

# The People's Truth for the Little Ones: National Bolshevik Children's Cinema during the Stalin Period

*Vadim Shneyder*

“The Soviet state,” writes Catriona Kelly, “placed children’s affairs at the heart of its political legitimacy, emphasizing that children were treated with greater care than they were anywhere else in the world.”<sup>1</sup> The significance of children for the Soviet regime and the status of cinema as the ‘most important art’ for the largely illiterate Soviet citizenry meant that children’s film played a major part in the mass culture that transmitted the priorities of the party hierarchy to the population and transmuted official ideology into cultural values. This paper examines Alexander Rou’s 1939 film *Vasilisa the Beautiful*<sup>2</sup> as an exemplar of the Soviet fairy tale film which emerged in the late 1930s following a major reorientation in Soviet ideology.

For a methodological model, I draw upon Katerina Clark’s Structuralist study of Soviet ideology and its narrative models.<sup>3</sup> The basis for my argument lies in David Brandenberger’s work on “National Bolshevism,” as he terms the ideology of Stalin’s regime<sup>4</sup> and in Hans Günther’s work on the utilization of nationalism by totalitarian governments.<sup>5</sup> Within this framework, I analyze Rou’s fairy tale film as a representation of National Bolshevik ideology for children.

With Stalin’s consolidation of power in the early 1930s, the Soviet party hierarchy initiated a series of policies designed to mobilize the diverse Soviet population by promoting Russian history and emphasizing the continuity between the Russian empire and the Soviet Union in education and mass culture. Glorification of Russian state builders and warriors replaced the earlier Marxist-Leninist narrative of the Russian Empire as an oppressive ‘prison of the peoples’ and of the Bolshevik Revolution as a profound break with the policies and traditions

of the past. Brandenberger refers to this rehabilitation of Russian state power and national culture as National Bolshevism.

The policies of National Bolshevism were intended to inspire the Soviet people to resist foreign enemies and contribute to socialist construction. The uninspiring earlier discussion of abstract social forces and the development of history was replaced by stories of famous Russian rulers and generals. The condemnation of Russian 'great power chauvinism' gave way to the notion of Russians as 'first among equals' in the Great Family of Soviet nations.

The revival of state-sponsored nationalism in the early 1930s under the Stalin regime was accompanied by a rehabilitation of folk tradition. According to Günther, the ideological tenant of folk-mindedness (*narodnost'*) promoted a primordial conception of the nation and contrasted the vitality of domestic folk traditions with the degeneracy of cosmopolitan and Modernist cultural forms.

Naturally, the change in ideology necessitated a corresponding change in education and mass culture. Just like the rest of the population, children had to be taught the values of the regime. The socialization of youth into Soviet society could not end when they left the classroom, however. The demand that mass culture contribute to the edification of young people facilitated the development of an expressly didactic children's cinema. With the end of the New Economic Policy and the beginning of the Stalin period in the early 1930s, Soviet cinema was freed from the Western competition that had forced it to make compromises with the demands of popular taste. Instead, cinema in the Stalin period could be molded entirely by requirements of propaganda.

In 1935, Boris Shumiatskii, head of the Soviet film industry proclaimed the necessity of a new film genres that would combine propaganda and entertainment.<sup>6</sup> The development of new

cinema for children would constitute an essential part of this project. The early 1930s saw the consolidation of a specifically child-focused film industry, with the creation, in 1936, of *Soiuzdetfil'm* – the studio for children's cinema, as well as *Soiuzmul'tfil'm* – the studio for animated films, which mostly produced films for children. Furthermore, according to Alexander Prokhorov, “the government established a special children's cinema infrastructure by creating studios dedicated to cinema for young audiences and built special movie theaters for children [ . . .] Cultural administrators redistributed resources of the film industry with 30% percent of its output dedicated to young audiences.”<sup>7</sup>

The 1949 book *Great Art for the Little Ones* delineates the priorities of late Stalinist children's cinema.<sup>8</sup> Citing psychological research and literary observations about the singularly powerful impact of cinematic images upon youthful imaginations, the authors Begak and Gromov write about the “special responsibility of work on cinema for children.”<sup>9</sup> Insofar as cinema had a profound effect on the moral and aesthetic development of children and those children were crucial for the development and strengthening of the Soviet regime, it was of the utmost importance that children's cinema be entrusted only to those who were capable of avoiding the “coarsening” and “vulgarization” of the film that could easily accompany the concreteness of the (implicitly realistic) cinematic image.<sup>10</sup>

The tone of Begak's and Gromov's book is unwaveringly didactic. Children's cinema should contribute to the creation of good socialist citizens, instill a proper understanding of morality, and protect children from deleterious influences, making sure that children did not sympathize with the wrong side or laugh at the protagonist. The book explores several genres of children's cinema, including comedy, adventure film, and fairy tale film.

With regard to the last, Begak and Gromov praise the capacity of fairy tale film to articulate the concerns of the present implicitly, teaching young audiences about contemporary cultural values with the aid of traditionally styled images and narratives. According to the authors,

the chief merit of the director Rou's most recent heroic fairy tale films is the bridging of the heroic theme of Russian folklore with the patriotic theme of the present day. This bridging is achieved not by primitively bringing the story up to date – the modernization of the story – but by means of an authentic, unobtrusive conceptualization of the story's events in light of the major events of recent times.<sup>11</sup>

Indeed, the plot of *Vasilisa the Beautiful* is a combination of several folk tales. “Our goal,” wrote one of the film's scriptwriters, “was not to use any particular tales, but to create on the basis of Russian folklore a new tale, which would embody certain ideas closer to our time.”<sup>12</sup> The fairy tale film was an ideal form for the transmission of National Bolshevik ideology to children: an entertaining spectacle, filled with the latest special effects, and at the same time a narrative emphasizing patriotism, defense of the motherland, and the subordination of the individual interest to the collective, all cast in a *mise-en-scène* suggestive of Russian folk culture. *Vasilisa the Beautiful* proved to be enormously popular with audiences, fulfilling Shumiatskii's exhortation to create a ‘cinematography for the millions.’ As the third most attended film of 1940, it attracted 19 million viewers.<sup>13</sup>

*Vasilisa the Beautiful* established not only the narrative conventions of the National Bolshevik fairy tale film, but also the key elements of the genre's visual language: its *mise-en-scène*, editing, and shot properties. By integrating the narrative and aesthetic features of

National Bolshevik folk-mindedness into an entertaining spectacle, the film constituted an implicit affirmation of official ideology in a form readily accessible to young audiences.

The hero of the film develops in accordance with the classical Socialist Realist model: beginning as an inherently positive but undisciplined youth, he matures into a serious and ideologically conscious member of the socio-political hierarchy. In this sense, his development mirrors the evolution of the Soviet citizen from an unenlightened individual into a member of the people who is subordinate to the collective interest, as articulated by the leader – the *vozhd'*.<sup>14</sup> This is the essential significance of *Vasilisa the Beautiful's* simple maturation plot, in which the young protagonist Ivan evolves from a provincial boy into a defender of the Russian land. The fairy tale setting grounds this maturation plot in national tradition while introducing young audience members to National Bolshevik values. These two elements – the ideological maturation plot, which communicates National Bolshevik values through the form of Socialist Realist narrative, and the fairy tale as a representative product of the new folk-mindedness – combine to make *Vasilisa the Beautiful* an ideal genre vehicle for National Bolshevik ideology. Finally, by communicating the ideology of the contemporary Soviet state through a story set in the remote time of the epic past, *Vasilisa the Beautiful* unifies the past and the present, linking the modern state and its demands on the citizen-filmgoer to the alleged organic wholeness and naturalness of Russian folk tradition.

With its fairy tale narrative structure, *Vasilisa the Beautiful* makes a claim to origins in the Russian epic past. In fact, the film's introductory episode reinforces the image of the film as a glimpse into ancient history. Rou opens *Vasilisa the Beautiful* with a shot of three elders playing *gusli* – the traditional instrument of Russian singers of folk epics – and singing for the viewers (Fig. 1). In Old Russia, such bards usually performed epic songs for the prince and his

warriors. The introduction sets the general epic tone of the picture, following which Rou combines elements of Socialist Realist and fairy tale narratives. In the words of the folk singers, this narrative structure meant that viewers were about to witness “*pravda narodnaia*” (the people’s truth).



Fig. 1: Epic bards introducing the film

Several oppositions define the ideological contours of *Vasilisa the Beautiful* and, by extension, Stalinist National Bolshevism. First of all, Rou incorporated comic scenes into the film primarily through two elements of its *mise-en-scène*: acting and setting. On the one hand, the comic acting of the film’s villains – representatives of enemy classes – contrasts with the epic acting of its positive heroes. However, this element of humor is limited entirely to the first part of the film – that is, Ivan’s early village life. As soon as he embarks on his quest to save Vasilisa, travelling through the majestic Russian land and the dark enchanted forest, all traces of humor disappear and are replaced by a solemn epic tone (Fig. 2).

On the other hand, the opposition between clownish villains and epic heroes finds a parallel in the dominant opposition defining the film’s setting – the opposition between private and public space. Just as humor appears only in the early portion of *Vasilisa the Beautiful*, its occurrence is confined to scenes of the home or other interior space. Over the course of the plot,

a contrast emerges between interior space, on the one hand, and exterior space, on the other. The grandeur of Ivan's journey through the majestic Russian land stands in opposition to his squalid village home.



Fig. 2: Ivan the epic hero

Interior spaces are the domain of the villains' comical deceptions, but also of incompetence, while public space is the arena for heroic labor and valiant combat. The interior spaces outside of the village – the lair of the dragon Zmei Gorynych and Baba Iaga's hut – are prisons in which the villains confine Ivan's destined wife Vasilisa, attempting to entice her with riches or bend her to their will. There is even a village parallel to Ivan's maturation: the older brothers attempt to assume the mantle of adults (by seeking wives), but instead of becoming men, they become victims of the manipulative upper classes.<sup>15</sup>

Characters avoid private space to the degree that their roles are positive. Ivan never appears indoors over the course of the film. When the three brothers launch their arrows to find their wives, Ivan's is the only one that lands in the Russian forest, far from any household, while the arrows belonging to his brothers both land on the estates of wealthy families. Ivan's marriage to Vasilisa, who also never appears inside a building willingly, is thus legitimized by its complete separation from domestic space.

Besides the separation of epic and comic acting and public and private space, the narrative and mise-en-scene of *Vasilisa the Beautiful* delineate positive and negative places, ideas, and modes of behavior in terms of nature, labor, and psychological depth. Public space – the Russian landscape – is the realm of great deeds. Scenes of nature frame the plot of the film. In the beginning, there is the Russian forest in which Ivan and his brothers reap the fruits of nature without straining their harmony with the land. In the end, Ivan, having rescued Vasilisa from Zmei Gorynych and Baba Iaga, rides off with her over the vast expanse of the Russian land.

Furthermore, labor distinguishes the good characters from the bad. It is best performed outdoors in the cheerful and harmonious Russian landscape with its broad wheat fields and friendly birch forests. Beyond the borders of this land lies the magical forest – that is, the only part of the story world that is totally outside of Russia – and here nature is dark and forbidding. This is the realm of the epic warrior's struggle, the place where Ivan the peasant youth becomes Ivan the hero by defeating Zmei Gorynych. For the first time, nature becomes Ivan's enemy in the enchanted forest as he stumbles over twisted roots. The illustrated mise-en-scene of the dark forest reflects the aesthetics of German expressionist film (Figs. 3-4).



**Fig. 3.** The enchanted forest in *Vasilisa the Beautiful*



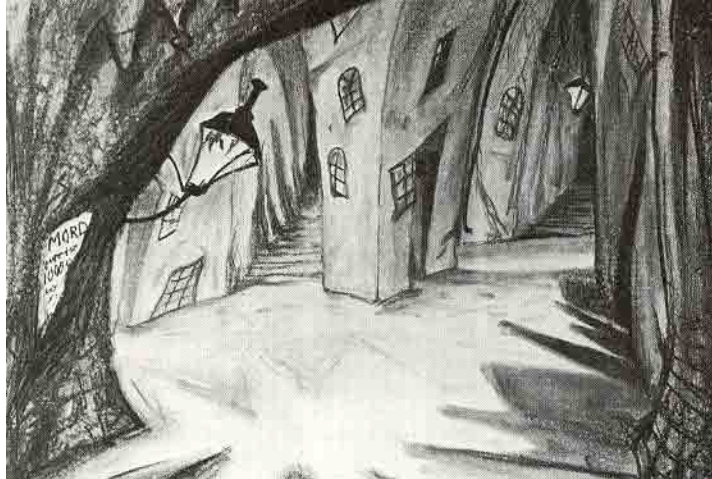


Fig. 4. Sketch for *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* by Hermann Warm (Robert Wine, 1920)<sup>16</sup>

However, unlike the deeply psychologized imagery of that movement, where the jagged mise-en-scene of such films as *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* reflected the confused and disturbed inner state of the protagonist, the world of *Vasilisa the Beautiful* avoids examination of its characters' psychologies. For example, Ivan does not engage in debate with himself about the feasibility of rescuing Vasilisa, and she, for her part, is never even tempted by Zmei Groynych's offer of riches. Those emotions that are appropriate to the occasion are communicated through expressive gestures.

Nothing is concealed because there is no room for interiority in Ivan's and Vasilisa's epic world: as the philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin characterized it, "by its very nature the epic world of the absolute past is inaccessible to personal experience and does not permit an individual, personal point of view or evaluation."<sup>17</sup> In the monolithic national past of *Vasilisa the Beautiful*, interiority would constitute a deviation from the organic community.

In *Great Art for the Little Ones*, Begak and Gromov stress the centrality of the state in the rearing of children and of childhood in the policy of the state. "The rearing of children, after all, is always a party matter. A non-party answer to this question is simply not an option. Child rearing is a social question."<sup>18</sup> Insofar as the rearing of children is a social question, it is also a

party question. The politicization of everyday life – which resulted in large part from the primacy of ideology in organizing Soviet society, as well as the notion that the Soviet Union had achieved a radical break with the bourgeois countries that surrounded it and stepped boldly into the future – meant that children’s culture assumed a high degree of political significance. In particular, cinema had to educate Soviet audiences young and old, giving people models for emulation and teaching them the values of the regime.

This is not to say, however, that the people responsible for the creation of *Vasilisa the Beautiful* were necessarily aware of the tropes and symbols that appear in their work in retrospect, or that they saw their work in the context of a project akin to National Bolshevism. They certainly did not use that term to describe the ideology of their time. Similarly, in those cases when evidence shows that they did consciously seek to express what they saw as the values of the time, they may have conceived of these values differently than they appear in the distorted view of hindsight. All the same, the intertwining of folk culture and official ideology in the products of mass culture proved successful enough to outlive the Stalin regime and even the Soviet Union.

Following the death of Stalin, Soviet ideology and culture underwent significant changes, but the Stalin-era fairy tale film genre showed itself capable of transcending its original ideological context and remaining relevant to future regimes as a vehicle for the articulation of changing cultural values. Indeed, the fairy tale film and invocations of folk-mindedness generally retain a significant role in Putin’s Russia today, probably playing a similar role in emphasizing the continuity of the regime and legitimizing contemporary cultural values. This modern-day folk-mindedness manifests itself in the regular release of fairy tale and folk epic-

themed films, as well as the erection of a fairy tale-themed sculpture garden near the walls of the Kremlin by the government's favored sculptor Zurab Tsereteli (Fig. 5).



**Fig. 5. Tsereteli's *The Frog Princess* near the Kremlin<sup>19</sup>**

The proximity of the Frog Princess to the seat of Russian power speaks to the significance of folk culture in the ideology of the contemporary Russian state.

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*Vasilisa Prekrasnaia*. Directed by Aleksandr Rou. 1938. Soiuzdetfil'm.

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<sup>1</sup> Catriona Kelly, *Children's World: Growing up in Russia, 1890-1991* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2007), 1.

<sup>2</sup> *Vasilisa Prekrasnaia*, directed by Aleksandr Rou (Soiuzdetfil'm, 1938).

<sup>3</sup> Katerina Clark, *The Soviet Novel: History as Ritual*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2000).

<sup>4</sup> Brandenberger, *National Bolshevism: Stalinist Mass Culture and the Formation of Modern Russian National Identity, 1931-1956* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 2002).

<sup>5</sup> Hans Günther, "Totalitarnaia narodnost' i ee istoki," in *Sotsrealisticheskii kanon*, eds. Hans Günther and Evgeny Dobrenko (Saint Petersburg: Akademicheskii Proekt, 2000), 377-389.

<sup>6</sup> Boris Shumiatskii, *Kinematografiia Millionov* (Moscow: Kinofotoizdat, 1935).

<sup>7</sup> Alexander Prokhorov, "Arresting development: A brief history of Soviet cinema for children and adolescents," in *Russian children's literature and culture*, eds. Marina Balina and Larissa Rudova (New York: Routledge, 2008), 6.

<sup>8</sup> Begak and Iu. Gromov, *Bol'shoe iskusstvo dlia malen'kikh* (Moscow: Goskinoizdat, 1949). The translations that follow are my own – V.S.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 110-111. The original reads: "Bol'shym dostoinstvom blizhaishikh k nam po vremeni geroicheskikh kinoskazok rezhissera Rou iavilos' priblizhenie geroicheskoi temy russkogo fol'klora k patrioticheskoi teme segodniashnego dnia. Priblizhenie eto dostignuto ne putem primitivnogo osovremenivaniia, modernizatsii skazki, a putem estestvennogo, ne naviazchivogo osmysleniia proiskhodiashchego v skazke v svete bol'shikh sobytii poslednego vremeni."

<sup>12</sup> RGALI, f. 1966, op. 1, d. 274.

<sup>13</sup> Sergei Kudriavtsev, *Otechestvennye fil'my v sovetskom kinoproekte, chast' 7*, <http://kinanet.livejournal.com/25331.html#cutid1>.

<sup>14</sup> Günther, "Totalitarnaia narodnost'," p. 377; The *vozhd'* (chief) is the masculine counterpart of the feminine land – the *mat'-rodina*. From this pairing, the Stalinist Great Family is born.

<sup>15</sup> The concern with class conflict, fundamental in the ideology of the 1920s, survives in the 1939 film, although its relegation to the comical and domestically focused early part of the film, rather than the later, heroic portion, suggests its declining importance for the folk-minded vision of Soviet society.

<sup>16</sup> Rachel Kendall, "More," *Sein und Werden* no. 2 (2004), <http://www.kisstthewitch.co.uk/seinundwerden/two/more.html>.

<sup>17</sup> Mikhail Bakhtin, "Epic and Novel," *The Dialogic Imagination*, ed. Michael Holquist, trans. Michael Holquist and Caryl Emerson, (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1982), 16.

<sup>18</sup> The original reads: "Vospitanie detei, v kontse kontsov, vseгда partiino. Bespartiinogo resheniia voprosa zdes' byt' ne mozhet. Vospitanie – eto sotsial'nyi vopros" (p. 40).

<sup>19</sup> Photography by Alexander Prokhorov, 20 Sept. 2008.