

‘Superior to Disney’: Colour Animation at Lenfil’m, 1936-41

The view cited above is encountered in a newspaper article published in February 1940 by Mikhail Tsekhanovskii (1940b), the graphic artist, illustrator, and filmmaker who had been associated with the animation atelier at the Lenfil’m studio since the late 1920s, and who had acquired an international reputation thanks to the release of *The Post* (Pochta, 1929), a silent (and later sonorized) film now recognized as one of the classics of Soviet avant-garde animation. Admittedly, the comparison with Disney applied to only one of the colour works produced by this atelier, *Dzhiabzha*, a twelve-minute short directed by Mstislav Pashchenko that had been adapted from a Nanai magical tale and officially approved for release in early 1939.¹ For Tsekhanovskii, the superiority of this film in relation to Disney lay in its ‘painterly approach’ to artistic form and compositional dynamic. The larger context of his article, however, which rehearsed the evolution of colour-film production at Lenfil’m from the early 1930s, and asserted that the challenge of colour in the sphere of animation had to all intents and purposes been ‘resolved’, makes clear that by ‘painterly approach’ Tsekhanovskii was referring primarily to Pashchenko’s artistic response to the challenge of colour. He would continue to promote this film energetically in his public statements. In a lecture given on 13 May 1941 to the Leningrad branch of the Writer’s Union, as part of which three other colour animations from the Lenfil’m studio were screened, including one, *A Tale about a Stupid Mouse* (Skazka o glupom myshonke), which he himself had completed the previous year, Tsekhanovskii predicted that *Dzhiabzha* would become a ‘lodestar’ (*orientir*) for all future

¹ The title of this film refers to the name of the main (Nanai) protagonist, and therefore has not been translated. The initial title of Pashchenko’s film was *Bednaia liagushka* (The Poor Frog), but at some point late in the production cycle it was changed to *Dzhiabzha*.

Soviet animation (*Kadr*, 18 May 1941).² This was not an eccentric view by any means. Within the studio, the quality-control commission judged the technical merits of *Dzhiabzha* to be ‘excellent’, and praised the director for his sophistication and ‘great taste’ (Vitenson, Chakhir’ian, and Dubrovskii 1939). Beyond the studio, moreover, in a review published in the newspaper *Kino* (Grigorian 1939), Pashchenko was praised for transporting the viewer into a ‘magical realm filled with harmonies of sound, colour, and movement’. Describing the film as a ‘minor chef d’oeuvre’, the reviewer in question urged the studio and the film-industry authorities to make the film available throughout the Soviet Union with the greatest possible speed.

This challenge would appear to have been technologically insurmountable. An article published in *Kadr*, the official bulletin of the Communist Party and factory committee at Lenfil’m, indicates that one year after approval for release only nine copies of *Dzhiabzha* had in fact been printed (Piniiev 1940). In the same issue, moreover, it was revealed that the film had been screened in only one cinema in Leningrad, the Koloss, and that even there it had been withdrawn after only a few days (Vul’f 1940). Although poor publicity and limited distribution were endemic problems for Soviet animation at this time (A. Ivanov 1936, 46; Kiva 2006, 165), such reports suggest that the mass production of colour films, whether animated or live-action, posed a particular challenge for laboratory technicians at Lenfil’m

² Brief news items, reports, and editorials published anonymously in newspapers or journals will be referenced within the body of the text giving the name of the newspaper or journal in question and the date of publication. More precise details, such the titles of the individual items and page references, appear in the separate listings at the end of this article. Individual entries have been organized according to the title of the newspaper or journal in question; and then chronologically if each title has more than one listing.

during the 1930s and early 1940s. Despite the considerable sums of money invested in them, the colour animations commissioned and completed at the studio during this period remained for the most part experimental projects: screenings were largely restricted to studio managers, senior officials at the State Directorate of Cinematography (GUK, before August 1935 the GUKF, or State Directorate of the Film and Photo Industry), and members of the Committee for Cinematic Affairs (Komitet po delam kinematografii), the body created in March 1938 with direct political oversight of the film industry. A sober analysis of the history of colour animation at Lenfil'm before the Second World War would acknowledge its limited impact as far as the general public was concerned. In this context, it is important to appreciate that the animation atelier was a small and relatively marginal phenomenon in terms of production output for children, especially after the creation of Soiuzdetmul'tfil'm in June 1936 (one year later this studio was renamed Soiuzmul'tfil'm); worryingly for the artists employed at Lenfil'm, although the situation would appear to have stabilized by early 1941, its very existence was threatened on at least three separate occasions during the 1930s (Shumiatskii 1933; Ionidin 1938; Zritel' 1939). Within the studio itself, the atelier was routinely described as the poor cousin of the other creative divisions: working conditions were unsatisfactory; supplies of essential equipment were unreliable; and production teams were forced to contend with constant changes of accommodation, often at short notice (I. Ivanov 1936; M. B. 1936; Krylov 1938). The peripatetic existence of the team working on *Dzhiabzha*, for example, was highlighted in a cartoon which appeared in *Kadr* during the latter stages of completion (fig. 1). The text accompanying the image refers to the film in its original incarnation as *The Poor Frog* (*Bednaia liagushka*), and ironically compares the circumstances of the director and his colleagues with the exploited frog-protagonist in the Nanai tale on which the film was based.

[fig. 1 + caption]

If logistical obstacles posed significant challenges during this period, additional pressures lay in the fact that, from mid-1935 onwards, prompted by the enthusiastic reception given to three Disney ‘Silly Symphonies’ in Technicolor at the Moscow International Film Festival in February, the acquisition of a viable three-colour process became identified as a pressing political objective on the part of Stalin and the Politburo (Cavendish 2019). This meant that managers at Lenfil’m were obliged to report directly on progress to Immanuel Tsil’shtein, head of the cultural-educational section of the party’s Leningrad City Committee (Gorkom), who in turn reported to Aleksandr Ugarov, the second secretary of the City Committee, and Andrei Zhdanov, the first secretary of the party’s Regional Committee (Obkom) and Politburo member.³ It is symptomatic of this pressure that in a seminal article published on 1 May 1936 to coincide with International Labour Day, the engineer in charge of the newly created colour-film division at Lenfil’m, Vasilii Mikhailyk, placed particular emphasis on directives issued by both Stalin and Zhdanov as evidence of the importance and urgency of the task (Mikhailyk 1936). Additional sources of anxiety lay in the abrupt and unpredictable shifts in cultural policy, for example the anti-formalist campaign in the arts, which acquired increasing momentum in the early months of 1936 and witnessed not only the denunciation of Dmitrii Shostakovich’s opera *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk* (*Ledi Makbet mtsenskogo uezda*), but also, perhaps unexpectedly, the ‘grotesque distortions’ of ‘artist-daubers’ in the realm of children’s book illustration (*Pravda*, 1 March 1936). One of the early

³ This is confirmed by the Gorkom documents preserved in the Central Government Archive of Historical and Political Documents in St. Petersburg. A memorandum from Tsil’shtein to Uvarov and Zhdanov dated 18 May 1937, for example, discussed later in this article, makes the lines of communication crystal clear.

victims of this campaign within the animation atelier at Lenfil'm was Tsekhanovskii's *A Tale about the Priest Ostolop and his Labourer, Balda* (Skazka o pope Ostolope i rabotnike ego Balde), an ambitious, feature-length adaptation of Pushkin's narrative poem of the same title, which was being filmed with a musical accompaniment by Shostakovich. At a hastily convened studio meeting in February 1936 to discuss the ramifications of this campaign (Rode 1936), both the composer and director offered to correct their 'formalist' errors in relation to the sequences regarded as most vulnerable to criticism, but their joint *mea culpa* was insufficient to secure the film's release.⁴ Writing retrospectively in his diary (2001, 185), Tsekhanovskii described this period as a 'catastrophe' for him personally.

These considerable pressures notwithstanding, the artists working for the animation atelier at Lenfil'm did nevertheless manage to create seven short films using a three-colour process between 1936 and 1941: *The First Hunt* (Pervaia okhota, 1937), directed by Pavel Shmidt; *Home, Sweet Home* (Teremok, 1938), directed by Vitalii Siumkin; *Dzhiabzha; The Duckling* (Utenok, 1938), directed by Ivan Druzhinin; *The Circus* (Tsirk, 1940), directed by Siumkin and Aleksandr Sinitsyn; *A Tale about a Stupid Mouse*; and *Three Friends* (Tri podругi, 1941), directed by Shmidt. Unlike the vast majority of colour animations produced by other Soviet studios during the 1930s and early 1940s, six of these works (with the partial exception of *Three Friends*) have survived with their original colour-separated negatives intact. Furthermore, four of them have been digitally restored by Nikolai Maiorov on behalf

⁴ *Skazka o pope Ostolope i rabotnike ego Balde* was put into production at the end of 1932, but progress was extremely slow and the film was still unfinished at the beginning of 1936. Tsekhanovskii's diaries (2002, 347) suggest that he was still working on the film as late as June 1936. At some point in the second half of 1936, however, the film would appear to have been definitively shelved. See Katerli 1936.

of the Russian State Film Archive (Gosfil'mofond Rossii) and screened as part of the festivals of archival film hosted annually by this institution in Belye Stolby.⁵ Although it is unlikely that Maiorov's restorations replicate exactly the colour tones of the original release-prints, a surviving nitrate-positive of *Dzhiabzha*, and some fragments of *The First Hunt* and *Home, Sweet Home* currently in private possession, demonstrate that, while the general effect is one of increased colour saturation and brightness, they are sufficiently close to permit analysis of their chromatic palettes.⁶ It is important to emphasize that, unlike other Soviet studios at this time, which continued to produce animations in black and white, and because of processing difficulties released films originally commissioned in colour in black-and-white versions, Lenfil'm was dedicated exclusively to the production of animations in colour. Furthermore, unlike the other studios, which had developed their own three-colour processes, these productions were facilitated by the adoption of a so-called hydrotype method, a laboratory process for converting colour-separated negatives into positive prints that had been developed

⁵ For a list of pre-war colour films that have survived in Russian film archives, see Maiorov 2011, 209. For information relating to the restoration and screening of these animations by Gosfil'mofond, see 'Vosstanovlennye trekhtsvetnye otechestvennye animatsionnye fil'my po alfavitu' on Maiorov's website, *Pervye v kino: Neizdannaiia kniga*, <http://cinemafirst.ru/vosstanovlennye-trekhtsvetnye-oteches/>. Accessed 25 June 2018.

⁶ My gratitude to Oleg Bochkov, former Director of International Liaison at Gosfil'mofond, for permitting me access to the surviving nitrate-positive of *Dzhiabzha*. The fragments of *Pervaia okhota* and *Teremok* were discovered as part of the personal archive of the director Pavel Shmidt. My thanks to Dr Petr Bagrov, formerly senior curator of cultural projects at Gosfil'mofond, now director of George Eastman House, Rochester, New York, for giving me permission to examine these fragments.

by the Leningrad State Optical Institute; this method subsequently came to be identified as the most promising of the three-colour technologies developed by Soviet researchers, and for this reason the Lenfil'm animations were scrutinized with particular interest by officials at the GUK and the Committee for Cinematic Affairs (Alekseev 1938).⁷ Regular updates on progress in the pages of *Kadr*, prompted no doubt by the pressure to succeed within a relatively ambitious time-frame, offer an unusually frank insight into the challenges posed by this technology.

If the animations at Lenfil'm merit more scrutiny than they have enjoyed hitherto (Ginzburg 1957, 102-04); Kuznetsova 1970; Grigor'ev 1970; Gailan 2005), it is not only because they are colour productions. Albeit relatively small in number, they constitute an important contribution to the debates among graphic artists and filmmakers that had been prompted by the impact of Disney, in particular the three 'Silly Symphonies' screened at the Moscow International Film Festival: *Three Little Pigs* (dir. Burt Gillett, 1933); *Peculiar Penguins* (dir. Wilfred Jackson, 1934); and *Mickey Mouse and Friends: The Band Concert* (dir. Wilfred Jackson, 1935). In assessing this impact, it is important to distinguish between the production methods of the studio, which had been visited in the summer of 1935 as part of an official GUKF delegation to Europe and North America led by Boris Shumiatskii, and the subject-matter and graphic style of its films, which some Soviet animators, among them Tsekhanovskii (1934, 26), dismissed as 'primitive' (privately, as revealed by a former colleague, Eleanora Gailan (2005, 241), he was even more damning, describing Disney in terms of '*obez'ianstvo*', or 'monkey-business'). The graphic artists based at Lenfil'm were proud of their independent spirit and commitment to animation as an idiosyncratic art form (Tsekhanovskii 1931). Furthermore, they belonged to an extensive community of prose writers, poets, dramatists, and composers, as well as editors employed by the Leningrad

⁷ For a detailed description of this process, and its similarities to Technicolor, see footnote 17.

section of the State Children's Publishing House (Gosudarstvennoe izdatel'stvo 'Detskaia literatura', or Detgiz for short), who specialized in works for children. It is testimony to the tightly-knit quality of this community that three of the animations produced at Lenfil'm – *The First Hunt*, *Dzhiabzha*, and *A Tale about a Stupid Mouse* – were adaptations of stories or verse-tales that had been published previously, either in independent book form or as contributions to *Chizh* and *Ezh*, the almanacs for children edited by the Samuil Marshak and his close associates (Marshak was so influential at this time that the writers and artists who belonged to this community were commonly known as the 'Marshak Academy').⁸ Several Lenfil'm animators, including Tsekhanovskii and Pashchenko, had begun their careers in the 1920s as book illustrators, and regularly produced sketches and drawings for these almanacs, many of them in colour.⁹ As several cultural historians have pointed out (Blium 2000, 216-9; Arzamastseva and Nikolaeva, 2005, 388; Balina 2008, 13), it is important to appreciate that the domain of children's literature was widely regarded during the 1930s as a safe haven for individuals who had fallen foul of official cultural policies. Nevertheless, even this haven was not immune from criticism, or worse, repression, as can be witnessed by the arrests of several

⁸ *Chizh*, which ran from 1930 to 1941, was an abbreviation of *Chrezvychaino interesnyi zhurnal* (the title puns on the Russian word for 'siskin'). *Ezh*, which ran from 1928 to 1935, was an abbreviation of *Ezhemesiachnyi zhurnal* (the title puns on the Russian word for 'hedgehog'). On the importance of Marshak as far as children's literature is concerned, see Hellman 2008.

⁹ Tsekhanovskii's illustrations for Marshak's *Pochta*, for example, first published by Raduga in 1928, were in colour. For a digital reprint, see <http://www.raruss.ru/childrens-books/page-child5/3259-tsekhanovsky-marshak.post.html>. Accessed 27 November 2018.

senior editors at the Leningrad branch of Detgiz in 1937 and 1938 (Blium 2000, 212-22 & 232-5; Hellman 2008, 231-2).

This article seeks to examine the production of colour animations at Lenfil'm in terms of content and aesthetic form, but also as contributions to the reimagining of the landscape of children's literature and culture in the Soviet Union during the 1930s and early 1940s. It will trace the evolution of colour-film technology at Lenfil'm from the early 1930s onwards, and examine the challenges faced by graphic artists and laboratory technicians in relation to the hydrotype method. The choice of subjects selected for colour treatment, the artistic approach to the medium of colour, and the wider discourses that pertained to the sphere of animation constitute the main focus of this enquiry. It will be argued that, while the works themselves may not have reached the general public due to technical impediments, they did nevertheless pioneer approaches to animation that would become important in the immediate post-war period, even if the atelier itself, due to the deaths of key figures at the front, and the evacuation of remaining staff during the siege of Leningrad, was eventually disbanded. Two of the artists, Tsekhanovskii and Pashchenko, continued to work in the sphere of animation after the war, albeit at Soiuzmul'tfil'm. Restrictions of space preclude a detailed analysis of all the colour-animation works produced in the second half of the 1930s and early 1940s. Nevertheless, three case studies have been selected in order to illustrate the main patterns of development. *The First Hunt* merits examination because it was the first animation to be put into production at the studio and demonstrates in stark terms the aesthetic and technological challenges posed by the new medium.¹⁰ *Dzhiabzha* offers evidence of the ways in which animators responded to official policies seeking to promote the children's literature and

¹⁰ Maiorov's digital restoration of this film as broadcast on Russian television is available on YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?V=6hNZd7cFdXs>. Accessed 14 July 2018.

folklore of the Soviet Union's ethnic minorities.¹¹ Finally, *Three Friends* demonstrates the marked shift in children's culture away from broadly educational and humanistic objectives towards more narrowly focussed political concerns.¹² In terms of visual aesthetic, although the approach to colour does evolve over time and bears the imprint of individual directorial preference, the films overall highlight the generally negative stance adopted in relation to Disney: the realistic mode predominates; the reliance on comic effect and caricature is resisted; the phenomenon of anthropomorphization is relatively restrained; and the approach to colour is thoughtful and discrete, and tends to avoid the spectacular. These features distinguish the animations at Lenfil'm from many of the works released by other Soviet studios during the same period, most importantly Soiuzmul'tfil'm, although even here, as we will see, the approach to Disney was nuanced and also evolved over time.

1931-36: Lenfil'm moves to embrace colour

By virtue of an editorial published on 7 November 1931 to coincide with the fourteenth anniversary of the October Revolution, *Kadr* became the first party-affiliated organ to call publicly for Soviet studios to develop a viable colour-film technology. At the time of writing,

¹¹ Maiorov's digital restoration of this work as broadcast on Russian television is also available on YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UoA6fXKnZQ4>. Accessed 21 July 2018.

¹² *Tri podrugi* is not currently in the public domain because the live-action sequences at the beginning and end of the film (with the exception of their respective soundtracks) have not survived. My gratitude to Nikolai Maiorov for permitting me access to his restored version of the animated sequences.

although this is not made clear in the article itself, the primary objective lay in the acquisition of a two-colour process, so called because the technology in question, whether additive or subtractive, relied on the combination of two primary colours – red and green –, and therefore could only reproduce a limited range of the chromatic spectrum.¹³ Tsekhanovskii (1930) had called for animators to embrace the potential of the new technology even before this, arguing that ‘only colour can fully reveal the essence of animation in painting’. Articles rehearsing the history of two-colour technology, with particular emphasis on the sphere of animation, subsequently appeared in *Kadr* courtesy of Sergei Maksimovich (1932a, 1932b, 1932c), a specialist in film and photography who had collaborated before the October Revolution with Sergei Prokudin-Gorskii, and who in the early 1930s was a professor at the Leningrad Photo-Film Technical College.¹⁴ The Lenfil’m archives confirm that it was the process developed by

¹³ For a timeline of colour processes which explains the various systems patented in the early years of cinema, and the differences between additive and subtractive systems, see ‘Timeline of Historical Film Colors’, database created by Professor Barbara Flueckiger at the Institute of Cinema Studies, University of Zurich, at filmcolors.org. For early Soviet research into colour film, see Cavendish 2016, 275-9.

¹⁴ Sergei Prokudin-Gorskii (1863-1944) was a chemist by training and is best known today for his invention of a three-colour process for still-photography in the first decade of the twentieth century. This process, which was demonstrated to the imperial family at a private audience, gave rise to an extraordinary collection of colour portraits and landscapes which show the Russian empire during the pre-revolutionary era. From 1911 onwards, Prokudin-Gorskii and Maksimovich lodged patents in Russia and abroad for a three-colour process for moving pictures, although this never proved to be commercially viable. Prokudin-Gorskii emigrated from the Soviet Union in August 1918.

Maksimovich that facilitated the studio's first animated short in two colours, *Symphony of Peace* (Simfoniia mira), which satirized the inconclusive disarmament talks sponsored by the League of Nations during the spring and summer of 1932 (directed by Vitalii Siumkin and S. Tarasov, the film's release was planned to coincide with the fifteenth anniversary of the October Revolution).¹⁵ Confidence in this process would appear to explain why the initial production plan for Tsekhanovskii's *Balda*, which was approved in the final quarter of 1932, envisaged filming in two colours (Finkel'shtein and Pokrovskaia 1935), although at some point afterwards this objective was abandoned when the scale of the task (and costs) became apparent. According to Tsekhanovskii (1934a), the difficulties encountered with completing this film demonstrated the lack of priority given to animation generally within the studio at this time; indeed, the all-pervasive inertia had prompted a particularly caustic phrase among employees in relation to the studio's production plans, namely '*fil'kina gramota*', which referred to documents regarded as devoid of meaning and significance (the equivalent in English would be 'not worth the paper they are written on').¹⁶

This situation changed radically at the beginning of 1936 thanks to directives issued by the Politburo's chief organizational committee, the Orgburo, and the Committee for Artistic Affairs (Komitet po delam iskusstv), which identified the acquisition of a three-

¹⁵ 'Maksimovich "Tsvetnaia mul'tiplikatsiia"' [July-October 1931], TsGALI St.P/R-257/8/80. For fuller discussion, see Cavendish 2019, 576-7.

¹⁶ The phrase derives from Ivan the Terrible's contemptuous response to letters of criticism from Patriarch Philip, whom the Tsar referred to condescendingly as 'Fil'ka'. *Fil'kina gramota* thus refers to documents regarded as ignorant, illiterate, empty of meaning, and without significance. The phrase appears in Finkel'shtein and Pokrovskaia 1935. For earlier use in the same context, see Bleiman 1929.

colour technology as an urgent political objective (Cavendish 2019, 579-82). In Leningrad, this took the form of a meeting on 19 February convened by Sergei Sobolev, secretary of the party's Petrograd Regional Committee (Raikom), to which senior managers, film-directors, and technical staff at Lenfil'm, as well as two employees from the State Optical Institute, were invited. In addition to a declaration on the political importance of the task, reported in *Kadr* on 29 February, this meeting announced the allocation of some 700,000 roubles from centralized funds to ensure the production of 'some' colour works before the end of the year. The sense of urgency was reiterated at a meeting of the same party committee one month later, reported in *Kadr* on 23 March, at which the director of Lenfil'm, Izrael' Katsnel'son, was ordered to produce a concrete plan of action within three days. From the technological point of view, such directives were made possible thanks to research into a hydrotype method by the State Optical Institute. According to Mikhailyk, who was appointed head of the new colour-film division at Lenfil'm at some point in May (*Kino*, 28 May 1936), research into this process had been launched three years previously and given rise to contracts with the studio that committed the institute to designing laboratory processing equipment that could facilitate the production of high-quality positive prints from colour-separated negatives by means of matrix (or etched-relief) film stock (Mikhailyk and Kligman, 1937). This process was similar in principle to the Technicolor three-colour process, which had been adopted by Disney for the first time for the production of *Flowers and Trees* (dir. Burt Gillett) in 1932.¹⁷ In the

¹⁷ Salt (1992, 149-50, 180-1, 198-200) gives an accurate and accessible account of the various stages of development of the Technicolor two- and three-colour systems from 1922 onwards. These accounts, which explain the introduction of special prisms and colour filters within the camera to split incoming light waves into colour-separated negative images imprinted on panchromatic black-and-white film stock, and the evolution of laboratory

printing procedures to produce colour-separated positive images, privileges live-action and ignores animation. The same is true for Mikhailyk and Kligman's description (1937) of the Soviet hydrotype method. Three-colour animation involved the shooting of three identical frames or static images consecutively through blue, red, and green filters to produce three adjacent colour-separated negative images on a single strip of film stock. The (animated) illustration was then replaced, and three further consecutive and identical images were then recorded adjacently on the same strip. This process would be repeated until all the animated illustrations had been filmed. A special optical printer was then used to print every third image in order to produce three separate (red, green, and blue) positive records (these were black-and-white images, but were subtly differentiated from each other in terms of tonal distribution and intensity, depending on the filter through which the filmic image had passed). These positive records were developed using a chemical procedure which hardened the gelatine of the emulsion in proportion to the intensity of the filtered colour record. These positive etched-relief records were then dyed individually with the required complementary colour in each case (yellow, cyan, and magenta) to produce three separate positive colour records. The dye transfer or imbibition procedure involved the three etched-relief positives acting as 'matrices' to absorb the complementary dyes and transfer them on to a single strip of blank film stock (each positive relief was pressed successively against the same blank by means of a special machine). With the passage of time, both the Technicolor and Soviet hydrotype method involved the blank stock carrying a weak fourth 'key', as Salt describes it (199), derived from printing one of the three separate camera negatives beforehand, usually the green negative. This procedure was introduced in order to enhance the quality of the black tones in the image. The adoption of this procedure explains why Maiorov's table of surviving

absence of a beam-splitting camera for live-action filming, which was in the process of being designed by engineers at Lenkinap, a factory specializing in machinery and equipment for the film industry, the initial efforts of the studio were directed towards the sphere of animation; such works could be filmed using conventional cameras and, or so it was argued, completed within a relatively quick time-frame. Confidence in the reliability of the hydrotype method gave rise in due course to appeals for the submission of screenplays; this occurred despite warnings from two of the studio's animators (Siumkin and Shmidt 1936) that the process had yet to be adequately tested and suffered from major defects, among them what they describe as 'colour rain' and a tendency for the colour dyes to 'float' across line-boundaries. On 31 May, a shortlist was announced by the recently appointed artistic director of the colour-film division (Bartenev 1936). This included several scripts adapted from well-known children's classics: a puppet animation based on Petr Ershov's *The Little Humpbacked Horse* (Konek-gorbunok, 1834); *Home, Sweet Home*, which had been adapted by Daniil Kharms from the well-known Russian folktale; and *Little Red Riding Hood*, which had been scripted by Evgenii Shvarts and Nikolai Oleinikov, both of them regular contributors to *Ezh* and *Chizh*. This shortlist also included *The First Hunt*, a script based on a short story for children by Vitalii Bianki, first published in 1924. In the event, despite having initially been put on a reserve list, it was the script for *The First Hunt*, composed by Bianki himself, that was put into production first. The text of the screenplay was duly published in *Kadr* on 26 June.

The choice of *The First Hunt* is intriguing in view of the author's at times troubled relationship with the authorities. Bianki was a popular writer of fiction for children, one sufficiently well-known to be discussed briefly by Marshak in his address to the First All-

colour-separated negatives in the Russian State Film Archive (2011, 209) refers to four negatives in relation to Lenfil'm animations, rather than the customary three.

Union Congress of Soviet Writers in 1934; in this address (1934, 24), he described Bianki as ‘perhaps the first of our writers for children to combine the skills of story-telling with authentic biological material’. Bianki’s rise to prominence had been associated with the relative liberalism of the NEP period. During the 1920s, he had penned a number of short stories and novellas, many of them drawn from his experiences as a traveller and hunter; the most significant was *The Forest Newspaper* (*Lesnaia gazeta*), a collage of newspaper-style bulletins organized according to the calendar year and reporting on the changing patterns of the seasons and their impact on the natural world. During the early 1930s, Bianki was a regular contributor to *Ezh* and *Chizh*, and several of his fictional works printed by private presses in the 1920s, including ‘The First Hunt’, were reissued by state publishing houses.¹⁸ Nevertheless, his position was far from secure. In late 1933 and early 1934, for example, his oeuvre was twice criticized by the same author (E. Shteinberg) in the same journal (*Detskaia i iunosheskaia literatura*) against the background of a campaign in favour of greater realism and engagement with contemporary concerns in the sphere of children’s literature (on the broader history of this campaign, see Kelly 2007, 93-115; Balina 2008). Bianki’s alleged shortcomings included the ‘absolutely abstract’ nature of his fiction; his ‘assiduous masking, extinguishing, and suppression of the aroma and colour of the contemporary world’; his ignoring of social relations and the building of socialism; and his vision of the natural world in terms of a Darwinian struggle for survival (1933, 1). These criticisms were sufficiently ominous to provoke fears that, as expressed by prose-writer and critic Vsevolod Lebedev in *Literaturnaia gazeta* (1934), Bianki was in danger of being thrown ‘overboard the ship of

¹⁸ Bianki’s contributions are too numerous to cite individually, but digitized scans of complete runs of these almanacs during the 1930s are available at barius.ru. For a reprinted edition of ‘Pervaia okhota’, see Bianki 1935.

children's literature'. Bianki's position was doubtless rendered more vulnerable by his 'unreliable' political past. Affiliation with the Socialist-Revolutionaries in the early months of the Revolution, and a brief stint of service in Admiral Kolchak's army during the early stages of the Civil War, resulted in no fewer than five arrests and two sentences of internal exile between 1925 and 1935.¹⁹ The last of these arrests, which took place in March 1935, very possibly as part of the general expulsion of 'undesirable elements' from Leningrad by the regional security organs following the assassination of Sergei Kirov in December 1934 (Boterbloem 2004, 126-7), resulted in a sentence of five years internal exile. It has been claimed that this sentence was commuted only thanks to the intervention of Ekaterina Peshkova, the erstwhile partner of Maksim Gor'kii, who at the time was working for an organization dedicated to the victims of political repression.²⁰

At the heart of 'The First Hunt' (the story) lies the phenomenon of mimicry or camouflage; in other words, the ability of some animals and insects to 'disappear' into their surroundings as a means of self-protection. Unlike the other shortlisted proposals, which could potentially have been filmed in black and white, albeit without the novelty of colour, the success of Shmidt's animated version of the story depended entirely on the hydrotype

¹⁹ Information on Bianki's five arrests has been given by his daughter in a documentary broadcast on the Russian television channel TV Kul'tura: see 'Pisateli nashego detstva: Vitalii Bianki, redaktor "Lesnoi gazety"', https://tvkultura.ru/video/show/brand_id/332799/episode_id/691713/video_id/691713. Accessed 28 November 2018. This information is amplified (but without documentary evidence) in Valentina Ponomareva, 'Za chto sovetskaia vlast' presledovala detskogo pisatel'ia Vitaliia Bianki?', <https://shkolazhizni.ru/archive/0/n-15761>. Accessed 15 November 2018.

²⁰ Ponomareva, 'Za chto sovetskaia vlast' presledovala detskogo pisatel'ia Vitaliia Bianki?'.

method. Bianki's screenplay modified certain details, slightly rearranged the order of individual episodes, and introduced colour-details not in the original text. In the story, a puppy bored of chasing hens around a domestic yard decides to burrow under the fence surrounding the property in order to chase animals, birds, and insects in a meadow nearby. In each case, with the exception of a bombardier beetle, which can defend itself by spraying a noxious substance on potential predators, the puppy witnesses the mysterious phenomenon of camouflage: a bittern blends itself effortlessly among reeds in a nearby pond; a hoopoe flattens itself on the ground like a colourful piece of cloth; a Eurasian wryneck (a member of the woodpecker family) magically disappears within the hollow of a tree-trunk; and caterpillars, crickets, and butterflies disguise themselves among grasses, twigs, and branches. Reflecting the new imperative of sound, Bianki introduced animal noises, songs in rhymed verse, and music (some animals play musical instruments and dance in pairs). He also inserted a new sequence featuring an eagle owl (*filin*), which terrifies the puppy by vigorously flapping its wings and hooting aggressively.

Although envisaged as an experimental work, in other words, one not necessarily intended for mass distribution, *The First Hunt* was planned for completion by the end of 1936 (A. P. 1937). Repeatedly missed deadlines during the first six months of 1937, however, gave rise to increasingly vociferous criticism within the studio which eventually culminated in the public denunciation of Mikhailyk as a saboteur in the 28 July edition of *Kadr* (archival records (Deriabin 2007, 493 & 544-5; Bernshtein 1993, 96) indicate that he was arrested on 8 July and executed at some point between May and September the following year). The accusations of incompetence, cupidity, and treachery directed at Mikhailyk and his subordinates (A. P. 1937; Greifer 1937; I. I. 1937; Kin 1937; Solntsev 1937) conform depressingly to the rhetoric that accompanied the purges of party structures during the 'Great Terror' of 1937 and 1938. Reading between the lines, however, it is clear that Mikhailyk

served as a convenient scapegoat for a number of problems related to the production of *The First Hunt*, very few of which lay within his direct control. Shmidt's lack of experience, for example, which meant that several of the sequences had to be re-shot, and the difficulties encountered in tracking down a hoopoe to observe its characteristic movements, were two of the excuses offered for the delays at one juncture (Greifer 1937). Significantly more intractable issues lay in the complexities of the new colour technology: the challenges presented by colour dyes on (imported) celluloid (Gailan 2005, 244); the quality-control issues associated with the processing and dyeing equipment supplied by the State Optical Institute (Greifer 1937); and the lack of predictability in relation to the supply and quality of matrix film stock (Kharchenko 1938). These meant that, even after the arrest of Mikhailyk, progress in the sphere of colour-film production was extremely slow (Greifer 1937; Solntsev 1937; Elin 1937). According to some reports (Greifer 1937; Elin 1937), 300,000 roubles had been spent and approximately 20-25,000 metres of (expensive) imported film stock wasted before a master positive of *The First Hunt* could be struck.²¹ In July 1937, in the context of Mikhailyk's denunciation – for this reason the views expressed should be treated with caution –, one studio commentator (Glebov 1937) claimed that the quality of this master positive was so poor that not even employees within the colour-film division itself had been permitted to watch it. The author in question ventured to predict that the film would be incomprehensible to those unfamiliar with the screenplay. Several issues were identified as requiring immediate rectification: the overly rapid movement of some of the animal characters; the 'illiteracy' of the colour-orchestration, which was at times so dazzling that the scenes in question resembled

²¹ The surviving nitrate-positive of *Dzhiabzha*, as well as the surviving fragments of *Pervaia okhota* and *Teremok*, reveal that the positive prints of these animations were struck using a film stock manufactured by the US firm Dupont.

a ‘pre-revolutionary calico bedspread’; the ‘unacceptable’ technical quality of the colour rendition (one of the sequences was allegedly devoid of colour altogether); and the grating quality of the soundtrack at certain intervals (the puppy’s agitated barking, it was claimed, at times resembled a ‘creaking cart’). For this correspondent, it was astonishing that Iakov Smirnov, the new director of Lenfil’m after the arrest of Katsnel’son (also for the crime of sabotage, although he was arrested many months previously), had already signed the order permitting the despatch of the film for approval by the Committee for Artistic Affairs. A few months later, a special commission convened within the studio to investigate the causes of the delays (Gozhev, Beloi, and Bykhanov 1937) revealed with embarrassment that no copies of *The First Hunt*, or indeed any other animation, had been released in time for the twentieth anniversary of the October Revolution. Despite promises made by the technical director of Lenfil’m at the end of 1937 to achieve the mass printing and distribution of colour animations (forty copies of each work were envisaged – see Alekseev 1938a; Krylov 1938), the situation did not improve markedly during the next twelve months. The late delivery of processing equipment, the continuing absence of reliable matrix film stock, and the closure of the laboratory for three months on health and safety grounds because of poor ventilation meant that not a single release print from the master positive of *The First Hunt* had been struck by the end of 1938 (Alekseev 1938a, 1938b; Krylov 1938; Aleksandrov 1938; Ionidin 1938). Only in the first quarter of 1939, in other words, three years after the initial pledge to the party’s Petrograd Regional Committee, did the challenges appear to have been definitively overcome, with five copies of the film now available for distribution. It is unclear, however, whether any public screenings took place in Leningrad or elsewhere in subsequent months.

The interminable saga with *The First Hunt* established a pattern for pre-war colour animations at Lenfil’m that consisted of repeatedly missed deadlines and significant cost overruns. Tsil’shtein’s memorandum to Ugarov and Zhdanov on 18 May 1937 reveals that

neither the local party nor the film studio anticipated the scale of the difficulties. Presumably based on reports issued by the Petrograd Regional Committee, this memorandum blithely asserts that *The First Hunt* is ‘practically complete’ and will be released ‘within a month’ (Tsil'shtein 1937, 52). Furthermore, it predicts the release of *Home, Sweet Home*, *The Poor Frog*, and *The Duckling* at quarterly intervals from June onwards. In the event, however, it was only at the beginning of 1939 that these works were printed in sufficient quantities to facilitate screenings beyond the studio and the film-industry authorities. Anecdotal evidence (Zritel' 1939) suggests that *Dzhiabzha* (nine copies) and *The Duckling* (thirteen copies) were shown at some point in 1939 and 1940, but only in Leningrad, very probably as part of the special film-programmes for children that traditionally took place during the New Year period. The technical quality of the prints was apparently far from perfect: this same correspondent noted the ‘not infrequent’ problems with colour consistency; and the tendency of colours to ‘float’ across line-boundaries.

Perhaps because these early productions were regarded as experimental works, or perhaps because it was believed that they could be released in larger quantities once the processing and printing technology had improved, the shortcomings did not unduly alarm the studio management. On the contrary, three additional colour animations, *A Tale about a Stupid Mouse*, *The Circus*, and *Three Friends*, were put into production in 1939 and 1940. On the eve of the Nazi invasion, moreover, thanks to the engagement of writers from Lenfil'm's screenplay-writing division, a number of additional animations were being envisaged, three of which had already been assigned directors. According to Raisa Messer (1941), a literary critic who later attended Tsekhanovskii's lecture at the Leningrad branch of the Writers' Union, and for whom the scripts in question represented a ‘new direction’ for the animation atelier, these included: *Song of Joy* (*Pesenka radosti*), directed by Pashchenko and already in production (this is subsequently confirmed in *Kadr*, 3 May 1941); *Chapai Lives On* (*Zhiv*

Chapai), assigned to Tsekhanovskii, which was an adaptation of the ‘heroic tale’ of the same title by Lidiia Oziasovna Shperling, a Leningrad-based poet, journalist, and translator who wrote under the pseudonym of Lidiia Lesnaia; and *Football* (Futbol), a comedy to be directed by Shmidt that would show a match between two teams of animals, some of whom, perhaps inspired by *Mickey’s Polo Team* (dir. David Hand, 1936), another Disney ‘Silly Symphony’, would be conceived as ‘friendly caricatures’ of contemporary Soviet players. The abundance of other scripts mentioned by Messer, including a ‘magical ballet’, *Fairy-Queen of the Dolls* (Feia kukol), which had been scripted by directors Leo Arnshtam and Grigorii Kozintsev, suggests that the animation atelier was regarded at this time as having an important future within the studio. This hypothesis seems confirmed by a report in *Kadr* on 4 January 1941, which reveals that, after repeated complaints about poor conditions, the atelier would shortly be moving into new and properly equipped premises.

Graphic style and colour aesthetic: repudiation of the Disney model

Although the impact of Disney on Soviet animation during the 1930s has attracted serious attention on the part of film historians (Macfadyen 2005, 64-74; Pontieri 2012, 22-44; Beumers 2008), there has been a tendency to ignore the nuanced and complex nature of the debates that took place at the time; articles in the film press, essays in edited volumes published contemporaneously, and retrospective memoirs indicate that there was a marked divergence of views on the merits or otherwise of adopting or adapting the Disney model. It is not exactly clear when and where the slogan ‘Give us our own, Soviet, Mickey Mouse’ was first formulated. The first published references – in the first case paraphrased, in the second case cited verbatim – are encountered in articles by Khrisanf Khersonskii, the film critic and screenplay writer (1934, 70), and Tsekhanovskii (1934, 26) in successive issues of the film

journal *Sovetskoe kino* towards the end of 1934; in neither case is the precise provenance indicated. An essay published two years later by Nikolai Khodataev, one of the pioneers of Soviet animation, suggests that the slogan, or something very similar, emerged in March 1933 during a conference of animators hosted by the Leningrad Association of Revolutionary Film Workers (LenARRK); this was an event conceived as an extension of a production conference for animators held in Moscow the previous month (Kuznetsova 1933), and for this reason attended by some well-known Moscow animators, as well as Pavel Bliakhin, Vice-President of Glavrepertkom, who gave the keynote addresses in both cases (E. 1933). According to Khodataev (1936, 66), the potential attraction of the Disney model had arisen as part of a debate prompted by the efforts of the authorities to promote animation as a potential vehicle for comedy. In his retrospective account of this debate, Khodataev identified two prevailing tendencies among Soviet animators. The first argued in favour of the models of animation that had been pioneered in the West, in particular the USA. These consisted of short comic sketches or serials on mundane subjects featuring eccentric, 'half-human, half-animal' heroes; referring specifically to Pat Sullivan's Felix the Cat, Max Fleischer's Ko-ko the Clown, and Disney's Mickey Mouse, Khodataev explains that such types were known collectively in Russian as '*murzilki*' (66-8).²² The second tendency, among whom Khodataev

²² *Murzilka* as a term of endearment for little people or small fluffy animals has a long and complex history. The term was initially adopted by Anna Kvol'son as the Russian translation for 'Brownies', the name given to the forest spirits in human form invented by Canadian author and illustrator Palmer Cox in 1887. In 1924, however, *Murzilka* was the name given to a scruffy but lovable mongrel puppy that featured in the inaugural issue of the children's almanac *Murzilka* (P. K. 1924) and experienced various adventures related to aspects of

clearly numbered himself, regarded this tradition as alien to Soviet reality and aspirations, drew attention to the psychological limitations of the favoured heroes – they are described as ‘deformed’, ‘clown-like’, and ‘devoid of human logic’ (67, 68) –, and argued that the necessity for Soviet content would inevitably entail the creation of new comic forms (69). As paraphrased by Khodataev (69), one of the demands articulated by representatives of the first tendency was the creation of ‘our own, home-grown, Soviet *murzilka*’.

Whether or not Khodataev had accurately identified the two tendencies in Soviet animation prevailing at this time, it is important to recognize that the Leningrad conference was not the first occasion on which the issue of animation as a vehicle for comedy had been explored: Khodataev himself (1928, 1929) had raised the subject on at least two separate occasions in the late 1920s. Nevertheless, there can be little doubt that Disney’s popularity in the Soviet Union, especially after the release of the three ‘Silly Symphonies’ in December 1935 (*Pravda*, 29 November 1935), prompted renewed debate. The film-press of the period features a number of articles which, while perhaps at times grudgingly (see, for example, Cheremukhin 1936), nevertheless applaud Disney films for their entertainment value, degree of comic invention, virtuosic exploitation of sound and image, and uplifting, optimistic ethos, what one commentator (Skytev 1936, 42) described in terms of a ‘naïve, simple-hearted, and life-affirming smile’. In his memoirs (1980, 80), the animator Ivan Ivanov-Vano recalls Moscow schoolchildren whistling ‘Who’s Afraid of the Big Bad Wolf’ for weeks after the screening of *Three Little Pigs* at the deluxe Udarnik film-theatre as part of the international film festival. Five years after the festival, even the sceptical Tsekhanovskii (1940a) was forced to concede that this film was undeniably the most popular animation among Soviet

everyday Soviet life. Khodataev himself had made an animated short based on this figure, *Kak Murzilka nauchilsia pravil'no pisat' adresa*, in 1926. See Macheret 1961, 178.

children during the 1930s. The Disney phenomenon was not confined solely to the realms of cinema, however. Book publications were coordinated with the general release of the films, for example Sergei Mikhalkov's translation of 'Three Little Pigs', which boasted colour illustrations borrowed directly from the film, and the third edition of which had appeared already in 1937. This same animation also spawned a new line of confectionary, Three Little Pigs chocolates, which began to roll off the production lines in early 1936 courtesy of the Red October factory in Moscow (Gronow 2003, 46) and boasted a package design clearly modelled on the Disney characters (fig. 2). On the eve of the Nazi invasion, the state publishing house Goskinoizdat was reportedly planning a collection of essays dedicated to Disney; one of them, translated by Tsekhanovskii and published in *Kadr* (1941b), had been written by Walt Disney himself. The Soviet film-press also offered reviews of Disney's latest productions, for example *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (dir. William Cottrell and David Hand, 1937), the studio's first full-length feature in Technicolor, even in those instances where the films in question had not yet been purchased for general release within the Soviet Union (Anokhina 1938).

[fig. 2 + caption]

Against this background of general approbation, prompted no doubt by the awarding of a special prize for the animations at the Moscow International Film Festival (*Kino*, 5 March 1935), dissenting views were nevertheless expressed. In his 1934 article, for example, Khersonskii argued that the 'mediocrity' of Mickey-Mouse, his naivety, sentimentality, and 'petit-bourgeois' sensibilities, rendered him an inappropriate model on which to base a Soviet equivalent (70). For his part, Tsekhanovskii associated the graphic style of Disney with the 'culture of cheap boulevard comics', and voiced his implacable opposition to the temptation

of ‘squeezing Soviet content into the anti-artistic form of American culture’ (1934, 26). Such scepticism was echoed in a number of subsequent interventions. In an important article published in *Sovetskoe kino*, the animator Aleksandr Ivanov acknowledged the undeniable success of the Technicolor ‘Silly Symphonies’, but criticized their content as ‘impoverished’ (1936, 45). Two years later, in a lengthy and detailed article tellingly entitled ‘The Wrong Path’ (Na lozhnom puti), which reviewed the twelve (black-and-white) animations released by Soiuzmult’fil’m during its first full year of operation, A. Kamenogorskii (1938, 58) criticized the majority of the works for their artistic ‘monotony’ and ‘mechanical borrowing of Disney’s subjects, characters, and devices’. By 1938 and 1939, it would appear, such criticisms were beginning to gain traction. According to one reviewer (Garin 1939), the animations released by Soiuzmul’tfil’m in 1938 were beginning to exhibit marked tendencies towards more individualized styles. In February 1940, reflecting on his experiences as co-script writer on two colour animations adapted from his classic verse-tales for children (*Scrub-ye-face* (Moidodyr, dir. Ivanov-Vano, 1939) and *Limpopo* (dir. Leonid Amal’rik, 1940)), Kornei Chukovskii (1940) dismissed the Disney model in terms of its ‘unnecessary caricature’, ‘soulless American pantomime’, and ‘stunt-trickery’. *Limpopo* was subsequently saluted by one commentator (Gur’ian 1940, 72) as the first ‘authentically Soviet’ animated film. It has been argued by Ivanov-Vano (1980, 103), one of the leading lights of Soiuzmul’tfil’m during these years, that 1939 was the year in which the ‘spell’ of Disney was definitively ‘broken’ in the Soviet Union.

Whether favourably disposed or hostile to Disney, it is curious that the vast majority of commentators ignore the issue of colour altogether; this gives rise to suspicions that the Soviet films under review, even if originally commissioned as colour productions, may have been made available for the most part only in black and white. In relation specifically to the Technicolor ‘Silly Symphonies’, those who did offer opinions were generally dismissive.

Khodataev, for example, writing in a special issue of *Sovetskoe kino* dedicated to the foreign works screened at the international film festival, was candid in his recognition of Disney's technical excellence as far as colour was concerned. He drew attention to the 'absolute purity of colour', the 'sharpness (*chetkost'*) of contours', and the 'consistency of colour in moving objects', which he confessed was impossible in the Soviet Union bearing in mind the current state of technology; in his view, Disney's achievement in relation to colour 'consistency' (*ustoichivost'*) had not been equalled in Soviet animation even in the sphere of monochrome (1935, 46). As far as the issue of visual aesthetics was concerned, however, Khodataev argued that the 'challenge' of the new technology had given rise only to 'primitive solutions' (47). This position was subsequently reiterated by the director Grigorii Roshal' (1936, 7), who compared the Disney aesthetic to 'street-sold oleographs', i.e., prints textured by means of chromolithography to resemble oil paintings, and Tsekhanovskii (1940c, 65), who chided Disney's animators and their domestic imitators at Soiuzmul'tfil'm for producing 'childishly naïve' colouring (*rastsvetka*). On a separate occasion (1941a), Tsekhanovskii resolutely defended his colleagues at Lenfil'm from accusations that they were ignoring the Disney model at their peril. Such accusations had surfaced in the form of an article by D. Loshkarev (1940), the engineer in charge of the scientific research laboratory in Lenfil'm's colour-film division, who argued that the studio's animators lacked invention, had produced 'pale' and 'unremarkable' characters little different from 'dolls', lacked ingenuity in relation to colour, and had failed to establish a uniform style. In response, Tsekhanovskii defended the right of artists to make their own aesthetic judgements, drew attention to the 'great mastery' with which certain characters in the films had been drawn, celebrated the diversity of styles within the atelier, and argued that the handling of colour was largely a matter of individual taste.

The film-industry authorities and those bodies in overall charge of cultural matters issued few specific guidelines in relation to colour cinematography. The sole instance is a

statement issued in February 1937 by the head of the Committee for Artistic Affairs, Platon Kerzhentsev, who argued in favour of realism, rather than the ‘search for brightness’ that, in his view, had characterized recent films in Technicolor (1937, 4). At the same time, however, he also recommended that ‘the basis of colour cinema must be to depict life in all the richness of its colours’. It can be speculated that these remarks were aimed primarily at live-action cinema rather than animation. As Tsekhanovskii would point out three years later (1940c, 65), animations for children, because they exploited the child’s capacity for fantasy, were not intrinsically bound by the conventions of realism. Nevertheless, the anti-formalist campaign in early 1936 had certainly made animators and illustrators of children’s books and almanacs wary about pushing too far against the boundaries of verisimilitude. Eleanora Gailan, the graphic artist who joined Lenfil’m’s animation atelier in June 1936 and was responsible for the images of the puppy in *The First Hunt*, has confirmed that the drawings of the animals were based for the most part on real-life observation, a procedure known at the time as the ‘Éclair’ or rotoscope method (2005, 245). Furthermore, the differences between Bianki’s screenplay and Shmidt’s film suggest a degree of nervousness in relation to the anthropomorphization of animal figures. Certain deviations from this norm are nevertheless apparent in *The First Hunt*: see, for example, the early scene in which the hoopoe takes a bow while detaching and doffing its red crest, followed shortly afterwards by a head-spinning pirouette (fig. 3). Likewise, although realism is clearly the principle that for the most part underpins the orchestration of colour in the film, the choice of dark blue for the body of the bombardier beetle indicates that compromises may occasionally have been sanctioned in the interests of chromatic experiment. It may be speculated that the visual landscape of *The First Hunt* was designed to some extent to test the ability of the hydrotype method to communicate the full range of the colour spectrum. Strikingly, the chromatic palette is significantly brighter and more densely saturated than the early Disney animations in Technicolor, for example

Flowers and Trees, the action of which also takes place in a rural landscape, but where the presence of scattered clouds gives rise to diffuse lighting conditions, and thus to the perception of relative restraint in the manipulation of colour. In his desire to explore the chromatic plenitude rendered achievable by the hydrotype method, Shmidt may have miscalculated the perceptual impact on audiences more accustomed to monochrome; this could explain the criticism of the master-positive within the studio in terms of a ‘pre-revolutionary calico bedspread’ (Glebov 1937). A similar objection could potentially have been raised in relation to Siumkin’s *Home, Sweet Home*, which employs a relatively garish and non-naturalistic orange-red for the depiction of a thatched roof.²³ Reservations about this type of approach may explain why, in the animations subsequently put into production, greater care was taken not to shock the viewer by selecting subjects and landscapes which, by their very nature, were relatively subdued in terms of their chromatic impact.

[fig. 3 + caption]

***Dzhiabzha*: experiment in ethnographic stylization**

Dzhiabzha was put into production in the first quarter of 1937. It is not clear at what stage, or why, the initial title of the film was abandoned, but it would appear to have been relatively late in the production cycle: figures showing quarterly outputs (Brzheziak and Korobov 1938) continue to list the film as *The Poor Frog* as late as July 1938. Although clearly more exotic-sounding than ‘poor frog’ in Russian (*bednaia liagushka*), the difficulty of pronouncing

²³ See the Maiorov’s digital restoration as broadcast on Russian television, [youtube.com/watch?v_slUk8MkOPU](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v_slUk8MkOPU). Accessed 22 November 2018.

Dzhiabzha in Russian, especially for a Russian-speaking child, renders the choice intriguing, if not slightly baffling. This title derives from the name of the main protagonist, an ‘evil old woman’, but it is symptomatic of its mysterious origins that this name does not feature in the Nanai tale on which the film was based, or the two Russian translations of this tale, or even Pashchenko’s screenplay (1963).

The Nanai are a Tungus people who inhabit the areas of dense forest along the eastern banks of the Ussuri river south of Khabarovsk and settlements along the River Amur and its tributaries just north of this city; in the early 1930s, they were known as Gol’dy (Golds), although this nomenclature was gradually being replaced by the designation preferred today: Nanai (*Nanaitsy* in Russian) (Lopatin 1922, 30-1). The story known in Russian translation as ‘The Poor Frog’ was first published in the Nanai language in 1935 by the Leningrad branch of Detgiz (Shavrov 1935, 8-10); this collection consisted of a number of Nanai folk and magical tales which had been recorded by Taisiia Petrova, an ethnographer and linguist attached to the Leningrad Institute of the Peoples of the North, who had transcribed them using a Latin-based writing script as part of the Institute’s general policy in relation to minority languages at the time (Slezkine 1994, 242-3). The title of the story using this script is ‘Hərəzəkə’. The editor of the collection, Kirill Shavrov, was a specialist in several languages of northern minority peoples; he served as a member of the editorial board of the Leningrad branch of Detgiz and was a close Marshak associate. Two identical Russian translations appeared the following year: the first was published in the April 1936 issue of *Chizh* (Petrova 1936); and the second was published in *The Little Deer’s Golden Horns* (Oleshek zolotye rozhki), a collection of northern tales published by Detgiz and edited by Marshak with illustrations by Nina Kogan (Marshak 1936, 33-5). The acknowledgements in both publications indicate that the translations had been abridged by Shavrov on the basis of Petrova’s source-text.

There can be little doubt that the publications of ‘Hərəzəkə’ in Nanai and ‘The Poor Frog’ in Russian were prompted by the desire on the part of the authorities to promote the children’s literature and folklore of the Soviet republics and the ethnic minorities found within their borders. Marshak (1934, 21) had referred to the richness of this literature in his speech to the 1934 Congress of Soviet Writers. Eight months later, moreover, on 1 April 1935, it was reported in the newspaper *Literaturnyi Leningrad* that writers representing the children’s section of the Leningrad branch of the Union of Writers, among them Marshak, would shortly be embarking on an expedition throughout the Soviet Union to familiarize themselves with this literature.

Although undeniably exotic from a Soviet metropolitan perspective, the Nanai were not an entirely unknown ethnic phenomenon by the time this expedition had taken place. The radical transformations taking place among Nanai communities as a result of collectivization and successive literacy campaigns had only very recently been highlighted in *Pravda* (Lidin 1936). Nevertheless, their obscurity had to some extent been dispelled many years earlier, during the early-to-mid 1920s, thanks to the writings of the explorer Vladimir Arsen’ev, which detailed his geographical expeditions through the Ussuri region in the early part of the twentieth century and his encounters and friendship with Dersu Uzala, a Nanai hunter and trapper (Arsen’ev 1921, 1923, 1926). Significantly, in the wake of Gor’kii’s designation of Arsen’ev as the ‘Russian Fenimore Cooper’, these writings had been referenced by Marshak (1934, 34) as important examples of travel and adventure literature for the young in his speech to the Congress of Soviet Writers. The region and its inhabitants had also become known to film-audiences thanks to a six-month expedition undertaken in 1928 by Aleksandr Litvinov, a documentary filmmaker, who was inspired by Arsen’ev’s example, established contact with him as part of the preparations for his expedition, and benefitted directly from his advice (Sarkisova 2017, 84-90). Two films released by Sovkino towards the end of 1928

drew upon the extensive footage shot by Litvinov and his camera operator, Pavel Merzhin, during this expedition. The first was an ethnographic documentary entitled *Forest People: The Udege* (Lesnye liudi: Udekhe); this depicted the way of life and customs of the Udege, a Tungus people closely related to the Nanai, who inhabited areas of dense forest along the Aniui river north-east of Khabarovsk (the final sequences, shot in Vladivostok, included footage of Arsen'ev himself). The second, *In the Wilds of the Ussuri Region* (Po debriam Ussuriiskogo kraia), consisted of a filmic diary of the expedition and included footage of Udege and Nanai settlements along the Amur river and its tributaries north-east of Khabarovsk. Both the expedition and the films enjoyed a great deal of media coverage (Polianovskii 1928, 1929a, 1929b; Iadin and Zalkind 1928), which reflected the increasing vogue for the Far East on the part of Soviet film studios. Two years later, Vostokkino released *Among the Golds* (Sredi Gol'dov), which consisted of documentary footage shot during the making of *Igdenbu*, an ethnographic feature with scripted elements directed by Amo Bek-Nazarov; both works showed the Nanai settlement of Naikhin, which had featured in Litvinov's *In the Wilds of the Ussuri Region* (Modest 1930; *Kino-repertuar* 1932a, 9-10). In the same year, the Lenfil'm director Mark Donskoi travelled to three Nanai settlements along the Amur river, among them Naikhin, for the shooting of *Fire* (Ogon', 1931), a full-length feature (*Kino-front*, 1 October 1930). This same expedition also produced a *kino-ocherk* entitled *The Golds* (Gol'dy), directed by his assistant, B. Fedorov, which showed the 'life, daily habits, and cultural advancement' of the Nanai people in these settlements (*Kino-repertuar* 1932b, 33). Lastly, in 1934, the Nanai found themselves the subjects of yet another documentary, *About a Nanai from the Tunguska River* (O nanaitse s reki Tunguski), which was directed by Mikhail Slutskii and showed the cultural transformation of a young *nanaets* who leaves his settlement near Khabarovsk to study at the Leningrad Institute of the Peoples of the North (Sarkisova 2017, 99-102). This film was deemed sufficiently important to be

showcased during a special programme at the Moscow International Film Festival dedicated to documentary and educational films (*Pravda*, 1 March 1935). Gailan's recollection (2005, 252) that Pashchenko showed her documentary footage of an authentic Nanai ritual on which to model her drawing of the young girl's dance – unfortunately, the title of the film is not mentioned – suggests that the director may have consulted one or more of these works as part of his preparations for *Dzhiabzha*.

If Shavrov's abridging of the tale as recorded by Petrova may have introduced minor alterations to the original text, the literary screenplay produced by Pashchenko significantly embellished the story and altered key details. By seeking to poeticize the origins of the maria on the moon's surface, so-called because early astrologers mistook them for seas or oceans, the story entitled 'The Poor Frog' in Russian belongs to the category of cosmic myth.²⁴ There are four protagonists in the original tale: an old woman, a young girl (her granddaughter), a dog, and a frog, who live in a small house (*fanza* in Nanai) belonging to the old woman on the banks of a wide river. The old woman loves her granddaughter and treats her well, but she is far less kind to her dog, and her behaviour towards the frog is brutal. This frog is exploited and mistreated to such an extent that on one occasion, after lamenting its unhappy fate by an ice-hole in the river, it begs the moon to descend from the heavens and release it and the dog from their shared misery. The moon accedes to this request, and the two animals are later described playing happily together on the moon's surface. In Pashchenko's screenplay, the action takes place in the depths of winter in a dense forest populated with pine and oak trees. In this version, the girl is not related to the old woman, and is exploited just as ruthlessly as her animal companions. Pashchenko dramatizes their exhausting labours by showing them

²⁴ For other Nanai myths relating to the origins of the moon's maria, including one recorded by Arsen'ev, see Lopatin 1922, 330.

feverishly chopping and cutting wood, and collecting water. They are subsequently locked in the house in order to prepare supper while the old woman disappears into the forest to visit a neighbour (in the film, she leaves to inspect her hunting traps). In the screenplay, such is the hunger of the three companions that they are tempted to eat small portions of the catfish pie that they have prepared, but what remains is swiped by a passing bear, who has forced his way into the *fanza*. Fear of retribution after Dzhiabzha's return persuades the companions to flee the hut and climb to the top of a tall tree from which, with the old woman in hot pursuit, they jump on to the moon's surface.

In terms of graphic style, one of the major differences between *Dzhiabzha* and its immediate predecessors – *The First Hunt* and *Home, Sweet Home* – lies in its stylized evocation of traditional Nanai art forms and its inclusion of objects with quasi (because simplified) folk-ornamental designs. From this point of view, *Dzhiabzha* establishes its distinctiveness in relation to other exploitations of 'primitive' subjects in the sphere of animation, for example *Little Hiawatha* (dir. David Hand, 1937), the Disney 'Silly Symphony' that draws its inspiration from Longfellow's 1855 epic poem of the same title and opens with a voice-over narration that quotes directly from it. Pashchenko's approach also distinguishes *Dzhiabzha* from other Soviet animations adapted from the folklore of ethnic minorities, for example *The Retrieved Sun* (*Vozvrashchennoe solntse*, 1936), which was directed by Ol'ga Khodataeva for Soiuzdetmul'tfil'm and ostensibly drew on the myths of the Chukchi and Nenets peoples.

The title sequence of *Dzhiabzha* might be regarded as a programmatic statement in this regard (fig. 4). Initially static, the human and animal protagonists are positioned along the bottom of the frame and drawn with the austere lines of a woodcut. Along the left- and right-hand margins, and resonating with the subtitle of the film ('A Nanai Tale'), there are two vertical strips of figurative and non-figurative shapes which, albeit in simplified form,

mimic the geometric patterns of traditional Nanai decorative art (Lopatin 1922, 331-47). The zoomorphic images of totemic animals (in this case birds, deer, and foxes) are typical of this kind of art (Lopatin 1922, 335). More importantly, the graphic arrangement is characterized by mirror-imaging, both within the strips and between the strips (the two strips are identical apart from the fact that the animals face in opposite directions), which also evokes the artistic practices of traditional Nanai design (Lopatin 1922, 335 & 340-1).²⁵ The impression of balanced and harmonious geometric pattern is reinforced by the use of zig-zag lines along the tops and bottoms of each strip, but also the distribution of discrete geometric shapes (small triangles) along the sides. In fact, before the heads of the protagonists begin to move in the manner of wooden dolls or puppets, this title image might itself be mistaken for an example of appliqué. The purpose of this declaration is two-fold: firstly, to situate the animation in poetic terms within a non-Russian imaginative consciousness; and secondly, by extension, to insinuate ethnographic stylization as a core poetic conceit.

[fig. 4 + caption]

The principle of ethnographic stylization is reinforced within the diegetic narrative of *Dzhiabzha* by a number of details, most prominently the inclusion of decorative objects within the interior of the old woman's home. These objects are typical of the traditional Nanai homestead, but do not feature in the original tale or Pashchenko's screenplay. During the meal-preparation sequence, for example, the viewer is presented with several ornamental objects: a large wall-hanging; two rectangular pieces of woven material that function as

²⁵ See also the illustrations reproduced in tables 30, 31, 32, and 33.

coverings for low-lying benches; serving dishes; a ceramic pot; an earthenware urn; a white cloth; and what appears to be a woven basket with a lid. These objects are all decorated with geometrical or symmetrical designs; in addition, the spiral motif common in traditional Nanai decorative ornament (Lopatin 1922, 336) is present on the front door of the *fanza*. Coupled with this folk-ornamental conceit are the parallels between the graphic style of the film and the material architecture of the home: its crudely-hewn wooden chest, large barrel, thick external door, solid rafters, and the planed wood used for walls and window frames, all of which are clearly modelled on traditional Nanai homesteads (Lopatin 1922, 82-3 & table 8; Petrova and Parnyakov 2014, 135). The impression of solidity, weight, and simplicity characterizes the visual treatment of the exterior landscape as well; this is populated by solid tree trunks and branches, a heavy revolving gate, crude fencing, large mounds of snow, and thick blocks of ice. The bold lines and non-naturalistic exaggeration of certain details in *Dzhiabzha* repudiate the idea of delicacy, subtlety, and lightness of touch; indeed, it may be speculated that it was precisely this quality that explained Loshkarev's disparaging reference to doll-like impressions in his critique of November 1940. The bold lines of *Dzhiabzha*, witnessed in the severe lines of the old woman's face and the sweeping contours of her body at certain junctures, also distinguish the film from the gently flowing, undulating, and rippling lines that characterize the visual style of Khodataeva's *The Retrieved Sun*. Initially, these lines represent simply the movement of ocean waves. Subsequently, they become a mesmerizing visual dominant that contributes to an overall impression of dreamscape.

Bearing in mind the preponderance of bright colour in traditional Nanai design, particularly in relation to embroidery, it comes as something of a surprise to encounter the relatively restrained colour palette in *Dzhiabzha*. In part, this is explained by the fact that the human protagonists are wearing everyday rather than ritual clothing; it is also explained by fact that, due to the choice of a nocturnal (lunar) landscape, the hues in general are subdued.

Broadly speaking, two colour temperatures operate in *Dzhiabzha* – the cold (exterior) and the warm (interior), each of which possesses its own symbolic valence. These establish the opposition between comfort and security (both the house and the surface of the moon) and a cold, uninviting, natural environment. The predominant colours of the exterior are dark and pale blue, dark and light grey, various shades of brown, pale yellow, mint-green, black, and white; the only exception is the red-brown hue that links the colour of the young girl's coat with the dog's fur and the frog's jacket. By contrast, the interiors possess a much warmer valence, but with the exception of the above-mentioned decorative objects, the colour spectrum for the most part is restricted to shades of brown, reddish-brown, yellow, black, grey, and shades of blue. Judging from the nitrate-positive, none of these colours is bright, intense, or extravagant; even the wall-hanging, which offers the most complex arrangement of coloured shapes, relies for the most part on pastel shades. Overall, the resulting impression is one of deliberate restraint and a reluctance to subject the viewer to sensory overload. The most illuminating moment, both literally and figuratively, occurs when the moon responds to the plaintive song of the young girl and her animal companions by bathing them in its luminescent rays: these are pale, indeed barely coloured at all, and reinforce Pashchenko's general avoidance of spectacular effect (fig. 5).

[fig. 5 + caption]

***Three Friends*: reinforcing the realistic mode**

When Tsekhanovskii described *Dzhiabzha* as a 'lodestar' for future Soviet animation, he was probably not thinking of *Three Friends*, which had not yet been put into production, although the casting preparations had begun as early as October 1939 (*Kadr*, 5 October 1939). Despite

their different subjects, however, the two works share various features in common. The most significant is the partial setting of *Three Friends* in the Arctic North. The bluish tints of these ice-bound sequences, and the mountainous contours visible in the background, bear a striking resemblance to the wintry landscapes in *Dzhiabzha*; it is instructive to learn from the credits that the backgrounds for both films were the work of graphic artist N. Vereshchagina. This point of intersection is intriguing in view of the fact that the Arctic did not feature as part of the contemporary event on which the scenario for *Three Friends* was ostensibly based, i.e., the record-breaking flight by Polina Osipenko, Valentina Grizodubova, and Marina Raskova in September 1938 which ended in the Siberian taiga, specifically a stretch of the Amgun' river north of Lake Chukchargirskoe, because the pilots were forced to abandon their plane after running out of fuel. Like Mikhail Kalatozov's *Valerii Chkalov*, a Lenfil'm production filmed more or less in parallel, *Three Friends* clearly sought to capitalize on the iconographic importance of pilots and long-distance flight in mid-to-late 1930s Stalinist culture. Shmidt's decision to relocate the action of his animation from the Siberia taiga to the polar north may have been prompted by a number of considerations. The most obvious was the fact that the record-breaking achievement of Osipenko, Grizodubova, and Raskova was already 'old news' even by the time *Three Friends* went into production: it had received blanket coverage in the press and had spawned a number of derivative materials in popular culture, including in almanacs for children (Mikhalkov 1938; Iadin 1939; Gernet 1939; Raskova 1939). More significantly, however, the story of how the three pilots had survived in the taiga until they had been rescued by the authorities had already provided the theme of *Friends in the Taiga* (Taezhnye druz'ia), an animation in three colours directed by Aleksandr Ivanov and released by Soiuzmul'tfil'm on 8 March 1939 to coincide with International Women's Day (sadly, this film is no longer extant). By shifting the geographical terrain of his film, Shmidt presumably intended to exploit another topos of 1930s Stalinist culture, namely, the Arctic (Petrone 2000,

46-84), and in so doing render explicit homage to Chkalov's record-breaking flight across the North Pole in June 1937. At the same time, the success with which the lyricism of the winter landscapes in *Dzhiabzha* had been communicated using the hydrotype process may have proved decisive. It is symptomatic of this persistent and overlapping interest that such a landscape would feature again in Pashchenko's *Song of Joy*: set in the Siberian North, within the Arctic Circle, this features a young girl from an ethnic minority background (her precise ethnicity is not indicated), an 'evil, cunning old woman' called Polar Night, and several arctic animals, among them polar bears, a seal, and a walrus (Pashchenko 1950).

Shmidt's decision was potentially fraught with risk in the sense that, without trees or human habitation, in other words, without significant chromatic variation, the potential of the polar north for colour exploration was, to say the least, limited. This can be illustrated with reference to Disney's *Peculiar Penguins*, which was set in the Antarctic and resolved the challenge of colour monotony by including underwater sequences and ending the film with a dazzling display of the Southern Lights (aurora australis). Shmidt sought to overcome the same challenge in a similar way: firstly by introducing polar animals, some of whom perform song-and-dance routines; and secondly by incorporating the Northern Lights (aurora borealis) in a sequence which undeniably constitutes the most spectacular example of colour as a form of attraction in the pre-war animations produced at Lenfil'm. Another solution lay in the fact that not all the narrative of *Three Friends* actually takes place in the Arctic. Inventively, the (main) animated section of the film was framed by a live-action prologue and epilogue that involved genuine human protagonists – three female pioneers from the Leningrad Palace of Pioneers, named in the credits as Nata Arechko, Liulia Gribkova, and Niura Ivanova. As the surviving soundtrack makes clear, the prologue witnesses these girls playing a game in which they fantasize about becoming tank commanders, border-guards, and record-breaking pilots. In addition, a reasonably substantial proportion of the main (animated) section takes the form

of a dream experienced by the girl-pioneer who wants to become a pilot: this includes scenes which show her and companions, as well as her cat, Vera, taking off in a plane from Red Square and subsequently encountering a violent storm that forces them to abandon their plane.

The modelling of drawn illustrations on living figures was not itself an innovation in the early days of animation. Max Fleischer, the Polish-American inventor of the rotoscope, whose films were well known in the Soviet Union (Khodataev 1936, 88), had experimented with this device in his creation of Betty Boop, a caricature of a jazz-age flapper based on the popular actress and singer Helen Kane (the series was launched in 1930). Perhaps inspired by this approach, Disney had also modelled animated figures on contemporary celebrities, for example in *Mickey's Polo Team*, which featured Laurel and Hardy, Charlie Chaplin, Harpo Marx, and Shirley Temple, among others. Lastly, there was a Soviet precursor of sorts in the form of *Friends in the Taiga*, which had apparently used photographic portraits of the three pilots (specially commissioned and taken outdoors) in place of their drawn, animated faces; according to Aleksei Radakov (1940, 69), a well-known poster artist and caricaturist who undertook occasional commissions for Soiuzmul'tfil'm at this time, the director, Ivanov, even invited a professional re-toucher from the newspaper *Izvestiia* to enhance the portraits.

The recourse to an ideologically sanctioned and heroic subject in *Friends in the Taiga* and *Three Friends*, and in the latter case the involvement of actual pioneers, by definition precluded the elements of comic exaggeration and parody typically associated with Fleischer and Disney. Surprisingly in view of the political climate prevailing at the time, this approach was regarded as a serious shortcoming for one internal reviewer (Cherniak 1941), who complained that the opportunity for fantasy and humour à la Disney had been neglected in favour of a 'photographic', 'illustrative', and 'de-caricaturized' approach. This same correspondent was disappointed that the polar animals were drawn and moved 'as if in real

life'; and that the new technology of colour had been exploited solely in order to convey an impression of 'verisimilitude'. These criticisms may well have reflected on-going tensions between the studio's animation atelier and the screenplay-writing division. According to Messer (1941), the idea for *Three Friends* had emerged from writers attached to the latter, but their initiative had been 'strongly' resisted, at least initially, by a number of directors in the former on the grounds that, in their view, such subjects ran 'counter' to the very essence of animation. Messer's revelation would appear confirmed by the revelation that, according to archival records (Deriabin, 2002, 342), the script for *Three Friends* was co-written by Mikhail Murov, a writer employed by the screenplay-writing division. It would also explain why Murov emerged as the film's chief defender after Cherniak's critical intervention. His defence (1941) rested on the argument that, historically speaking, realism had always been part of literature aimed at young audiences. Furthermore, he added, the human protagonists featuring in the film (in his own words, 'the image of our children who seek to become like Grizodubova, Osipenko, and Raskova') precluded the 'grotesque tones' usually associated with Disney. Murov applauded the skill with which Shmidt and his team had conveyed the 'cold, severity, and fairy-tale (*skazochnyi*) beauty' of the Arctic; he also commended them on the depiction of the storm, with its 'very real sensation of threat'.

As restored and reconstructed by Maiorov, but unfortunately not currently in the public domain because, with the exception of the soundtrack, the live-action sequences of the prologue and epilogue have not survived, *Three Friends* is a more interesting cultural document than the exchange between Cherniak and Murov might suggest. In essence, perhaps reflecting the different inputs from the animation and screenplay-writing divisions, it is a hybrid product, one in which the politically correct live-action sequences and main fantasy section belong to different generic categories. Judging from the plot description given by Cherniak, the live-action sequences belong to the genre of the Socialist-Realist youth film,

as exemplified by, for example, *Wake Lenochnka* (*Razbudite Lenochnku*, 1934) and its sequel, *Lenochka and the Vineyard* (*Lenochka i vinograd*, 1936), both of them directed by Antonina Kudriavtseva for Lenfil'm on the basis of screenplays by Nikolai Oleinikov and Evgenii Shvarts. The animated fantasy sequences, by contrast, with the exception of the scenes on Red Square, fall properly within the category of adventure story, albeit one interspersed with the popular traditions of circus performance and cabaret. Like Siumkin and Sinitsyn's *The Circus*, which reflected a longstanding interest in performing animals dating from the 1920s (Marshak's *The Circus*, published by Raduga in 1925 with Constructivist illustrations in colour by Vladimir Lebedev, is the best example of this interest), these sequences are not marked culturally as belonging narrowly to the 1930s. The routines performed consecutively by a walrus, four polar bears, and a seal relate only tangentially to the preferred genres and texts of Stalinist popular culture during this decade: the walrus, accompanied by a fox on the piano, sings the opening lines of a doleful Russian romance; and the four bears dance a Charleston and perform a Cossack folk dance, before somersaulting out of view. Bearing in mind the fact that this is purportedly a dream, the implication must surely be that the ideological rectitude of the three pioneers' ambitions, signalled by the presence of a military band and the faint sounds of trumpets on Red Square as they walk towards their plane, functions merely as a convenient veil with which to conceal a more traditional set of cultural attachments. Unlike the animals in *Friends in the Taiga*, which help the stranded pilots locate the food that has been parachuted to them by the authorities, and thus insinuate their support for the record-breaking attempt (Petroni 2000, 56), the sole function of the Arctic creatures in *Three Friends* lies in the staging of audience entertainment, as well as providing one or two moments of comedy, for example when two bear cubs climb into the plane and inadvertently take-off. At times, this entertainment achieves a crystalline beauty, for example when the seal performs by balancing an ice-crystal, rather than the customary circus ball, on its nose. The

accompanying background of the aurora borealis, rather than communicating Mother Nature's schmaltzy approbation of a comic romance à la *Peculiar Penguins*, achieves a sublime quality that moves well beyond the dictates of ideology. The harp glissando that accompanies this moment serves only to enhance the scintillating splendour of the natural spectacle.

Conclusion

The delay in completing *Three Friends* – the production took twelve months in total (March 1940 to March 1941) and involved two requests for extensions to Ivan Bol'shakov, President of the Committee for Cinematic Affairs (Borodin 2005, 231) – testifies to the fundamental challenges faced by Lenfil'm's colour-film division in the years before the Nazi invasion. Both Shmidt and Tsekhanovskii, whose *A Tale about a Stupid Mouse* took eighteen months to complete (one report in *Kadr* (1 January 1941) claims that the production actually lasted thirty months) and went over budget by more than 200,000 roubles, were threatened by Bol'shakov with never working again (Borodin 2005, 231). It is not known at present how many prints of *Three Friends* were released for distribution, or whether it was ever screened beyond the studio, the Committee for Cinematic Affairs, which awarded the film an overall assessment of 'good', and Tsekhanovskii's lecture to the Leningrad branch of the Writers' Union. The fact that the committee's decision was reached at the beginning of April (*Kadr*, 5 April 1941), with the invasion occurring less than two months later, suggests that, for perfectly understandable reasons, *Three Friends* may not have received any form of release at all.

Thanks to Maiorov's restorations, it is now possible to gauge the ways in which animators at Lenfil'm responded to the challenge of Disney. In relation to the aesthetics of

colour, with the exception of *The First Hunt*, which roams as freely within the new medium as its puppy-protagonist (the escape from the domestic yard to some extent presages a symbolic leap into a world of chromatic plenitude), the animations in question offer a model of restraint, sobriety, and tastefulness. This is partly explained by the penchant for nocturnal landscapes, as illustrated, for example, by *Dzhiabzha* and *A Tale about a Stupid Mouse*, but also by the incorporation of natural phenomena or weather conditions that have the effect of subduing colour tone, for example the storm in *Three Friends*, which signals a dramatic shift in mood and atmosphere. The moments of colour intensity are rare; even when encountered, for instance during the Red Square sequence in *Three Friends*, or during the opening moments of *A Tale about a Stupid Mouse*, both of which take place against the background of a setting sun, they are motivated realistically. In the case of *A Tale about a Stupid Mouse*, inventively, Tsekhanovskii introduces a moving shadow in the early part of the film that gradually engulfs the landscape and shows the darkening of colour tones in the process of occurring (fig. 6). This device might be regarded as a form of colour *mise-en-abîme*; indeed, attention to light conditions and atmospheric effect is something that distinguishes the film generally from the successive editions of Marshak's verse-tale, for example the illustrations in colour by Lebedev for the second Raduga edition in 1925, which ignore the nocturnal context altogether.²⁶ By contrast, with the exception of *The Goddess of Eternal Spring* (dir. Wilfred Jackson, 1934), which was inspired by the Greek myth of Persephone, storm sequences and night-time or late-evening landscapes are rare in Disney's 'Silly Symphonies' of the 1930s. The bright, sunny optimism of the films, and their relentless focus on comic

²⁶ Tsekhanovskii's film is available on YouTube: [youtube.com/watch?v=os3NLB7u8](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=os3NLB7u8).

Accessed 29 July 2018. For a digital reprint of the second edition of *O glupom myshenke*, published by Raduga in 1925, see barius.ru/biblioteka/4069. Accessed 25 July 2019.

effect, tend to result in an impression of unvarying mood and atmosphere: little interest is evinced in light conditions, realistic effects, or colour as a painterly medium. After the initial attraction of colour had prompted subjects that had clearly been selected for their chromatic potential, for example the Easter-egg painting sequences in *Funny Little Bunnies* (dir. Wilfred Jackson, 1934), or the aurora australis episode in *Peculiar Penguins*, it is notable that colour is subsequently relegated to the role of perfunctory and standardized backdrop. This approach began to shift with the release of Disney's first full-length features, *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, *Pinocchio* (dir. Norman Ferguson and T. Hee, 1940), and *Bambi* (dir. James Algar and Sam Armstrong, 1942), where dramatic imperative, emotional and psychological motivation, and overarching symbolism necessitated a more nuanced approach. This was recognized by participants at the conference on colour film that took place in the Moscow House of Cinema in September and October 1945, an event organized as a prelude to the authorities' massive investment in colour-film production in the post-war period, and prompted by the Red Army's acquisition of a number of foreign films in colour as a 'trophy of war' from the Berlin Reichsarchiv. Art historian Aleksei Fedorov-Davydov, for example, observed that the handling of colour in *Bambi* was considerably more interesting and sophisticated than the live-action films of recent vintage in Technicolor and Agfacolor, the monopack system which had been developed in Germany during the 1930s, and the patents for which had also been acquired by the Red Army as a 'trophy of war' (Germanova 1991, 131-5).

[fig. 6 + caption]

Although it might be argued that the lack of large-scale distribution meant that the Lenfil'm animations of the pre-war period existed in a cultural vacuum, it is important to emphasize that they did nevertheless contribute to an emerging discourse within the Soviet film industry that was concerned with how best to exploit the new medium of colour. The debates surrounding the new technology were certainly polarized. At the 1945 conference, for example, veteran director and camera operator Iurii Zheliabuzhskii disparaged the 'chocolate-box confectionery' of recent works in Technicolor (Germanova 1991, 148); he also reminded participants (147) of the disparaging epithet 'half-crazed fruit-drops' (*vzbesivshiisia landrin*), which had been coined by Formalist critic Viktor Shklovskii in a review of *Sorochintsy Fair* (*Sorochinskaia iarmarka*, 1940), a screen adaptation in two colours of Nikolai Gogol's short story of the same title directed by Nikolai Ekk (V. S. 1939). It was generally accepted by participants that existing three-colour technologies, whether Technicolor, Soviet, or German, were by no means perfect instruments at this time because they could not represent all the colours of the natural world with absolute fidelity. As Tsekhanovskii pointed out, however, these imperfections posed significantly greater challenges to directors of fiction films and documentaries than to graphic artists operating within the sphere of animation, for whom fidelity to nature was not a primary concern (Germanova 1991, 151). This was why, in his view, the invention of three-colour film offered 'huge perspectives' to animators; and why animation, he predicted, would become the 'art-form of the future' (152). In this respect, the animations produced at Lenfil'm, while undeniably belonging to the embryonic stages of colour-film development, would nevertheless shape the ways in which the medium was approached in the Soviet Union in subsequent years. The awarding of a bronze medal to Pashchenko's *Song of Joy* at the eighth international film festival in Venice in 1947, the script and sketches for which had been completed before Pashchenko's evacuation from Leningrad in the early stages of the war (Tuliakova 1972; Ivanov-Vano 1980, 133-4), offers fulsome

testimony to the importance of this embryonic stage as far as this particular director was concerned.

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