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Narrative strategies for resistance and protest in Eastern European animation

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Soviet Russia's domination of Eastern European countries for over 40 years (from the fall of the 'Iron Curtain' around 1947 until the 'Glasnost' of about 1990) brought mixed blessings for animation. On the one hand, Soviet policy favoured cinema as an essential, powerful popular artform and maintained busy animation studios not only for each country but also for distinct ethnic groups; animators were often tenured civil servants with guaranteed full-time employment making not only theatrical cartoons but also public service and educational animation, children's films of folk culture and titles and special effects for features. On the other hand, Soviet policy dictated sharp guidelines for subject matter and a strict censorship of both preliminary plans and finished films in order to guarantee that all films upheld general communist ideals and current party agendas. While many animators remained content to concentrate on innocent children's films or benign 'situation comedies', some artists attempted to produce allegorical or satirical works critical of totalitarian regimes, and their careful planning to outwit censorship made them, in some cases, create masterpieces of film art. Four festival prize-winners, one from each decade, demonstrate the changing strategies that their filmmakers used to speak out against totalitarian oppression.

Before the birth in 1960 of ASIFA (the International Animated film Association) with its all-animation film festivals, a newly-made Polish film, *Dom* (Home), won the grand prize at the 1958 Brussels Experimental Film Festival – a $10 000 cash prize. The two animators who collaborated on the film, Walerian Borowczyk and Jan Lenica, used the prize money to emigrate to Paris and West Berlin respectively, where they continued their animation careers in 'freedom'. They had made *Home* during a particularly touchy year in Soviet history: in October/November 1956 Russian troops crushed the Hungarian rebellion against Soviet occupation (and the hopes of neighbouring countries to escape communist domination). A year later, the successful launch of the *Sputnik* satellite

put Russia in control of the skies as well.

Home addresses the issues of people trapped in a repressed world through three strategies. It sets up a complex non-linear structure that the viewer must decipher, which (1) makes it hard for a censor to ban since no individual element is obviously against the rules and the overall meaning is uncertain, and (2) requires the viewer to question the norm, which is a subversive act in itself. They also (3) focus *Home* on the plight of women, which seems to remove it from the political arena, although the thinking viewer will recognise that the ills of the woman arise to a considerable extent from the thought-control and repression of the totalitarian government.

The opening and closing scene of *Home* are the same: above the decaying façades of century-old apartment buildings, flickering patrols lurk (emphasised by Wlodzimierz Kotonski's fine pioneer electronic/concrete musical score). Decades before the helicopters of *Blade Runner* and *Blue Thunder*, these abstractions read as the omnipresent surveillance of the totalitarian state. Seven times we see the occupant of one apartment, a woman (played by Ligia Branice, Borowczyk's wife) waiting, hearing footsteps, looking up expectantly or glancing down contemplatively. Between each appearance of this heroine we see six episodes of radically different styles, which cumulatively probe the daily life of the wife in a repressive society.

The images of the first episode, mostly cut out of scientific texts, show a drill or welding gun assembling a human skull and turning on its perceptive abilities, which gradually comprehend circuitry, music as a mechanical action and furniture, culminating in that quintessential Victorian houseplant, an aspidistra on a pedestal. The sequence forces the viewer to ask: whose brain is this? Is it a man's head thinking of machinery or a woman coping with her home? And what is perception? Is it just a mechanical action? Is it human? Is it controlled by some outside force?

The second episode animates a man in sequential poses obviously cut from a manual of some kind and tinted a pastel yellow. Is it dancing, exercise or self-defense? The main question remains 'What is he doing?', which may be what the woman wonders.

The third episode prompts the question, 'What is she doing?', through an astonishing 'still life with wig'. On a kitchen table top with bottles, glasses, a cannister, an orange and a crumpled newspaper, a blonde wig roams, perusing the newspaper, pursuing the orange, drinking milk from the bottle, breaking a glass and finally scurrying away at the sound of the 'surveillance'. This wig, partly suggesting the empty-headed rambling

Left *Walerian Borowczyk and Jan Lenica working on the animation of the model husband in* Home *(1956)*

Right *The wife eagerly embraces the husband in* Home

of the trapped housewife, partly the dispossessed glamour-hair of the mechanicalised head from the first episode, seems eerily subhuman, menacing, in its impossible ability to drink, break glass, and pursue.

The fourth episode, again heralded by the approaching footsteps, pictures the man as a dehumanised robot through a live action loop repeatedly showing him enter the door and hang his hat on a hook, accompanied by musical scales played on a tinny toy piano, gradually escalating in volume. The fact that the footsteps continue after this episode re-locates the mechanical husband in the mind of the wife, continually waiting (a theme in feminist literature from Natalie Barney's 1910 poem 'Waiting' to Faith Wilding's 1970s performance-piece 'Waiting').

The fifth episode delves deeper into the soul of the woman, following her reveries and longings: lying nude, she remembers 'the olden days', photographs of her grandparents, children's books, romantic church weddings, trips abroad (honeymoons?), and beautiful flowers. For a moment the footsteps intrude upon her sensuous nostalgia and her nude body quickly turns into the waiting woman again. Then in a sixth episode the live action woman approaches the handsome head of a man, which appears to be a hat-model dummy. She fondles, caresses, kisses 'him', her passionate gestures turning into flowers, one of which is tinted scarlet. But the mass-produced, uniform head collapses beneath the heat of her passion, his eye, his nose, his forehead crumbling until only a hollow shell is left. Empty reality fails to satisfy desire. The surveillance sound hovers again; the woman looks up and scurries, even as the wig had earlier. The footsteps relentlessly continue over the end credits: no answer, no solution appears for the woman's paralysed life. While evoking the tragic plight of the confined, dependent woman, *Home* also convicts as guilty the repressive society that dehumanises her and the men on which she is forced to be dependent.

Jiri Trnka's *Ruka* (The Hand), made in 1964–65 just as the Czech New Wave began to blossom, represents the more traditional mode of expressing protest through allegory. *The Hand* was also the last of Trkna's 25 films, as it threw him into official disfavour. In a 1966 interview in *Newsweek* magazine, Trnka complained, 'Too many officials think their opinion is the only one that counts . . . Official taste is bad taste'. 'Luckily', he added, 'unlike Disney, I do not have a child's soul. I do not suffer from any illusions' – a comment repeated in his obituary when he died of cancer some four years later, after the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia.

Trnka uses a simple, linear story: a large Hand invades the home of a potter fond of making flower-pots, demanding that he, in the future, make only images of hands. The potter refuses and tries to get rid of the Hand in several ways (hiding, nailing the doors and windows shut, refusing gifts, ripping out the phone) but the Hand foils all the potter's protests and eventually manipulates the potter with strings, like a traditional marionette, to make a monumental sculpture of a Hand. Though celebrated with state laurels for this achievement, the potter languishes and dies. Trnka managed to get the scenario and the finished film past censors by cleverly identifying the Hand with specific nationalities (the Nazi salute, the raised hand of the Statue of Liberty) considered enemies of socialism, so that the parable could be read as a protest against foreign domination – but the film nonetheless garnered international recognition (not only the Jury Prize at the 1965 Annecy, but also prizes at non-animation festivals in Oberhausen, Melbourne and Bergamo) as a denunciation of Soviet control over the arts and media. The brilliance of Trnka's masterpiece arises not only from its clever plot twists (the

broken flower-pot, telephone and television as destructive tools, the seductive Hand dancing in mesh hose) but also in subtle conceptual depths: the Hand is also the animator's hand and the protagonist's unchanging wooden face is ingeniously designed and miraculously managed so that it registers dozens of different emotions, from joy to despair, simply through subtle lighting and movement.

Yuri Norstein claimed in an interview that Trnka's *The Hand* was his favourite animated film, which reminds us that these films were produced in a conscious tradition. By the late 1970s, when Yuri and his wife Francesca shot *Skazka Skazok* (Tale of Tales), several successful changes of leadership in post-Stalin Russia must have made it seem that the Soviet order would last indefinitely. So, rather than a specific protest against government policies, the message of *Tale of Tales* urges artists to accept the burden of keeping better times alive through art. Norstein still constructs his film in a complex, non-linear story that conceals the implications of his images from the blunt eye of the censor. Like *Home* and *The Hand*, *Tale of Tales* is filtered through a particular consciousness: that of a little wolf, a protagonist which Norstein freely admits to be autobiographical. At the same time, this hero derives from a traditional Russian lullaby, 'A Little Wolf could carry you away, deep into the forest', which is sung repeatedly in the film. As with Trnka's potter in *The Hand*, the wolf's paper cut-out face magically seems to mirror a hundred emotions, often deriving from the situation and subtle movement – the little tilt of the head while staring at the baby or when 'swinging' on the treadle of an abandoned sewing machine. Once in an interview, Norstein pointed out that the 'anima' in animation means putting 'soul' into something, not just life.

Within the first few minutes of this half-hour film, we glimpse a sample of all the material that will appear in variations during the rest of the film: an apple, a baby nursing, seasons passing in a forest, an abandoned house with a dazzling light pouring

The face of the Norsteins' wolf magically seems to mirror a hundred emotions. According to Yuri Norstein, 'anima' means putting 'soul' into something, not just life

Above left
The opening scenes of the Tale of Tales *include all the variations shown in the rest of the film*

Above right
The boy dreams of feeding the birds

from its door, a luminous reverie of a bygone era (half Pushkin, half Picasso) peopled by a fisherman, a poet and a girl jumping rope with a bull, a wartime picnic-dance from which men disappear to battle and death and the heavy traffic on a contemporary highway which has now cut through the forest near the abandoned house. Each image has its characteristic sound, such as the popular tango 'The tired sun says goodbye at the sea just as you say you don't love me anymore' for the wartime scenes.

Each of these images is animated freshly and differently and the subtle changes express a growing awareness of the deeper meanings or potentials of the material. The apple in the snow, for example, is seen as a ruptured fantasy when the boy dreams of feeding the birds but it is interrupted by his drunken tyrant father, whose 'Napoleon' hat he adopts; later, this bitter childhood memory is redeemed by the excision of the parents and the successful feeding of the birds. The Pushkin reverie is first seen in vivid detail,

Gradually the film focuses on the wolf protagonist and its ever-widening point of view

panning across the seaside property, pulling in for closer views of the children's play, the witty cat, the poet and his lyre, the fish and the fisherman. The second appearance transpires all in a long shot following a wanderer who passes through the same scene, but keeping everything in a larger perspective – obviously the wolf's widening point of view, which leads to his decisive intervention.

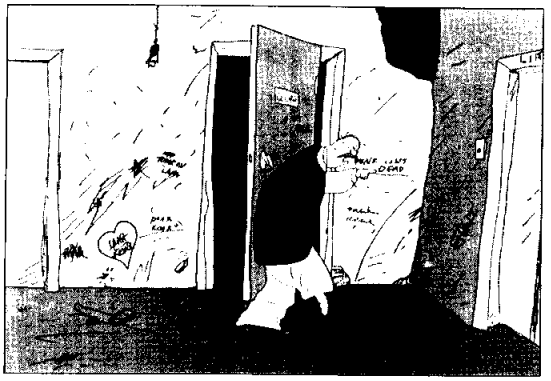
The transitions between disparate elements occur as visual analogies: the fire in a baker's oven turns into autumn leaves flaring into flame at the foot of a tree, which in turn leads to the flashing lights of autos in the highway. This constitutes the associative mental process of the wolf protagonist. The luminous door through which the wolf reaches the nostalgic past is paralleled by the light-cone of the wartime lamppost and by the luminous manuscript of the poet (flickering like a projector beam), and this cumulative chain leads to the wolf's climactic gesture of stealing the manuscript from the past and nurturing it as a baby in the present, thus preserving the precious memory of the beautiful and the tragic alike.

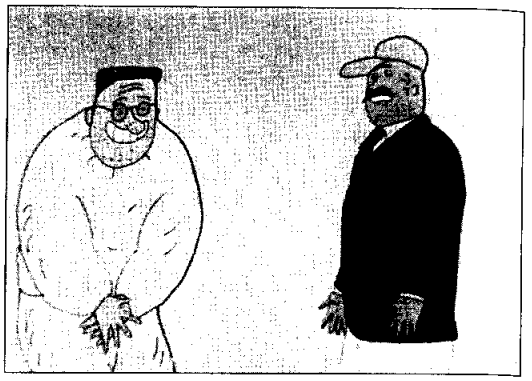
In addition to winning the grand prize at Zagreb, during the 1984 Olympic Games an international jury chose *Tale of Tales* as the greatest animation film of all time, a distinction well deserved by the variety of superb effects and moods, from the quiet realism of the little wolf eating a hot potato to the conceptual brilliance of scratching the phonograph record so that music is missing at the point of departure of each soldier. Trnka's *The Hand* took fourth place.

Priit Pärn's *Eine Murul* (Picnic on the Grass or *Déjeuner sur l'herbe* after Manet's painting) also won a grand prize at Zagreb in 1988, though the film had been proposed as early as 1983 and was finally approved for release in 1986, after the Chernobyl nuclear accident signalled the decline of Russian prestige. Soviet Russia had occupied and plundered Pärn's native Estonia for more than 30 years by that time, so his theme logically concentrates on desperate living conditions in a country without goods, without self-rule, redress or justice.

In making *Déjeuner sur l'herbe*, Pärn already knew both *Home* and *Tale of Tales*, so his

Below *The wolf decides to steal the manuscript of the past and nurture it as a baby in the present, thus preserving precious memories*

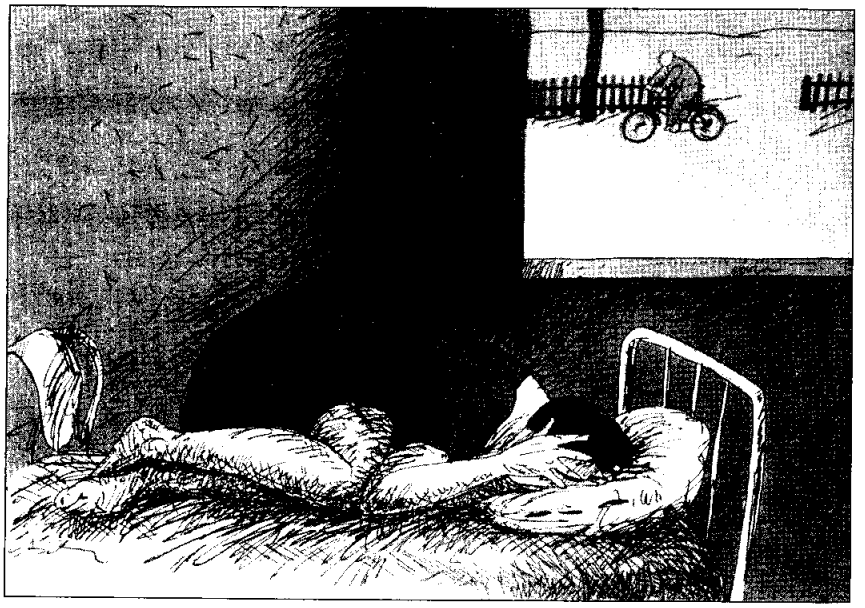




Above left
The theme of Priit Pärn's Déjeuner sur l'herbe *concentrates on desperate living conditions*

Above right
George must find suitable clothing for the picnic

structure consciously became even more complex. A superficial overall pattern becomes gradually clear: four Estonian people wish to have a picnic in a public park (or, more specifically, as we find out only at the end, the picnic depicted in Manet's painting *Déjeuner sur l'herbe*), as a moment of art and respite from the brutality of daily life. Each of the four has a specific task in order to make the picnic possible and we watch each of their tales separately: Anna must get the food (symbolically an apple) necessary for the meal; George must find suitable clothing for his costume instead of the grim grey uniforms officially available in stores; Bertha, formerly an artist's model but now a faceless digit in the socialist state that prizes motherhood over art, must regain her sense of an artistically viable identity if she is to model again; Edward must manage to get the bureaucratic permit to use the park. Each is successful and for a moment, they actually realise their dream of an instant of art and respite.



The faceless Bertha cowers in bed

Meek Edward fakes macho strength to enter the bureaucrats' offices

Across this more obvious structure, however, flow equally obvious contradictions that make the viewer puzzle and question. Anna is awakened at precisely 9.20 in the morning by the shrieking crash of an automobile accident and later, while shopping, she drops a bag of apples (just after George sneaks by) which children pursue out into the street. In George's tale, the car crash sound occurs while he is still home (and it causes Bertha's picture to fall from the wall), yet he encounters the children running after the apples

At last Edward obtains the key to the garden (park) gate

much later and manages to grab one in order to trade it for black-market goods. In Bertha's tale, we see her daughter join the children running after the apples fallen from the bag and the car swerves and crashes in order to avoid Bertha's daughter – but the camera pulls back to show Anna, just awakened, looking out her window. This inconsistency implies that disaster happens over and over again, so time no longer matters in this moribund society.

The frequent reoccurrence of a character that looks like Picasso (the film is ironically dedicated to 'Artists who do exactly what is expected of them') also reinforces this idea. Often 'Picasso' is being arrested by two policemen, usually pursued by seagulls, but mysteriously he sometimes performs other roles: although George had seen him arrested only minutes before, he is (with cynical common sense) a civil servant in the Bureau of Eyesight, where he is arrested again. Artists are always being arrested, just as cars are always crashing.

Picasso also gets the last word. After the lucky four enjoy their moment of art, we see the hapless Picasso lying in the road, his arm, crushed by a passing tank, squashed out into the shape of a seagull's wing. No real room for artists in the totalitarian state.

As with *Home*, *The Hand* and *Tale of Tales*, *Déjeuner sur l'herbe* offers a wealth of aesthetic and conceptual thrills that make the viewer happy to continue working to puzzle out the overall structure. Pärn's clever use of a grotesque caricature for the common man – whether the taxi driver or the black-marketeer who wants sex with Anna in exchange for an apple, they look the same – is subtly twisted and enriched by George's air-brushed *Playboy* fantasies or the remarkable instant of ecstasy that the drunken workman experiences in the snivelling baker's factory. The passing reference to the Beatles' *Yellow Submarine* when George changes the 'Shoe' sign to a blue glove or the chilling moment when Bertha draws a 'Picasso' distortion of eyes, nose and mouth on her empty face with her makeup, cause the viewer to feel more intensely the plight of intelligent, feeling prisoners of this closed system. The epic imagery of Edward's quest – his shrinking stature, the mouldy walls of the minister's building, the giant squashing a little man in the elevator, the monumental secretaries, the cyclops administrator – makes the viewer feel both the absurdity and the tragedy of this battle against bureaucracy – even as does George's ridiculous transfer (as if it were a sport like football) of black-market goods: apple for bread for shoe for glasses. And if the hidden jibes at the Russians are not always clear to a Western viewer – the Russian administrator (the film censor would have been one such) is a cyclops because the Russians only see one way to do things, and since the Estonians habitually leave the spoon in their tea while the Russians take it out, Edward can blind the Russian with a teaspoon – the Odyssean imagery carries the idea through.

Home, *Tale of Tales* and *Déjeuner sur l'herbe* all posit an 'interactive' system, in which the purposefully convoluted narrative structure must be unravelled by the viewer. While these strategies might have been devised to circumvent censors, they result in a rich experience that rewards repeated viewings, since the films are composed freshly in the viewers' minds, with new connections, new perceptions and new feelings every time. And the intricate artistry of all four filmmakers does appeal as strongly to the emotions as to the reason of the viewer, which enhances our sympathy for the characters and makes the films transcend the narrower political issues that they originally protested.

This paper was presented at the 1993 SAS Conference.

Notes

1. Giannalberto Bendazzi, *Cartoons: One Hundred Years of Cinema Animation* (London: John Libbey, 1994), 438, for the founding of ASIFA (well indexed for all references about animation). Parker Tyler, 'New Images', *Dom, Loving, L'opera mouffe*, *Film Quarterly*, vol. XXI, no. 3 (Spring 1959): 50–53.
2. Natalie Clifford Barney, 'Attendre', *Actes et Entr'actes* (Paris: Sansot, 1910), 88–89. Faith Wilding's performance piece is preserved in Johanna Demetrakis's documentary film *Womanhouse* (1974).
3. *Jiri Trnka, der Puppenfilmer aus Prag* (Frankfurt: Deutsches Filmmuseum, 1987); Borge Trolle, 'Jiri Trnka, the Master of Puppet Animation', *The Art of Animation*, vol. 1, no. 1 (Spring 1994): 28–39.
4. 'Trnkaland', *Newsweek*, vol. 67, no. 13 (March 28, 1966): 99–100; Transition: 'Jiri Trnka', *Newsweek*, vol. 75, no. 2, (January 12, 1970): 45.
5. J.P. Jeunet, 'Yuri Norstein', *Banc-Titre*, no. 15 (December 1980), 21–23.
6. Mikhail Yampolsky, 'Yuri Norstein', *Kino* (Riga) (April 1985). A French version of this interview appeared in *Positif* no. 297: 48–50. *Positif* no. 288 also carried Eric Derobert's study of Norstein: 61.
7. *The Olympiad of Animation*, June 29 – July 2, 1984, presented by The Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences and ASIFA Hollywood. (Twenty-five-page program booklet.)
8. Mikhail Yampolsky, 'The Space of the Animated Film: Khrzanovsky's *I Am with You Again* and Norstein's *Tale of Tales*, *Afterimage* no. 13 (Autumn 1987): 93–117; Karen Rosenberg, 'Yuri Norstein', *Pegbar*, vol. 1, no. 7 (Summer 1991): 18–19.
9. Sergei Assenin, 'Drawn Paradoxes: Priit Pärn', *Etüde Eesti Multifilmidest Ja Nende Loojatest* (Estonian Animated Films and Their Creators) (Tallinn: Periodika, 1986), 296–304 (for an English-language text), plus 18 pages of unnumbered color plates on Pärn. This text covers only up to *Time Out* in 1984, but it discusses Pärn's background as a graphic artist, Arnheim theories in relation to Pärn's films, etc.