxtaposed this piece to the wave of Disneyfication of Soviet animation in 1960s.

In the 1970s and ‘80s, Khrzhanovsky’s major project was an animation film based on Alexander Pushkin’s drawings, hundreds of which the poet scribbled in the margins of his notebooks. In the animation film *Я к вам лечу воспоминанием* (I am flying to you through Memory), Khrzhanovsky brings to life the poet’s handwriting and drawings in the animated film.

Concluding his presentation, Khrzhanovsky showed a preview of his latest project, which is unusual in form—in addition to animation, it combines live actors and photographs to depict a movie-length story of Joseph Brodsky’s childhood and life before he was expelled from the Soviet Union in 1972. The film is called *Полтора кота* (A Cat and a Half) and was inspired by Brodsky’s poetry and essays, particularly the essay called “A Room and a Half.”

During this screening, there was only enough time to show a condensed preview-version of “A Cat and a Half,” but Mr. Khrzhanovsky expressed hope that he would be able to show the entire film sometime in the future.

Some of Khrzhanovsky's work is available on Youtube:

Жил-был Козявин (with English subtitles)-

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h7bcqQim6pM&feature=related>

Стеклянная Гармоника (with English subtitles, divided into two parts)-

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0EfZtSaC0kY&feature=related>

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CIFYdvmp8ZQ&feature=related>

Шкаф (with English subtitles)-

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xu_Efobexxw&feature=related

On Pushkin: *Я к вам лечу воспоминанием* (I fly to you through Memory), in 3 parts-

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rKv91DHP78Q>

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3eiAsMYrwf8&feature=related>

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rKv91DHP78Q&feature=related>

On Brodsky: *Полтора кота*, in 3 parts-

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mNuiqios29g>

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oVZLy70dbCU&feature=related>

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YaIz5f4Kngg&feature=related>

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