Bridging the Gap:

Yuri Norstein, *Tale of Tales* and the Great Russian Cultural Divide

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Source: *Tale of Tales*, Screenshot via Youtube.com
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I also grant permission for Georgetown University to publish this paper on the Lauinger Library database.
Yuri Norstein, whose film *Tale of Tales* is the focus of this paper, is a Russian film animator. Like most Russian names, Norstein’s first and last names can both be transliterated from the Cyrillic to the Roman alphabet in at least two ways (Yuri or Yuriy and Norstein or Norshteyn). Because his surname is Jewish, the Russian pronunciation of it is more closely approximated by the Norshteyn spelling. However, both Norstein and Norshteyn are accepted in English-language sources. In fact, Clare Kitson, who has written the most substantial English-language text on Norstein, opted for the shorter spelling. Because this paper draws heavily on her work, I have chosen to follow suit.
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Introduction

In 1984, the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences declared Yuri Norstein’s *Tale of Tales* (1979) to be the “best animated film of all time.” Four years earlier, the director from Moscow had been awarded the Grand Prix title at the annual World Festival of Animated Film in Zagreb, along with a slew of prizes at similar festivals around the world. At home in the Soviet Union, *Tale of Tales*—now recognized as Norstein’s masterpiece—was equally popular. It met incredible (and unexpected) box-office success when it was first released, and it remains a fixture on Russian television even today.¹ Yet, cultural analysts and historians of the late Soviet period leave the film virtually untouched. As far as this writer can tell, the only major English-language text written about the film (or Norstein) is Clare Kitson’s *Yuri Norstein and Tale of Tales: An Animator’s Journey*, which focuses closely on the process by which Norstein made the film and very little on the film’s place in the cultural maps of modern Russian and Soviet history. This paper thus intends to add that historical dimension to the foundation laid by Kitson and thereby help bring Norstein’s finest film to a new audience.

It should be noted up front that Kitson is not a historian by profession, but a former animation editor with Channel 4 in Great Britain. She therefore approached Norstein and his work as an expert in animation rather than in cultural history, and her purpose was to write a close analysis of the content and technique of the film in conjunction with an informative overview of the production process. The lack of historical context is thus not a shortcoming in her text. Indeed, without her extraordinary dedication to bringing a thorough study of the film to the English-speaking world this paper would not have been

possible. She spent two decades perfecting her Russian and hundreds of hours interviewing Norstein and reviewing his records in order to write her book, and the degree to which this paper is indebted to Kitson’s path-forging work cannot be overstated.

In addition to locating the film in the cultural history of Russia and the Soviet Union, this paper’s second goal is to explore the cultural implications of Norstein’s success with *Tale of Tales*. Observations made by two Georgetown University scholars, Michael David-Fox and the late Richard Stites, form the cornerstone of the argument that this paper advances. First, David-Fox writes in an unpublished manuscript that there existed a longstanding, distinctive split between “two Russias” of wildly divergent high and low cultures. He is certainly not the first historian to identify the bifurcated nature of Russian culture, but his eloquent statement of its existence is fundamental to the course of this thesis. Chapters one and two will trace the evolution of both sides of this divide. In particular, the first two chapters will aggregate work done by David-Fox, Stites and others on the Russian intellectual elite’s crusade to overcome the gulf by fostering an understanding and enjoyment of high culture among the lower classes.

Chapter one examines the emergence in the early nineteenth century of the culturally didactic intelligentsia, who were motivated first and foremost by a shared disdain for the low art that constituted the opposite pole of Russian culture. They were further propelled by a fixation on the question of Russia’s national identity, which the chapter will explore. While many in the creative, economic and political elite of seventeenth and eighteenth century Russia had looked to Europe as a model of

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sophistication and modernization, the nineteenth century intelligentsia retreated from that admiration. Scholars hypothesize about the reasons for that reversal (the most common theory will be covered in the chapter), but it is clear that the preoccupation with Russia’s national identity was linked to this inward turning. What is more, the retreat from West-worship went so deep that segments of the intelligentsia began to conceive of Russia as the cultural savior of the depraved, materialistic West. During the second half of the 1800s, the question of national identity increasingly drove members of the intelligentsia to the conclusion that the base level of all culture must be brought closer to the standards of high culture if the Russian nation were to fulfill its messianic purpose. The opening chapter will touch on some of the practical manifestations of this belief. It will then survey the robust urban low culture that blossomed during the last decades before the 1917 revolution in defiance of the edifying agenda of the intelligentsia. Thus, the primary chapter will demonstrate that the didactic cultural mission of the late imperial era intelligentsia was by and large a failure.

The second chapter will follow the flow of those moralizing tendencies past the watershed 1917 revolution. The avant-garde artistic elite of the 1920s will be examined to identify the didactic inclinations they inherited from the pre-revolution intelligentsia. The chapter will also discuss the differences between the agendas of the old intelligentsia and their revolutionary counterparts, the most important of which is the fact that work of the new masters of high art was subsumed within a broader social transformation. They shared the desire to acculturate the masses that the pre-1917 intelligentsia had inaugurated, but their mission featured an additional ideological dimension. While the 1920s creative elite also failed to span the cultural divide, their effort set the stage for the
successful cultural campaign of the cultural authorities of the Stalinist era. Stalin’s regime initiated a crackdown on the low culture that had repulsed much of the elite before the revolution and built in its place a new, all-encompassing genre known as socialist realism that delineated ideologically correct principles that all creative expression was to follow. While the art produced within the socialist realist schema was embraced by much of the Soviet citizenry, and is therefore credited by scholars as effective in unifying the two poles of Russian culture, it also harbored a destructive side. In addition to riding the tailwinds of the Stalinist state’s suppression of competing art that it deemed inappropriate, socialist realism also facilitated the state’s cover-up of the ruthless violence and economic hardship that it imposed on the Russian people. One of the central arguments of this paper, then, is that Norstein’s Tale of Tales provides a different mode of bridging the great divide that avoids the high calamitous cost incurred by socialist realism.

The success Norstein found in transcending the cultural gulf was anchored in the second observation around which this paper is constructed: “All culture is organic.” Stites makes that critical statement while differentiating between high and low culture. By his definition, high culture is that which attempts to answer big questions about eternal values and truths. Low culture is that which addresses questions and issues that are not necessarily timeless, but that resonate with its contemporary audience. Low culture, according to Stites, deals in more superficial values, but also carries a greater capacity to draw people together within its period than high culture. Stites and, as this

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4 Stites. pp 1-2.
paper will demonstrate, Norstein both recognized what the moralizing intelligentsia before and after the revolution could not: Popular culture, although it may have less staying power than high culture, is just as authentic. There is, in other words, value to be found on both sides of the cultural divide. Norstein honors that truth in drawing inspiration from both cultural realms in his classic work. Chapters three and four will locate *Tale of Tales* in the cultural environs of the Brezhnev period and will address a number of ways in which he does so, including an homage he pays to Alexander Pushkin (whose nineteenth-century poetry had been coopted and politicized by Soviet cultural system), his inclusion of low culture folk imagery, his avoidance of ideological undertones and socialist realist moralizing norms, his consideration of the big, high culture question of happiness, and his use of an unconventional, non-linear plot structure and innovative animation techniques. Through all of these threads, as well as through other elements that will be explored, Norstein defied the cultural control of the socialist realism that continued to reign fifty years after its birth, while still creating a piece that resonated with proponents of both high and low culture. *Tale of Tales*, then, represented an alternative to the socialist realist solution to the high-low cultural dichotomy. This paper will ultimately argue that *Tale of Tales* offers a preferable means of conquering the cultural split. A sustainable reconciliation of the high-low cultural divide ought to be found in individual works like Norstein’s that straddle both worlds, and can thus transform the cultural realm from a polarized opposition to an inclusive continuum, rather than in discriminatory totalizing cultural systems like socialist realism.
A Short Summary of Tale of Tales

Because the thesis proffered by this paper necessitates an overview of the cultural history of Russia from the early nineteenth century through the mid-twentieth century before it can properly address the film itself, it may be helpful for the reader to look briefly at the structure of the film before diving into the first chapter. While there is no substitute for actually watching the film, this writer understands that not every reader can set aside the time to do so.

Tale of Tales does not have a linear plotline or a central plot conflict. Instead, Norstein builds Tale of Tales around three overlapping, but distinct worlds: the world of his memories, the contemporary world and the dream world where his idealized happiness is depicted. The viewer moves fluidly between the three and is accompanied by a little grey wolf that observes the action in each realm. The scenes that comprise the three worlds offer a mixture of comedy, joy and melancholy, as they trace Norstein’s nostalgia for his childhood, his search for happiness through family and art, and his reflections on the hardships and societal weaknesses of both the post-World War II period of his childhood and the 1970s. To say that it is difficult to succinctly summarize the film is an understatement, as it is composed of layers of meaning that reveal themselves over multiple viewings. As such, this writer hopes that those who read through to the end of this paper will be inspired to log onto Youtube (where the film is available in its entirety) and experience it for themselves.
Chapter 1: The Great Cultural Divide During the Late Imperial Period

Before turning to the significance of Yuri Norstein’s film, it is imperative to paint a picture of the cultural context and history that rendered Tale of Tales so momentous. This chapter will address the historical roots of the high-low culture dichotomy that Tale of Tales transcended, as well as pre-1917 efforts to span it. In dealing with the development of both high and low culture from the early nineteenth century to the fall of the Russian Empire, this chapter will contribute to the larger narrative of the distinct cultural gap surveyed in this paper that persisted in some form for most of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In addition, this opening chapter will address some early attempts to bridge that disconnect, in order to lay the foundation for a later discussion of how Norstein differed in his approach and what that difference means for Russian culture on a broader level.

Slavophiles and the Question of the Russian Identity

The first noteworthy group to consider is the early nineteenth century intelligentsia. The exact definition of the term “intelligentsia” is sometimes the subject of contention among scholars. As prominent Russian historian Martin Malia indicates, “intelligentsia” has been used to connote concepts as wide as “intellectuals” and as narrow as “revolutionary opposition.” For the purposes of this paper, however, intelligentsia shall carry the definition proposed by Malia and confirmed by N.G.O. Pereira. In his view, the intelligentsia is the body of critical thinkers across the political spectrum that coalesced in the 1830s and 1840s and that occupied itself with the

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dissemination of new ideas. In some cases, particularly during the late imperial era and the Soviet period, this boundary-pushing took the form of opposition, but hostility to established authorities was not the essence of the intelligentsia. Nor were the ideas spread by its members necessarily uniform. The intelligentsia was instead a cohesive entity insomuch as it made itself the opponent of intellectual stagnation and engaged in the propagation and circulation of fresh thinking.

By virtue of its function, the intelligentsia was a part of the Russian cultural elite during the nineteenth century. Composed of learned individuals, the intelligentsia (and the rest of the elite) existed worlds apart from the almost entirely illiterate peasant and serf population. It was distinct from other entities in the elite—such as the landed gentry, church and imperial authorities, military officials, and other components of wealth or power—although its members could overlap with them.

As both Malia and Pereira detail, the focus of much of the intelligentsia during the nineteenth century was on big ideological questions—“moral quests” in the words of Malia. More precisely, the great question that captivated the intelligentsia of the 1800s was that of Russia’s national identity. The late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries had been dominated by Peter the Great and his westernizing reforms, which were continued

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7 Literacy among serfs was actually discouraged by the autocracy, and was very low among peasants as a whole. It began to increase during the 1870s after the emancipation of the serfs in 1861 (see: Thurston, Gary. “The Impact of Russian Popular Theatre, 1886-1915.” The Journal of Modern History. Vol 55, No. 2. Chicago University Press. P 241. Footnote 13.) For a glimpse into some of the very few written serf autobiographies, see: MacKay, John. Four Russian Serf Narratives. Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press. 2009.

by Catherine the Great after him.⁹ At the beginning of the nineteenth century, a Western orientation was still current among the elite, with large portions of the aristocracy learning French as their first language.¹⁰ Despite this opening to the West, however, Russia lagged behind Europe in political and economic development in the early 1800s. That knowledge strained the elite’s cultural relations with West and caused many in the intelligentsia to turn inward to search for Russia’s unique identity and her place on the historical stage.

Malia argued that the Slavophiles, as these budding intelligentsia nationalists were called, began to search for new markers of national value. Russia was lacking in the democratic institutions, civil liberties, and independent religious institutions that were increasingly defining the civic identities of Western states, and Malia describes how the intelligentsia compensated for what it knew could be perceived in the West as cultural and political backwardness:

> What was most cruelly lacking in the national existence was rationalized as unimportant, or even construed as a virtue, while those elements of positive achievement which did exist were exalted to the rank of the first principle of life.¹¹

Pereira echoes Malia in asserting that a severe inferiority complex was at the core of intelligentsia output in the first half of the nineteenth century. He then goes further to

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⁹ Having traveled extensively throughout Europe, Peter devoted much of his reign to reorienting Russia toward the West in an effort to modernize it. He founded St. Petersburg as the new capital largely because of its geographic proximity to Europe and modeled it on the cities of the West. He also overhauled the Russian army, restructuring it to resemble European military powerhouses. He even famously required noble men to shave their beards and to dress in Western styles. There is an unbelievable wealth of scholarship on Peter the Great and his reforms. A good starting point is: Carcraft, James. *The Revolution of Peter the Great*. Harvard University Press. 2006.


detail what he views as an impressive philosophical reversal achieved by the 
intelligentsia in their work on the national question. He explains that Russia was cast as 
the savior of Europe. While Western states featured the external trappings of freedom 
(such as little or no censorship, social contracts, constitutional structures, etc.) that 
Russia—still decidedly ruled by an autocracy—lacked, freedom was the essence of the 
Russian lifestyle. The West, by contrast, was regarded as aging and degenerate, mired in 
materialism and an overdeveloped sense of rationalism unanchored to any higher truth. 
Russia, then, was destined to deliver the West from its debilitation.12

Intelligentsia thinkers, as one might expect, were not entirely in agreement as to how this salvation would be achieved. Indeed, however one might regard the sense of 
inadequacy that drove their creative ambitions, the young intelligentsia produced an 
extraordinary range of responses to the existential problem before them that formed the 
derpinning for a Russian high culture. Many members embraced the concept of 
messianic nationalism by pointing to the principles of the Russian Orthodox Church as 
the formulation of the truth absent in the West.13 Vladimir Solovyov, who wrote 
extensively during the second half of the century, is perhaps the most prominent of these 
nineteenth-century spiritual philosophers.14 Others took a more secular approach, and 
many were open about their opposition to the autocracy. Political writer Alexander

12 Pereira. pp 298, 300-1, 303
13 Pereira. 298.
14 A poet and a philosopher, Solovyov wrote extensively throughout the second half of the 
nineteenth century. He is best known for introducing a form of Sophiology (Sophia being 
the representation of Wisdom in the Godhead) that sought truth, or wisdom, in the 
synthesis of Russian Orthodox theology with elements of Hellenistic philosophy, 
mysticism, Buddhism and other select spiritualities. As a worldview, Solovyov’s 
Sophiology is decidedly non-rationalistic, and thus fits naturally into the Slavophile ethos 
of the 1800s. A good starting point for the study of Solovyov is the 1985 translation of 
his The Meaning of Love: Solovyov, Vladimir and Owen Barfield (trans). The Meaning 
Herzen, for instance, helped lead the intellectual charge for government liberalization. He did so, however, while maintaining that Western institutions were not to be mimicked, but considered models of failure to be avoided. \(^{15}\)

Still others turned to the elevation of native folk traditions and customs (either real, exaggerated or, in some cases, fabricated) as proof that Russia possessed a culture of value that existed before the Peter the Great’s cultural upheaval. \(^{16}\) Between 1859 and 1869, for instance, several compilers published collections of what they labeled “Russian popular tales.”\(^ {17}\) W.R.S. Ralston, who translated a volume of these tales into English, warns his reader not to regard the tales as entirely accurate representations of actual folk stories from the imperial age. While some may have been a part of the peasant oral tradition, many of them were likely adaptations of fairy tales from non-Russian, but easily accessible sources. \(^ {18}\) Nevertheless, these tales and other such glorifications of what was believed to be folk culture led many men of letters—including figures like Fyodor Dostoevsky and Leo Tolstoy—to romanticize the peasant culture in order to find in it evidence of a distinctive Russian identity. \(^ {19}\)

Even before members of the intelligentsia began stylizing depictions of peasant tradition to retroactively fashion a native culture, the realm of high culture was witnessing the emergence of a bona-fide literary tradition. Where most European cultures already boasted a significant literary heritage, Russia—perhaps in large part because of its longtime cultural deference to the West—had not yet developed a robust canon.

\(^{15}\) Pereira. 301-2.
\(^{16}\) Pereira. pp 295-6.
\(^{18}\) Ralston. p 6.
\(^{19}\) Malia. p 296. For portrayals of idealized peasant culture, see Dostoevsky’s “The Peasant Marey” or Tolstoy’s “The Death of Ivan Ilych.”
Indeed, one can infer one of the reasons for that void from the fact, already noted, that the Russian language—the necessary medium for any Russian literature—was passed over by much of the Russian nobility for French as their language of everyday use. This preference dated from the reign of Peter the Great, where French was elevated as the language of sophistication. During the first half of the nineteenth century, however, author-poet Alexander Pushkin burst onto the scene and effectively established the foundation for Russian literature. D.M. Thomas, in his introduction to a volume of Pushkin’s poetry, compares his legacy to that of Shakespeare in England. Pushkin not only produced an expansive body of work that influenced writers and other artists throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, he also strengthened and stretched the capacity of the Russian written language.20 His poetry will be more closely examined in chapter 3, as Norstein himself drew heavily on Pushkinian motifs in crafting Tale of Tales. What is integral to the object of this chapter, however, is the realization that his work—like that of Solovyov, Herzen, Dostoevsky, Tolstoy and other comparative thinkers—contributed to the intelligentsia ambition to build a distinctly Russian culture and identity. In doing so, they also introduced a spirit of creative innovation in Russian high culture that Norstein would draw on a century later in shaping his distinct animation style.

The Russian culture and identity crafted by the intelligentsia, it must be noted, was one of a minority. When the first and only census of the Russian Empire was conducted in 1897, it revealed that a little more than 80 percent of the entire population

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was peasants.21 Although statistics do not exist for the nineteenth-century before that year, it is reasonable to assume that the peasant population comprised a roughly similar percentage throughout the 1880s. As previously noted, illiteracy was the norm among the serf and peasant sectors during most of the 1800s, and, as such, little primary source records remain of the peasant culture during this period. What is certain, however, is that the expanding high culture was inaccessible to them. And so one sees an early incarnation of the clear-cut culture gap. The philosophy, mysticism and literature that was the backbone of the early stages of modern Russian high culture—the preponderance of which was inspired by a need to discover a fundamental Russian identity—was out of reach for most of the Russian people.

*Popular Theater and the Advent of the Moralizing Element*

The end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth witnessed two important changes in the high-low culture dynamic. The first, addressed in this section, was the sudden widespread elite concern with the moral condition of the lower classes. The second, explored in the next section, was the industrialization-spurred explosion of a low urban culture.

Richard Stites, in his seminal work on Russian popular culture during the late imperial and Soviet period, asserts that moralism held a prominent place in pre-1917 high culture.22 Parts of the intelligentsia, often working with agents of the state, endeavored to cultivate among the wider public a preference for what they regarded as authentic culture

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over the inferior popular culture. The didactic mission of those involved was to supplant the vulgarity of the lower classes with art that would inspire better ways of living and the search for higher truths. This position, of course, would seem to be an extreme about-face from the romanticism of peasant culture that occurred during the middle part of the nineteenth century. It can be explained, however, with two observations. First, while celebration of peasant customs constituted one strand of intelligentsia thought during the nineteenth century, it was certainly not characteristic of every sector of the intellectual and political elite, or even of every element within the intelligentsia. There were those among the privileged who disdained the crude expression and mannerisms of the masses. Further, it was not impossible for an individual to span both positions—romanticizing the seventeenth-century peasant cultural legacy while expressing condescension or even derision toward the contemporary peasants he interacted with. Tolstoy, for instance, lambasted the peasantry of his era for its “cynicism and filth that systemically demoralizes the people from century to century.”

In any case, the idealization of peasant life by some intelligentsia thinkers was matched by a patronizing sense of superiority among many segments of the intelligentsia and the elite that aided the development of a proactive moralism in high culture.

The second consideration that explains the arrival of an actively didactic trend in high culture at the end of the 1800s was the abolishment of serfdom. After Tsar Alexander II terminated the feudal serf system in 1861, the roughly one third of the Russian population that had been trapped in slavery was emancipated. No longer

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24 As indicated earlier, no formal census data exists for imperial Russia before 1897.
shackled irrevocably to the land, they immediately gained a new potential with regards to their ability to contribute to Russian modernization. During the époque of serfdom, the peasants were to be pitied and their culture mostly disdained and dismissed. With emancipation, however, the crassness, lack of discipline, ignorance and other stubbornly unchanging elements that the elite saw in peasant culture became worrisome hindrances to the progression of Russian culture and the national identity. To overcome the gap, the intelligentsia believed, the bottom must be brought up—a task that required both the expansion of literacy and the more intangible “civilizing” of the uncouth. The learned classes, then, acquired an urgent desire to enlighten the peasant population that was predicated on the conclusion not only that they could better the masses, but also that it was imperative that they do so.

Thus, one arrives at the critical impetus behind the moralism of the last decades of the Russian Empire: the guardians of high, intelligentsia culture hoped to close the gap between high and low culture by endowing lower class populations with the norms, ideals, morality and sensibilities of high art. This self-assured superiority and pedagogic orientation toward the masses would continue through the revolution and into the Soviet era, as this paper will discuss in the next chapter. Norstein, however, would eschew this edifying attitude and instead embrace the low culture of his time—a fact that would both

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26 Thurston. p 240.
set him apart from the generations of high-culture artists before him and explain, in part, his ultimate success in transcending the high-low divide.

One phenomenon that demonstrated this moralism among the intelligentsia was the system of popular theaters, also known as people’s houses, that spread across the Russian landscape beginning in the 1880s. The term “popular theater” is deceptive in that they generally did not originate from a popular movement, but were built for the masses by the government and intelligentsia theater groups. The regime—which had previously deterred the advancement of literacy among the serfs—now looked to support the education of the masses. Popular theaters thus developed in the context of an intelligentsia and government effort to devote more resources to promoting peasant literacy and schooling. During the 1890s, villages across Russia witnessed the opening of schools, libraries, reading rooms, trade schools, tearooms and other institutions intended for the cultural betterment of the population. Rural intelligentsia at the end of the century also took to organizing circles dedicated to reading secular literature to peasants. Popular theaters, then, were linked to the broad and newly energized effort on the part of many in the elite to pull the common population out of illiteracy and what they perceived as cultural darkness.

Indeed, Gary Thurston explains that the first such theater in Russia was constructed by an intelligentsia couple working as schoolteachers in a rural village in the late 1880s. They seized upon performances by their peasant students of works by elite and classic playwrights as a means to supplement their classroom education and combat

27 Thurston. p 238.
28 Thurston. p 240
their cultural backwardness. The wife of this original pair strongly believed that, with the aid of a web of such theaters across the empire, peasant ignorance could be eliminated in ten to fifteen years.\textsuperscript{30} That sentiment typifies the conviction of the champions of high culture that the lower classes could be lifted \textit{en masse} to a greater level of cultural sensibility. The students of this initial program responded positively to the dramatic exercises, and intelligentsia groups in other regions were quick to follow suit and construct their own theaters.\textsuperscript{31}

As popular theater performances became more prevalent, the intelligentsia also began to conduct surveys of theatergoers to gauge how exposure to what the theaters’ sponsors considered legitimate plays affected them. What they found was that watching (or, on occasion, acting in) plays in which characters were confronted with a variety of forces and situations encouraged in peasants the development of a sense of self-awareness. Observing actors navigate some of the scenarios they could encounter in real life allowed lower class audience members to better understand that they occupied a place in a larger world and that their decisions carried consequences outside of themselves. As an example, Thurston cites one peasant who reportedly commented, “There you can see what is demanded in life and what can suffocate life, what miserliness, pride and deceit do; you see all this; it is always presented in a lively fashion, where deceit leads to the worst and how you get out of this unhealthy stream.”\textsuperscript{32} The testimonies collected through the surveys were saturated with this sort of affirmation of the transformative power of popular theater. Whether they were representative of the

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\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{30} Thurston. 250
\item \textsuperscript{31} Thurston. p 250.
\item \textsuperscript{32} Quoted in Thurston. p 260
\end{itemize}
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actual views of the majority of theatergoers is less important than the fact that they persuaded many in the elite that they were, such that proponents of popular theater were encouraged to continue expanding the web of theaters into new villages and cities.\textsuperscript{33}

In addition to providing much of the financing and production expertise to popular theaters, members of the intelligentsia—inspired by the apparent success of theater programs—also began to write plays specifically for popular theater stages. Alexander Ostrovsky, for example, was a member of the literary elite as well as powerhouse in popular theater writing. In a letter to Tsar Alexander III written in the 1880s, Ostrovsky expressed his ambition to create a national theater repertory that would cater both to the elite and to the common man. His enthusiasm is yet another illustration of the elites’ desire to synthesize high and low culture into one national culture (favoring the values of the former) that lay at the heart of the popular theater movement.

Maxim Gorky, who would later be influential in the birth of socialist realism, likewise wrote several plays intended to counter what he identified as a cynical strain in peasant culture, which he attributed to the passivity learned over hundreds of years of serfdom. Leo Tolstoy likewise took to crafting plays specifically for peasant audiences in order to furnish alternatives to the \textit{au courant} folk culture.\textsuperscript{34} As with all aspects of elite cultural activity before the 1917 revolution, these popular theater playwrights faced some pushback from imperial censors. Tolstoy in particular was blocked from publishing some of the pieces he wrote for popular theater audiences.\textsuperscript{35} With that said, however, the regime became progressively looser in the restrictions it placed on popular theater

\textsuperscript{33} Thurston. p 249.
\textsuperscript{34} Thurston. p 243.
\textsuperscript{35} Thurston. pp 239-40, 243.
dramatists as the nineteenth century gave way to the twentieth, and thereby enabled the educated upper crust to pursue the moralistic goal of sweeping the masses into high culture through the mechanism of theater.

One of the major differences between the moralizing elite of the turn of the century and that of the Stalinist Soviet years (discussed in the next chapter) was the relative diversity of opinion about how to handle the masses among the pre-revolution upper class. Although intelligentsia support for popular theaters grew quickly as the nineteenth century closed, the theaters were far from universally embraced by the powerful elements of society. Orthodox priests, for example, tended to be more concerned by the possibility that the intelligentsia playwrights would attempt to stage shows that cast the clergy in a negative light or that contradicted their authority than by the cultural enrichment of the peasants. That conservative perspective, moreover, was consistent with the view of the peasantry ascribed to by much of the Church—including the Holy Synod, its highest governing body—that the masses were simple, devoid of any capacity for ideas or reasoning, and therefore unable and unfit to receive literary or theatrical culture.\(^\text{36}\) As such, the clergy at the dawn of the twentieth century did not share in the optimism of the intelligentsia regarding the power of popular theater to plant the seeds of high art among the common people.

Similarly, the government element of the elite was initially wary of the explosion of people’s houses. Although the exact concerns of the autocracy were not clear, it is likely that the influence intelligentsia-sponsored popular theaters seemed to rapidly develop over their audiences worried the monarchy, as the intelligentsia often criticized

\(^\text{36}\) Thurston. p 239, 251-2.
the regime. In any case, state censorship strictly limited the works that could be staged for common audiences in the 1880s and 1890s. Tolstoy and Gorky, for instance, each wrote at least one play for the edification of the common public that was blocked by censors from reaching their intended demographic.37 Following the 1905 revolution (discussed shortly), however, they and other playwrights faced much less censorship. Like most artistic areas, popular theater enjoyed a greater diversity of material after the promulgation of the October Manifesto in 1905. But the threat of censorship did not fully dissipate, and the tension between the regime and the intelligentsia persisted.

Even the owners of people’s houses themselves were not always motivated by the prospect of civilizing the masses. Cities in particular were home to a number of theaters that were opened solely for economic reasons, without an acculturation agenda. Investors in factories, particularly after 1905, sometimes established theaters for their workers in an effort to reduce absenteeism. This strategy presented itself because people’s houses proved to be quite (for lack of a better word) popular among the working class. Theater thus became a legitimate leisure activity and, by extension, an alternative to drinking in the tavern.38 This pattern demonstrates again that the elite as a whole were not entirely united behind the aspiration of elevating the cultural consciousness of the masses—a fact that would change during the Stalinist cultural overhaul. More importantly, however, it evidences the fact that the intelligentsia campaign to bridge the cultural gap was a partial, though far from complete, success. It is difficult to quantitatively evaluate what portion of the common population responded positively to the availability of popular theater by choosing to repeatedly attend. Nor is it possible to determine to what degree those who

37 Thurston. p 243-4.
38 Stites, 22. Thurston, 241-2, 244,
did experience frequent exposure to the theaters absorbed the cultural and moral lessons advanced by much of the popular repertory in the way the intelligentsia desired. What is clear is that plethora of moralizing people’s houses that appeared in the late 1800’s and flourished after 1905 acted as a medium through which some new, tenuous linkages between the elite and the lower classes began to form.

The 1905 Revolution, Urban Low Culture and the Endurance of the Cultural Divide

People’s houses, while the most prominent incarnation of the elite’s moralistic designs for the masses, were not the only cultural institutions that embodied it. This section will touch on another example of the intelligentsia’s edifying intentions toward the lower classes, as well as the unfolding of a new urban popular culture that signaled the failure of those intentions. First, however, it will briefly review a political event that served to relax the censorship of the state. The flood of artistic expression that ensued in the spheres of both high and low culture, as well as the subsequent friction between them, demonstrated clearly that the high-low culture cleavage continued to mark Russia into the twentieth century.

In 1905, the Russian Empire was swept by waves of political and social unrest. Known collectively as the 1905 Revolution, the protests consisted of worker strikes in the cities, peasant uprisings and, in some cases, small-scale revolts by military companies. A mélange of discontent with grueling working conditions, the inability of workers to unionize, the severe inflation and price increases of 1904, and the treasury-draining Russo-Japanese War gave the revolution momentum across wide swaths of the Russian nation, as well as in other parts of the empire such as Estonia and Latvia. It also brought
to the forefront calls for constitutional reform that had been circulating among the urban liberal intelligentsia for years.

Revolutionary activity continued until October 1905, when Tsar Nicholas II issued the October Manifesto. In an apparent concession to the movement’s demands, the manifesto pledged freedom of speech and association, the ability of workers to unionize and the establishment of the Duma, a parliamentary body. In reality, many of the compromises Nicholas pledged were superficial, and the constitutionalist intelligentsia leadership was largely dissatisfied with the revolution’s outcome. Unfortunately for its cause, further gains were impeded by the disintegration of the tenuous coalition of opposition and reformist groups that the Union of Liberation (a liberal intelligentsia organization) had built. For the purpose of this paper, however, it is important to note that one of the few areas where the monarchy’s promises precipitated substantive change was that of censorship. Even before the October Manifesto was promulgated, the regime began easing up on censorship of the press, such that by the end of 1905 the press was mostly free. In addition, censorship of artistic works was diminished, which spurred a diversification of both popular and high culture.

In the realm of high culture, the focal point of the early twentieth century was the Silver Age. Encompassing three main literary and poetic genres—symbolism, acmeism and futurism—the Silver Age featured an emphasis on the mystical, metaphysical and irrational. Symbolism, the most prominent of the Silver Age movements, was heavily

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39 For more information on the Union of Liberation and the 1905 Revolution, see Melissa Kirschke Stockdale’s Paul Miliukov and the Quest for a Liberal Russia, 1880-1918 and Terence Emmons’ The Formation of Political Parties and the First National Elections in Russia.

influenced by French symbolists poets such as Charles Baudelaire, as well as by the writings of Solovyov. In this sense, it was an heir to the spiritual philosophy that flourished during the Slavophile era earlier in the nineteenth century. While the Silver Age began before the 1905 revolution, the open (relative to any previous period) cultural milieu of post-1905 Russia allowed it to push its boundaries in new ways. The outcome of the 1905 revolution, then, enabled a robust, decadent, diverse, and experimental literature to prosper among elite intellectual writers.  

When discussing the brilliance and distinctiveness of Silver Age literature and poetry, however, it is important to note that the work of Silver Age writers was accessible to only a small minority. The fascination of Silver Age authors with cryptic metaphors and esoteric imagery limited their audience. For example, Andrey Bely’s Petersburg—considered by many to be the pinnacle of Russian symbolist prose—is often referred to as the Russian equivalent of Ulysses, in part because it, like James Joyce’s epic, appears at first blush to be a chaotic mix of impossible puzzles. Furthermore, Stites notes that Silver Age writers tended to tackle abstract subjects, remaining removed from the more tangible, pertinent social problems of their day. As such, Silver Age literature reinforced the gulf between the educated elite and the masses.

Although it dominated much of the scene in the early twentieth-century, the Silver Age was not the only movement in Russian high culture. As the Russian Empire strove to catch up with Europe in terms of industrialization and urbanization, a new business class

41 For an impressively clear and concise explanation of the Silver Age (which does not lend itself to either clarity or brevity) see: Moss, Walter. A History of Russia: Since 1855, Volume 2. London: Wimbledon Publishing Company. 2005. 167


43 Stites. p 10.
emerged in the cities that expanded the realm of the elite and, by extension, the market for high culture.\textsuperscript{44} The elite population that shaped high culture during this period, like that of the nineteenth century, was far from a monolithic body. In some cases, a manifestation of such culture could evoke acclaim from selected parts of the elite and criticism from others. One example of a divisive genre was the enhanced folk music that arrived in cities in the years after 1905. Stites explains that sponsors within the intelligentsia felt obligated to “rescue” folk music from obsoleteness by presenting it to the urban public. The political right, however, lambasted the purveyors of folk music for dealing in what they considered a coarse peasant ethos.\textsuperscript{45} Thus, the high culture of the end of the post-1905 empire was both rich in variation and marked by a component of internal discord.

The divisions between different strains of high culture were of little consequence relative to the distance that endured between the creative activities of the elite minority and those of the masses. Moreover, although the Silver Age literature that overshadowed most other forms of high culture did not necessarily push a moralizing agenda, moralism continued to be a presence in pre-1917 high culture.\textsuperscript{46} The intelligentsia, often working with agents of the state, endeavored to cultivate among the wider public a preference for what they regarded as authentic culture over the inferior popular culture. Unlike during the nineteenth century, the principal target of the elite’s moralizing creativity was not the peasant aura but the urban culture—described later in this chapter—that exploded with the arrival of industrialization and the mass migration of workers to the cities. The

\textsuperscript{44} Stites. p 9.
\textsuperscript{45} Stites. p 19.
\textsuperscript{46} Stites. p 6.
mission of the elite campaign, nonetheless, closely resembled that of nineteenth-century:
To supplant the vulgarity of the lower classes with art that would inspire better ways of
living and the search for higher truths.

Stites draws his reader’s attention to one cultural enterprise in particular that was
new in the early twentieth century: the already mentioned elite revival of peasant music.
Stites hits on the telling tendency of the self-proclaimed saviors of folk music to modify
its performance significantly before debuting it. Musician Vasily Andreev, for instance,
became famous for delivering the music of the balalaika (a traditional three-stringed folk
instrument) to the cities. Yet Andreev’s interpretation of the music altered it and
supplemented it with orchestral accompaniments such that few peasants would have
recognized it as the traditional sound he declared it to be.\(^\text{47}\) The penchant of upper-class
folk revivalists to transform what they were supposedly trying to save suggests that their
motives were more complex than simply conserving the heritage of folk culture. One can
infer that this movement was due in part to the rapid growth of urban mass culture. As
will be discussed shortly, the urban art of the early twentieth century quickly eclipsed
folk art as the nexus of popular entertainment, thereby rendering it the greatest threat to
the elite’s mission of moral and cultural betterment of the general population. Surpassed
by urban culture, folk culture became a tool with which to fight it. Stites notes that
Andreev hoped to make folk music a national pastime.\(^\text{48}\) Such a goal—which was
accomplished later during the Stalinist period—indicates the didactic element, manifested
in this case as the assurance of Andreev and his sympathizers that he knew what was

\(^\text{47}\) Stites. p 19
\(^\text{48}\) Stites. p 19
culturally best for the ordinary Russian, that pervaded nineteenth and early twentieth century high culture.

Any success that the intelligentsia found in its moralizing crusade was quite limited, as evidenced by the fact that it did not displace low culture by any means. In fact, as the Russian Empire industrialized and workers flocked to the cities, a new world of urban entertainment emerged. Three areas in which this urban culture prospered in particular were literature, live performance, and film. Much of the elite exhibited hostility toward these forms of expression, and Stites explains that the urban popular culture responded with increased antagonism toward their moralistic aggression.\textsuperscript{49} Cities in the early twentieth century thus became loci of the friction caused by the wide divide between high and low culture.

Consider first the pulp fiction that appeared on the literary scene as the worker presence in the cities expanded. Written and published in the cities, its intended audience included both urban workers and rural peasants. Bestsellers were typically those penned by lower-class authors and saturated with some combination of melodrama, adventure, suspense, action and gratifying endings. As would be expected, pulp fiction enjoyed a boost after the 1905 revolution; as censorship waned the shock value of pulp fiction increased. Taking a cue from the enthusiastic exposé style of the newly empowered press, pulp fiction writers churned out stories of corruption, crime, and prostitution that depicted the shifty underside of city life. The post-1905 environment also allowed for the publication of graphic “boulevard” literature, which was especially loathsome to elite critics who derided it as pornography. They did not confine their scorn to racy romance

\textsuperscript{49} Stites. 10.
novels, however, but blasted the whole of pulp fiction as base, vulgar and facetious. As with theater, members of the elite with moralizing predilections took to sponsoring and writing their own novels for common audiences in the hope that they would engender more sophisticated tastes among the reading public. In contrast to the dynamic surrounding the people’s houses, though, the state and members of the Church, in addition to the learned intelligentsia, supported this sort of popular literature. Also in contrast to the trends in theater, the attempt to craft a new culture in this area for the masses met almost no success. Sales of novels produced by highbrow authors for the wider population were meager relative to those of pulp fiction.\textsuperscript{50} In the realm of literature, then, the demarcation between high and low culture was sharp and unmitigated by the sort of tentative rapprochements occurring in theater world.

Theater itself was wrapped up in a wider sphere of performance art that was likewise an arena for contention between high and low culture. The rise of urban entertainment precipitated the explosion of a variety of live performance forms collectively known as {	extit{estrada}}.\textsuperscript{51} Encompassing everything from nightclub performances to comedy acts and variety shows to traditional gypsy music, {	extit{estrada}} was the everyman’s diversion with choices to satisfy wide sweeps of urban workers. An element of {	extit{estrada}} that was especially prevalent was the folk drama, which predated the intensive urbanization of the turn of the century. Folk drama shows were largely improvised, and companies traveled throughout Russia bringing them to the villages. Their popularity and their reach made them particularly offensive to the intelligentsia, and the people’s house

\textsuperscript{50} Stites. 23.

\textsuperscript{51} The exact derivation of the term {	extit{estrada}} is hard to come by, although Stites informs his readers that it is drawn from Spanish through French. Stites. p 16.
movement was in part a counter to what the elite saw as their crudeness. Estrada as a whole was disliked by the elite, and that animus typified the attitude of many purveyors of high culture toward the folk and, by extension, urban culture of the masses.\(^52\)

Film, the youngest of the mediums through which popular art was expressed, shared much with pulp fiction in terms of its appeal. The movie-going population overlapped heavily with pulp fiction audience; as a result, early Russian films featured many of the elements that made pulp fiction writers successful: melodrama, action, suspense and romance. The nascent cinema industry was also incredibly commercial. Investors were much more motivated by the promise of profits than by notions of promoting sophisticated culture and, as a result, the production of pop culture blockbusters outweighed that of highbrow films. Pre-1917 studio heads also cashed in on the demand for Western films by bringing many of them to Russian theaters.\(^53\) Stites emphasizes that this “mass defection” of capital from high art “deepened the lines between moral elites of government, church and, intelligentsia on the one hand and the producers and consumers of popular culture on the other.”\(^54\)

The tension between the two sides was further aggravated by the emergence of “bourgeois melodrama” as a dominant, profitable genre in Russian popular film. Between 1913 and 1917, bourgeois melodrama films constituted 50 percent of all those produced in the empire. They were typically set in upper-class environments, which were depicted as bastions of decadence, replete with luxurious, classically inspired décor. Stites attests that filmmakers often cast the wealthy characters of their features as depraved in order to

\(^{52}\) Stites. pp 17-8.
\(^{53}\) Stites. pp 24-8.
\(^{54}\) Quoted from Stites. p 28.
push the melodramatic plots forward, and offered the beauty of their backgrounds as an ironic contrast to their moral degradation. Worker audiences, however, tended to interpret bourgeois melodramas as wholly accurate windows into high society life, and would view the ornate sets as evidence of the underserved excess of the privileged elite. Stites hypothesizes that the ubiquity of the genre in the last decade before the 1917 revolution contributed to worker animus toward the owning classes.\textsuperscript{55} What is clear, then, is that the proliferation of films focused on the grandiose histrionics of an extravagant world did little to encourage a rapprochement between the proponents of high and low culture.

Despite the polarizing effect of the early film industry, the period between 1905 and 1917 did witness some areas of unprecedented movement of elite and popular culture toward one another. The people’s houses, of course, were some of the most conspicuous organizations softening the line between high and low culture. But just as the enthusiasm of a segment of the lower class for popular theater indicated its desire to cultivate an understanding of elevated drama, so a part of the elite enjoyed elements of urban entertainment. In a trend that was certainly not unique to Russia (and that is often referred to as “slumming” when it occurs in the West), members of the wealthy minority sought to ingratiate themselves with the culture of the common urban majority. They would attend vaudeville and gypsy music shows and frequent bohemian cafés and eateries to mingle with poets, artists, dancers, sailors, soldiers, and hobos. Stites points to the broader implication of this mixing: Namely, that the burgeoning urban environment in last decade before the Bolshevik uprising boasted a “comingling” of classes and cultural preferences

\textsuperscript{55} Stites. pp 32-3.
that encouraged the flourishing of diverse genres.\textsuperscript{56} Thus, even as the moral-minded intelligentsia pushed to sweep away popular entertainment and the masses responded with a revitalized urban culture, there were contingencies on both sides that explored the other. The divide between high and low culture, while still a dominant feature of Russian creative life, became less absolute in the early twentieth century.

\textit{Summary}

As the Russian intelligentsia began to concern itself in the nineteenth with the question of Russia’s national identity and, by extension, its cultural relations to the West, Russia witnessed the blossoming of a more vigorous high culture. While the responses to this question among writers and artists of high culture were diverse, many were connected by contempt for the materialism and rationalism of the West and by the notion that a superior Russian culture could liberate the West from its degradation. Furthermore, although some among the proponents of a distinct Russian cultural identity idealized the tradition of indigenous folk culture, much of the intelligentsia harbored disdain for the primitiveness and ignorance of the Russian peasantry. When combined with the emancipation of the serfs, this disdain fueled a crusade to civilize the masses by cultivating in them an appreciation for high culture values and standards.

The natural question after an extensive review of turn-of-the-century cultural dynamics, of course, concerns what they have to do with an animated film produced seven decades later. The background provided here on the solidification of the great Russian cultural divide during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries will inform the

\textsuperscript{56} Stites. p 22.
rest of this paper as it traces the evolution of the divide through the Soviet era as well as attempts to close it. Without this overview, it would be difficult to adequately communicate the significance of Norstein’s success in crossing the cultural gap. In addition, this chapter also introduces Pushkin as a prominent figure in Russian high culture, a theme that would later become relevant to Norstein’s film and to the wider cultural evolution mapped in this paper.
Chapter 2: The Soviet Solution to the Great Divide

1917 looms large in any account of modern Russian history as it marked an unprecedented upheaval in the country’s political, economic and social structures. While the Bolshevik Revolution and the subsequent Civil War made quick work of the autocratic regime, the new order in these three areas was not immediately solidified. In fact, much of the 1920s was a period of uncertainty with regards to all aspects of the new Soviet state. It was only with Stalin’s consolidation of power at the end of the decade that the broad contours generally associated with the USSR were realized.57

Nowhere was this pattern truer than in the realm of culture. The place of culture in the 1920s Soviet Union was ambiguous and ill defined. This chapter will touch on some themes of this interval of uncertainty in order to identity continuities between the pre-revolution and immediate post-revolution cultural climates. More specifically, it will demonstrate that the high-low culture divide, the civilizing mission of the intelligentsia sector and the aversion among the intelligentsia for commercially oriented popular culture (and its association with Western materialism) all survived the Bolshevik uprising.

With the arrival of Stalin as the leading figure in the USSR, cultural ambiguity gave way to turbulence and then convergence as cultural institutions were fully nationalized and a new, centrally engineered genre known as socialist realism was debuted as the paradigm for all artistic enterprises. Michael David-Fox explains that

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57 Although particular aspects of early Soviet history will be referenced throughout this chapter, no long-form overview of the 1917 Revolution, the Lenin years or the advent of Stalinism will be included, as it is assumed that most students of history have a sufficient, if only general, idea of the relevant developments. For a more thorough introduction to this portion of the Soviet story, see: Pipe, Richard. *A Concise History of the Russian Revolution*. Random House. 1995 and Stites, Richard and Catherine Evtuhov. *A History of Russia: Peoples, Legends, Events, Forces Since 1800*. Houghton Mifflin. 2004.
“cultural production [in the Soviet Union] was turned into nothing less than a branch of the planned economy.” Similarly, the state under Stalin worked to filter artistic output through its evolving ideology, such that culture became part of a holistic system of societal control that was more comprehensive than any Russia had seen before. In the process, the portion of the intelligentsia that executed the revolution and continued to wield power under Stalin accomplished what the imperial-age intelligentsia could only aspire to: the creation of a unified culture across all levels of society. Their success is due in part to the fact that, for the first time, the state threw its weight behind the intelligentsia’s cultural evangelism. Moreover, because the architects of this new integrated culture were striving not simply to raise the lower classes to a higher standard, but to create a new standard and bring all of society in line with it, they were able to actively seek and account for feedback from the masses. As a result, socialist realism combined the demands of ideology with certain tastes of the masses so that early socialist realist culture was well-received by much of the population.

The cost of the successful spanning of the cultural gap, as we shall see, was the suppression or ideological manipulation of cultural products that did not fit the prescribed schema and, on a more sinister level, cultural blindness to the hardships, terror and atrocities cultivated under Stalin’s tutelage. Later chapters will argue that this destructive tendency is one of the most important differences between socialist realism and Tale of Tales, both of which transcended the cultural disconnect. This difference thus inspires one of the broader conclusions about Russian culture proffered in the conclusion to this paper: The problem of a polarized culture is best mitigated, not by subverting one pole or

58 Daivd-Fox. p 22.
by merging the two under a single, unified synthesis, but by allowing connections on a micro level to develop across the gap and thus promote the emergence of a cultural continuum in place of a stark divide.

*Proletkult, the Avant-Garde and Cultural Continuities*

Whatever impression the worker-focused rhetoric of the 1917 Revolution might have given, almost all of the leaders of the Bolshevik uprising were not lower class workers, but members of the radical leftist intelligentsia. After the dust settled in 1923 following the Civil War, these new authorities were faced with the same questions that had propelled the nineteenth century creative elites: What is the national identity and how will the everyday citizen engage with it? In addition, they were galvanized by a distinct ideology that proved to be a strong force in shaping the cultural direction of the initial years. The revolutionary razing of the imperial order meant that the Soviet Union in the 1920s experienced a state of flux as the regime scrambled to find a workable new order. The culture-making activity coalesced around the avant-garde work of the leftist radical intelligentsia as well as *Proletkult*, a network of cultural groups led by the avant-garde that attempted to develop a distinct proletarian culture. In briefly reviewing both factions, this section will highlight the elements of continuity from the elite cultural crusade outlined in the previous chapter, as well as the failure of pre-Stalin Soviet artists to span the great cultural divide.

Stites impresses upon his readers that the Bolshevik victory was received by large swaths of the leftist intelligentsia and the lower class population as a triumph of good

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over evil and as the starting point for a more perfect society.\textsuperscript{60} Many among the artistic avant-garde in particular vigorously supported the revolution. A segment of the leftist intelligentsia, the avant-garde was thus one of the few elements of the elite not steamrolled by the revolution.\textsuperscript{61} A variety of avant-garde art forms took root before 1917—including transrational poetry, geometric dance patterns, and constructivist theater—although they were generally relegated to the periphery of the high culture domain. Artists of the avant-garde consequently welcomed the revolution as an opportunity not only to oust an unjust regime, but also to supersede the more mainstream high culture. As a result, the avant-garde response to the revolution was profuse.\textsuperscript{62}

The two areas where avant-garde offerings were most abundant were theater and film. Avant-garde theater director Vsevolod Meyerhold, for instance, publicly dedicated himself to the Communist cause immediately following the 1917 uprising.\textsuperscript{63} He had enjoyed a successful career as a director in St. Petersburg, and one can imagine the risk he was taking in attaching himself so enthusiastically to socialist ideology before it was determined that the Bolshevik Red Army would persevere in the Civil War. He was joined in his allegiance to the new ideology by a range of avant-garde film and stage directors and writers such as Sergei Eisenstein, Nikolai Yevreinov, Vladimir Mayakovsky and Nikolai Okhlopov. Notable works of these years include Yevreinov’s \textit{Storming of the Winter Palace} (1920)—a play that celebrated the revolution—and \textit{The Battleship Potemkin} (1925)—a film directed by Eisenstein and commissioned by the state that promoted the advantages of the Bolshevik regime in the context of a portrayal of a

\textsuperscript{60} Stites. p 37.
\textsuperscript{61} David-Fox. Pp 21-2
\textsuperscript{62} Stites. p 39.
\textsuperscript{63} Beumers, Birgit. \textit{Pop Culture Russia! Media, Arts and Lifestyle (Popular Culture in the Contemporary World)}. ABC-CLIO, Inc. 2005. p 1.
mutiny on an imperial battleship in 1905.\textsuperscript{64} In the midst of this ideologically driven creative outpouring, nonetheless, the avant-garde community emphasized the importance of the freedom of self-expression.\textsuperscript{65} In effect, it pledged itself to advancing the communist charge, but reserved the right to do so in the manner (or manners) its artists deemed best.

Even as it advocated creative liberty, the artistic avant-garde envisioned itself as the cultural standard-bearer for the masses. Here one clearly sees the continuation of the didactic attitude that characterized much of the intelligentsia before 1917.\textsuperscript{66} Unfortunately for their movement, the general population was less than enamored with the cultural offerings of the avant-garde. \textit{The Battleship Potemkin}, although it topped a poll of Soviet film critics in 1958, was a box office disaster in 1925. Similarly, audiences had little patience for avant-garde stage productions teeming with flying lizards or machine-inspired dance choreography.\textsuperscript{67}

The Soviet leadership, whose interest lay in communicating its ideology through art and other channels in order to legitimize its role as the revolutionary vanguard, began to look elsewhere for creative vehicles for its messages. One of the most significant differences between the cultural enrichment quests of the late imperial intelligentsia and its early Soviet counterpart was that the latter’s effort was a combined cultural and political proselytization. Because the moralizing work of the post-1917 artistic elite was embedded in a social revolution, the political elite was much more supportive of work that furthered its cause and much less tolerant of work that did not. Many Russian artists,

\textsuperscript{64} Beumers. pp 1-2.
\textsuperscript{65} Stites. p 39.
\textsuperscript{66} Stites. p 39
\textsuperscript{67} Sites. p 39 and Beumers. p 2.
sensing this tidal change, emigrated to Europe and the United States, where they would go on to find creative success. 68 Others, like sympathetic elements of the avant-garde, found favor with the new regime until it became clear that they were ineffective in uniting the general population to the communist creed. As will be explained shortly, the Soviet state did not realize its full potential for control of cultural production until reforms of Stalin were effected. There remained during the 1920s some leeway for artistic autonomy. But even during the interval of uncertainty after the revolution, when economic, political and social structures were still being sorted out, a shade of the state domination that would pervade Stalinist-era artistic endeavors colored the cultural environment.

The tendency toward central command of culture became evident as the state interacted with another elite cultural group that worked alongside the general avant-garde community to lift up the masses to communist consciousness during the Civil War. Founded in 1917, Proletkult (a hybrid of the Russian words for “proletarian” and “culture”) was an association of avant-garde artists who allied with local cultural groups with the purpose of establishing a new working class aesthetic. 69 Its leaders were heavily involved in the Bolshevik party before 1917, and its ideology aligned closely with that of the revolutionaries. 70 More formally organized than the broader avant-garde, Proletkult also wielded more cultural influence on the ground during the early days of Soviet Russia than the state’s official culture and education agency, the People’s Commissariat of Education (Narkompros). This fact created tension between the two institutions, as

68 Stites. p 38.
70 Fitzpatrick. Commissariat of Enlightenment. p 310
Proletkult desired autonomy from the state yet insisted that Narkompros fund its acculturation activities.\textsuperscript{71} Proletkult’s position aggravated the central Soviet hierarchy all the way up to Vladimir Lenin, who had little patience for what he considered a haven for the leftover, out-of-touch elite intelligentsia.\textsuperscript{72}

Moreover, although Proletkult maintained that it sought to guide the proletariat in shaping its own culture (it did count a significant number of revolutionary “conscious” workers in its membership), its artistic offerings, like those of the avant-garde as a whole, struggled to gain traction among the wider population. It emphasized futurism and constructivism with avant-garde experimentation and industrial themes mixed in, none of which resonated strongly with the masses. Stites notes, for instance, that the political factory songs that Proletkult musicians endeavored to spread among workers were complicated, freakish and soundly rejected by the working class.\textsuperscript{73} Combined with growing hostility from Nakompros, this weakness contributed to the dissolution of Proletkult by the end of the Civil War in 1923.\textsuperscript{74} Despite its short lifespan, however, Proletkult revealed critical facets of the 1920s cultural atmosphere. Specifically, its friction with Nakompros demonstrated the Soviet state’s intent to conscript culture to the service of its social agenda, and its lack of success with the people demonstrated the continued failure of the elite to unite the two sides of Russian culture.

Even amidst the confusion of the early Soviet years and the consistent inability of the 1920s leadership to craft a proletarian culture that resonated with the proletariat, then, one sees a clear parallel to the didactic posturing of the old elite. While their revolution


\textsuperscript{72} Fitzpatrick, Sheila. \textit{The Commissariat of Enlightenment}. p 107.

\textsuperscript{73} Stites. pp 40, 42.

\textsuperscript{74} Stites. p 42 and Mally. Pp 194-7.
was ostensibly for and of the people, the low cultures cultivated by peasants and urban workers during the late imperial period was lumped by the Bolsheviks with the ancien régime and the commercial economy as phenomena that must be supplanted if the Communist ideal was to become reality. Much of the creative elite of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries presumed Russia to be the cultural savior of a decaying Europe; after the serfs gained their freedom, these elements of the elite concluded that the cultural refinement of the masses was a critical prerequisite to the modernization of Russian and the enlightenment of the degenerate West. Likewise, the Bolsheviks envisaged the young Soviet Union as the beacon of Communist salvation to the rest of the world, a role that required a body of cultural expression representing their fresh political philosophy. As David-Fox succinctly states, “The Bolshevik Revolution layered an intensified ideological-geopolitical rivalry onto the old obsessions of national identity.”

Cul ture had a part to play in the global transformation that the Bolsheviks believed they were inaugurating. Like the old intelligentsia before them, the Bolsheviks regarded the commercial popular culture as detrimental to the progression of their campaign. They therefore oversaw the initiation of a new acculturation crusade that sought to eliminate all popular entertainment that did not advance their pursuit of a communist economic, political and social order.

Stalin, the Cultural Revolution, and Socialist Realism

In addition to the collapse of the Proletkult and the impotency of the avant-garde, the cultural mission of the early Soviet elite was further stymied by economic troubles.

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75 David-Fox. p 24.
76 Stites. p 38.
Agricultural output, in the wake of the catastrophic and prolonged Civil War, fell dramatically. To offset a potentially devastating famine, Lenin and the Bolshevik Party enacted the New Economic Policy (NEP) in 1921, which was designed to encourage farmers to increase food production. It did so by introducing a mixed economy with private and public sectors, thereby allowing farmers to sell their surplus crops for profit. The idea was to permit some capitalistic elements until the central economy strengthened sufficiently to support socialism. With respect to the cultural realm, the NEP facilitated the reemergence of many markers of popular culture that the Bolsheviks had attempted to eliminate, including decadent urban cafes, gypsy music, jazz, and pulp fiction. Even the film industry, which remained largely (but not entirely) government-controlled during the NEP, returned to churning out moneymakers in the form of melodramas, adventure flicks and even imported foreign films. Stites remarks that Eisenstein’s *Potemkin* was unceremoniously booted from a Moscow cinema to make room for the more eagerly anticipated American film *Robin Hood.* Thus, the forms of low entertainment that survived 1917, or that reappeared with the arrival of the NEP, further inhibited the Bolshevik effort to unite all segments of society under a new culture.

Joseph Stalin’s consolidation of power in the late 1920s signaled an end to the NEP and a new phase of the intellectual culture crusade. Stalin was named General Secretary of the Communist Party (the party of the Bolsheviks) in 1922. Following the death of Lenin in 1924, Stalin quickly amassed the support necessary to enlarge his power so that by 1928 he had positioned himself as the *de facto* leader of the Soviet state. He quickly supplanted the NEP with a revamped centralized economic structure and

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78 Stites. pp 54-9.
debuted the first Five Year Plan to direct a period of heavy industrialization. The implications of this sea change were enormous in the cultural realm. Voices within the regime began to demand an eradication of the vulgar NEP-era cultural tendencies to parallel the elimination of corrupting capitalist aspects of the economy, and Stalin’s cohort obliged. From 1928 until 1931, the Soviet state executed a wide-ranging demolition of popular culture that is now referred to as the Cultural Revolution. With the Five Year Plan, the state was able to fully nationalize publishing, filmmaking and other critical cultural industries. In addition, it established national unions led by party intellectuals for writers, filmmakers and other artists that, in conjunction with stricter censorship, attacked non-political art and entertainment. Low culture genres such as detective stories, science fiction, urban song and fairy tales that had long displeased the creative elite were swept aside.

The Cultural Revolution did not, however, leave high culture untouched. It occurred concurrently with Stalin’s infamous purges, during which scores of elites—especially political elites—were massacred. As historian Sheila Fitzpatrick notes, the one-two punch of the Cultural Revolution and the purges were “psychologically debilitating blows” to much of the intelligentsia, which became submissive and powerless in the face of the orthodoxies imposed by the regime. In addition, militant cultural authorities made examples of artists like Meyerhold, whose theater was forcefully closed and who was ultimately arrested, in order to demarcate clearly what was considered

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79 For more on early Stalinism, the first Five Year Plan and Soviet industrialization see: Conquest, Robert. The Great Terror: A Reassessment. New York: Oxford University Press. 1990.
80 Stites. p 64.
81 David-Fox. p 23.
82 Stites. p 64
83 David-Fox. pp 23, 30.
84 Fitzpatrick. The Cultural Front. p 13-4
 unacceptable. In doing so, they paved the way for the birth of a new, all-encompassing cultural genre that would finally achieve the goal of spanning the cultural divide that the creative intelligentsia had harbored for decades.

Socialist realism, the new aesthetic that transcended the high-low culture gap, represented the constructive counterweight to the destructive force of the Cultural Revolution. Luellen Lucid, a scholar who has studied socialist realism and its relation to literature, explains that socialist realism as a movement was predicated on the premises that “art is a social act and should deal with social reality by taking a firm political stand,” art should inspire optimism, and art should spur its audience to social consciousness. In simpler terms, socialist realism reified the communist elite’s conviction that art ought to contribute to the larger transformative social enterprise. The mandate that socialist realist art instill optimism in its audience is, as will be discussed shortly, a testament to the influence the demands of the masses had on the formation of socialist realist principles. That influence was also one of the most substantial factors in the wild success early socialist realist art met among the masses. Socialist realism, in sum, was a cultural framework crafted by the Soviet elites with the input of the mass audience for which it was designed. The emphasis on collaboration across the cultural divide set socialist realism apart from the acculturation campaigns that pre-revolution intelligentsia and the pre-Stalin avant-garde and Proletkult had launched.

The pertinent questions, of course, pertain to how and why the architects of socialist realism incorporated the feedback of the general population into the framework they developed. First, the interests of the masses were culled by regime-sponsored

85 Fitzpatrick. The Cultural Front. p 11.
readership surveys conducted throughout the 1920s. One of the earliest such surveys was a 1922 evaluation of village readers in rural central Russia. It revealed that the peasants could not understand the politicized concepts and terms that filled propaganda newspapers distributed in the region, and were thus more likely to use them for cigarette paper than to read them.\(^\text{87}\) Similarly, questionnaires given to readers on a broader scale throughout the decade demonstrated that it was not the ideological and political messages that the people took issue with so much as the means by which they were delivered.\(^\text{88}\) The Russian population was, after all, by and large supportive of (or, at least, not openly hostile to) the idea of a worker revolution. Indeed, many of the revolutionary songs that were issued by revolutionary leaders and radical workers’ clubs during the early Soviet years spread like wildfire among the masses and remained immensely popular well into the Soviet era. It is telling, however, that the revolutionary songs that were eagerly adopted were those with simple, uplifting lyrics set to old folk tunes. The songs composed by leftist \textit{Proletkult} musicians—which were devoid of any trace of folk or popular culture melodies and often had more aggressive political tones—were rebuffed by the Russian everyman.\(^\text{89}\)

Similarly, the average reader as portrayed by the readership surveys was more than willing to accept politicized plots in their books, but had no patience for the modernist and experimental styles or overly political rhetoric that weighed down the literature offered to him by the artistic elites during the 1920s. Instead, the ordinary Soviet citizen placed a premium on literature with relatable characters and a high entertainment value. A book glorifying the revolution was acceptable so long as it

\(^{87}\) Stites. p 41-2.  
\(^{88}\) Stites. p 42  
\(^{89}\) Stites. p 46.
boasted some of the features of a pulp fiction novel: a realistic, straightforward tone, an engaging storyline and a positive ending (here one sees one of the roots of socialist realist optimism). As a result of these findings, the cultural authorities under Stalin were well-equipped by the time the Cultural Revolution began to introduce a model that accounted for both the ideological agenda of the state and the stylistic demands of the masses.

The second question that should accompany a discussion of the genesis of socialist realism relates to why its engineers were willing to appropriate some of the conventions of low culture when the elite from which they were drawn had for so long held popular culture in contempt. The most likely answer points to the significant difference between socialist realism and the mass enlightenment movements of earlier intelligentsia. The moralizing intelligentsia of the late imperial period was bent on raising the sensibilities of the mass population to the already-existing standards of high culture. The 1920s avant-garde, although their work was anchored by a new ideological purpose, also sought to elevate the tastes of the masses to already established modernist norms. The cultural powers that emerged under Stalin, by contrast, were determined to sweep away all undesirable traces of pre-revolution culture, both high and low, and replace them with a unifying, new standard. Moreover, the formation of socialist realism was subsumed within an economic overhaul and a consequent reinvigoration of the communist ideological rhetoric. As a result, the ideological integrity and the capacity for political message transmission of socialist realist art were weighed more heavily by the handlers of the nascent genre than were stylistic considerations. While the writers of the Silver Age or the artists of the early Soviet avant-garde were invested in the cultural

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90 Stites. p 42.
91 David-Fox. p 29.
aesthetic as an end in and of itself, the elites that brought socialist realism to the Soviet scene were dedicated the creation of a culture with a purpose. Consequently, they were much more tolerant of low-brow stylistic influences than previous artistic elites.

The art produced under the banner of socialist realism was extensive. The iterations of socialist realist axioms across different creative industries are fascinating to study, and any interested reader is encouraged to read Stites’ text more closely. This section will only look momentarily as some illustrative motifs of socialist realism. First, the findings of the readership surveys were applied across different creative industries including literature, film, radio and music. Storylines exalted reason, technology and socialist principles and decried decadence, eroticism and other aspects of old popular culture that the regime associated with the West and capitalism. But they did so in a manner that appealed to the masses.92 Many movies and books of the early 1930s chronicled the rise of young workers as they attained social consciousness and moved upward through the employment ladder. Others took up the adventures of Civil War soldiers in tales of high excitement and suspense. They all shared simple prose or scripting, relatable characters the “positive hero” paradigm. Positive heroes were protagonists that were intended to be examples for the reader. They embodied the respect for socialist ideals, the work ethic, the selflessness and the optimism that Communist Party ideology affirmed would emerge in all citizens as they gained consciousness and move closer to the archetype of the New Soviet man. This new man was to be the most basic unit of the ideal communist society, the construction of which had begun with the 1917 revolution and continued—in the mind of cultural authorities—under Stalin.93 Even

92 Stites. p 67.
as they assumed many of the artistic devices of popular culture, then, socialist realist artists exercised a clear, didactic mission, as had the generations of intelligentsia before them.

The directors of socialist realism as well as the artists that worked under it were distinct from early incarnations of the intelligentsia, however, because their effort to span the great divide and unify the different levels of society under one culture was effective. The general population embraced socialist realist art with fervor.94 In addition to its general orientation toward popular culture styles, socialist realist art espoused folkloric themes that endeared it further to the masses. Composers of mass song adopted folk song tunes, socialist realist novels proffered characters that resembled figures from folk tales and some writers even produced new fairy tales about iconic figures of the revolution. Lenin, for instance, was the subject of folk stories written to be a source of moral instruction for Soviet citizens.95 Thus, as Stites declares, a sector of folklore and “pseudofolklore” was created to operate as a conduit for regime propaganda, as its familiar style made it more amenable to mass audiences than pure, unfiltered political publications.96

Some classic works of pre-revolution high culture, such as Pushkin’s poetry, were similarly coopted for political use, as will be explored in the following chapter.97 It is

94 David-Fox. p 29. See also Stites’ discussion of socialist realist art, especially cinema, and its reception by the people: Stites. pp 85-95.
95 Stites. pp 72, 78-80.
96 Stites. p 71.
97 David-Fox explicate that there were those in the working and peasant classes who considered proficiency in traditional high culture to be a mark of prestige, and thus aspired to master the classics of Russian literature, music, drama, etc. One finds here an echo of the ambitions of theatergoers at people’s houses at the end of the nineteenth century. While Socialist realism capitalized on the sensibilities of this facet of the
critical to note the socialist realist absorption of some (though certainly not all) elements of pre-revolutionary folk and high culture—not only because they contributed to the success of the genre in transcending the culture gap—but also because Norstein wove these same elements into the tapestry of *Tale of Tales* in a manner that clearly defied the dogmatism of socialist realism. Chapters three and four will examine the ways in which Norstein undercuts the creative control of the socialist realist establishment, including by depoliticizing folkloric and Pushkinian motifs.

**Summary**

The Cultural Revolution and the birth of socialist realism under Stalin marked the fulfillment of a goal that had captivated (and frustrated) the artistic elite for half a century. For the first time in modern Russian history, the great cultural divide was conquered. Members of the elite crafted socialist realism, a new genre that both breathed life into the unifying culture and dictated the parameters beyond which it could not stray. The guardians of socialist realism thus achieved the longtime cultural objective of the moralizing aspects of the Russian intelligentsia in a way that many in the pre-revolution intelligentsia would not have envisioned. Their agenda was, for instance, first and foremost, ideological, and they were flexible about allowing low culture to shape the aesthetic of the unifying standard. As the failed attempts of the 1920s avant-garde and *Proletkult* to bridge the gulf demonstrated, however, there were certain key facets of the pre-1917 intelligentsia cultural crusades that survived the revolution and continued to inform the work of artistic elites during the early Soviet years. The obsession with the population in appending ideologically-correct interpretations to select pre-revolution works of high art. See: David-Fox. p 29.
question of national identity, the sense of cultural superiority to the West, and the notion
that the masses must be culturally uplifted if Russia is to realize her potential and deliver
the West from its degradation all persisted among the elite of the Soviet era.

All of those factors, when mixed into a broader social revolution, meant that the
socialist realist transcendence of the cultural divide carried destructive ramifications. Its
dominance stifled creative expression that did not fit its formula, as will be discussed
more fully in the fourth chapter. More gravely, Stites observes that the impression of an
idyllic socialist state that socialist realist art put forward helped to camouflage the
hardships engendered by Stalinist collectivization, as well as the atrocities Stalin’s regime
perpetrated. In justifying the communist system, socialist realist art implicitly justified
the terror.\footnote{Stites. pp 90, 93.} Chapter four will establish that Norstein’s film, by virtue of being an
apolitical, non-moralizing, single work of art, traversed the cultural divide without
noxious consequences. That contrast reinforces the conclusion that the gulf between high
and low culture is more appropriately transcended, not by a totalizing cultural philosophy
that will carry constricting and destructive repercussions, but by the emergence of a
cultural spectrum populated by individual works of art that draw from both worlds.
Chapter 3: Pushkin, A Captive and A Muse

Captured (and Celebrated) by Stalinist Socialist Realism

Although the rise of Stalinist socialist realism severely restricted the space in which creative intellectuals could operate, it did not entirely obliterate the artistic traditions that hailed from the imperial era. To be sure, much of the experimental, abstract work that had flourished during the Silver Age in the immediate pre-Revolution years was partially or completely censored. For instance, the works of symbolist author Andrey Bely were removed from circulation by the regime until the late 1970s.\(^99\) Symbolism, with its emphasis on the metaphysical, the irrational, and the mystical was antithetical to socialist realism’s straightforward, pragmatic purpose of engaging the broad population with the Communist message.

The harsh treatment suffered by symbolist literature, however, was not uniformly applied to all of pre-1917 culture. Alexander Pushkin is perhaps the most prominent example of an artist from the imperial period whose work was not only permitted by the cultural authorities, but also embraced by them. Stalin’s regime elevated the author-poet to heroic heights and Soviet, as well as post-Soviet, society revered (and still revere) him as the father of Russian literature. As D.M. Thomas observes, Pushkin is “more alive to Russians than Shakespeare or Wordsworth is to us;” Pushkin’s body of work has influenced significant Russian writers in every period after him, from Fyodor Dostoevsky to Bely and Nikolai Gogol to Alexander Solzhenitsyn.\(^100\) It is safe to presume that the Soviet regime’s acceptance of Pushkin played a large role in preserving the strength of


his legacy. Even as the socialist realist establishment favored Pushkin, however, it practiced considerable revisionism in analyzing his writing.

The socialist realist celebration of Pushkin began in earnest with the 1937 commemoration of the 100-year anniversary of his death. Stephanie Sandler—who has devoted much of her academic career to the exploration of variations of what she calls the Pushkin myth—details the extravagant jubilee staged by the state to honor him as a national treasure.¹⁰¹ Pushkin’s life story (he was exiled twice by the tsar and faced repeated censorship before dying at age 37 in a duel defending his wife’s honor) can be easily molded into tragic form, and Sandler presents a comprehensive survey of the dramatic biographical films about Pushkin that were produced in the Soviet Union and in post-Soviet Russia. She also discusses film adaptations of his writing that altered or supplemented his original work with ideological elements. For example, she cites a 1928 film version of Pushkin’s Russian Uprising that took creative license in molding scenes about economic life in the eighteenth century to fit the principles advocated by socialist realist art. She also examines the 1958 adaptation of Pushkin’s The Captain’s Daughter, which gives much greater weight to the standoff scene between imperial soldiers and Cossack rebels, and much less weight to the domestic scenes, than the novel itself does.¹⁰² Through the analysis of these two films, Sandler reveals a pattern in the approach of Soviet filmmakers to Pushkin in the Stalin and early Khrushchev years: In promoting Pushkin as the premier poet of the Russian people, the socialist realist order gained

control of his identity and was thereby able to project onto him and his work the politically-charged messages their genre was designed to push.

This cooptation of Pushkin is especially evident in a series of essays published about him by the U.S.S.R. Society for Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries (VOKS) in 1939. VOKS, founded in 1925, was a committee tasked by the central government with fostering cultural ties with Western nations. Criticized widely in the West as being nothing more than a propaganda mouthpiece, VOKS’ publications provide a valuable window into the official positions that shaped the genre of socialist realism in its formative years. With regard to Pushkin, the essays written by VOKS-approved authors demonstrate the degree to which his biography and work were squeezed and stretched to achieve a socialist orientation.

Consider first that the opening essay in the collection goes to great lengths to laud Pushkin as Russia’s national poet. The writer declares that Pushkin was the personification of “national consciousness,” a key phrase that immediately signals to the reader the author’s intention to position Pushkin’s views as precursors of the ideas of class and national consciousness as articulated by Lenin and Stalin. The essay concludes with a dramatic statement integrating Pushkin with what the author depicts as the inevitable arc of Soviet revolutionary history:

Russia’s path, it appears, was the path of Pushkin’s heritage. Despite Turgenev, the working class won freedom for the whole people. Despite Dostoevsky, the

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104 Ivan Turgenev was a nineteenth-century novelist and aristocrat disparaged by the many socialist realist during the Stalin period.
105 Fyodor Dostoevsky was also not socialist realism’s cup of tea. His focus on theological themes, as well as on the abstract inner life of the individual, were antithetical to the socialist realist mission to provide clear (if politically-steeped) and secular solutions to issues standing in the way of the education of the masses and the triumph of
people found in socialism both outer and inner freedom. And whereas formerly, the masses, deprived of all place in the world of culture, lacking even the most elementary of educational facilities, had no access to Pushkin and did not read him, now, in the epoch of the Stalin Constitution, they have found their great poet, who has become theirs forever.  

The writer approaches his goal of absorbing Pushkin into socialist realism from several directions in this brief excerpt. First, he associates Pushkin with the success of the working class, thereby melding him with the political mission of the people (as expressed by the Communist Party). Second, he contrasts the rightness of Pushkin with the hubris of Turgenev and Dostoevsky, thereby emphasizing that the victory of the people is also the victory of Pushkin, whose powerful message overcame the erroneous (and therefore immoral) prose of the decadent, bourgeoisie authors of the imperial era. Finally, he links leveling of the cultural field with the accessibility of Pushkin’s work. Socialist realism conquered the divide between the elite and the common culture by supplanting the old intelligentsia with a new worldview that either appealed to or imposed itself upon every stratum of society. Simultaneously, as Luppol asserts, Pushkin reached the mass population that had previously eluded him. In other words, socialist realism and Stalinist state are responsible for bringing a literary genius to the people, and that genius embodies the principles espoused by socialist realism and the Stalinist state.

The analysis of Pushkin by Luppol and other essayists in the collection is an absolutely brilliant bit of propagandist strategy. Pushkin, long dead, was in no position to correct or clarify the socialist realist reading of his work. As such, socialist realist thinkers like Luppol were able to present Pushkin as a hero and at the same time entirely control the interpretation of his work. Establishing Pushkin as a champion of the cause


Luppol, p 23.
later advanced by socialist realists, in turn, lends legitimacy to the Communist project of the socialist realists and the Stalinist regime by extending its historical roots into the early nineteenth century. Indeed, another contributor to the collection concludes that, “Pushkin foreshadows the inevitability of a sharp struggle.” Stated another way, Pushkin’s work predicted the 1917 revolution because it recognized that the oppressive monarchy and elite class were destined to succumb to an empowered proletariat.

It is impossible to determine to what extent the writers of this collection, and proponents of socialist realism in general, sincerely believed this variation of the Pushkin myth, but a close examination of Pushkin’s biography and some of his well-known pieces reveals that the socialist realist understanding of Pushkin encompassed in the 1939 compilation is at best distorted and at worst patently false. One essay builds upon the foundation laid by Luppol in the introduction by focusing on Pushkin’s time in exile, as well as by assigning to him connections with the Decembrist revolutionaries that were, in reality, tenuous at best. It emphasizes, for instance, that Pushkin had contacts within the secret society that organized the revolt and claims that he declared to the tsar during a personal audience after the revolt that he wished he could have fought alongside his friends. He was prevented from doing so, according to the author, because he had been sent to the south of Russia by the tsar. The essay thus seizes upon Pushkin’s multiple

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108 On December 26, 1825, royal army officers led a force of approximately 3,000 soldiers in violent protest in the Senate Square of St. Petersburg, the capital of the Russian empire. The Decembrists, as the rebels have since been called, were reacting to the assumption of the throne by Tsar Nicholas I. Nicholas became the heir after it was revealed that his older brother Constantine had secretly renounced his position as heir two years earlier. The leaders of the revolt, many of whom were of the aristocracy, desired liberal government reforms, including the introduction of a constitution and a federal state in place of the autocracy. For more information, see Goldfrank, Evtuhov, Hughes, and Stites’ A History of Russia.
exiles as further evidence of his radical opposition to the monarchy. The author relates anecdotes illustrating the tsar’s alleged desire to humiliate and persecute Pushkin at every turn, and expresses outrage at the tsar’s decision to personally act as the censor of Pushkin’s work. Even Pushkin’s death is politicized; the essay proffers a theory that the controversy that drove Pushkin to challenge a suitor of his wife’s to a duel was engineered by hostile elements in the government (The collection’s introduction goes one step further and refers openly to Pushkin’s death as an assassinatin). As such, the scholarship published by VOKS on Pushkin paints the poet as a man before his time, a writer openly antagonistic to the feudal order in whose work “national consciousness first found artistic expression.”

That portrait, however, is based upon a loose interpretation of the facts. To begin, the assertion that Pushkin harbored revolutionary beliefs is a misleading representation of his political views. Certainly, Pushkin was among the reform-minded sector of the aristocracy. Oleg Proskurin notes that Pushkin supported the call among some intellectuals for the freeing of the serfs. He also advocated (most clearly in his poem “Liberty”) for the development of a constitutional monarchy. Moreover, he did maintain friendships with some of the Decembrists rebels. And yet, Proskurin stresses that Pushkin viewed revolution as unnecessary and destructive. His vision for reform centered on the gradual, internal transformation of the government. He was adamant that a

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110 Luppol, 14.

111 Luppol, 6.

112 Proskurin, Oleg. “Pushkin and Politics.” *The Cambridge Companion to Pushkin.* 105-6, 111.
peaceful collaboration between the tsar and intellectuals was the most viable path to a constitutional monarchy.

Indeed, the record of the meeting between Pushkin and Nicholas I after the Decembrist upheaval indicates that, contrary to VOKS’ statement, Pushkin was far from St. Petersburg on the day of the revolt and did not have to choose between loyalty to his friends and loyalty to his political convictions.\(^{113}\) That testimony appears to have been more than political pandering as Pushkin, in a private and unguarded moment, also scribbled a drawing on a manuscript of the Decembrist leaders being executed and captioned it with the phrase, “And like a clown, I might have…”\(^{114}\) In addition, the exiles served by Pushkin were far from the Siberian experience of many political outcasts during the imperial period. Instead, the tsar removed Pushkin from the capital by assigning him to government posts that allowed him to keep up his comfortable lifestyle and devote significant time to his writing. So while the Nicholas I did attempt to separate Pushkin from his liberal tendencies through isolation and did order some censorship of Pushkin’s work (which was not unusual in nineteenth-century Russia), Pushkin was not nearly as hostile to the regime as VOKS depicts him.\(^{115}\) The assumption that Pushkin would have eagerly joined the proletariat revolution (as the VOKS essays strongly imply) is simply an irresponsible reading of his biography.

The divergence from reasonable interpretations of Pushkin is just as apparent in the VOKS collection’s analysis of his writing. The essay that addresses his signature poem, *The Bronze Horseman*, is illustrative of this pattern. The poem itself is divided into

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\(^{113}\) Proskurin. 110-11.


three parts. The short introduction is an ode to St. Petersburg in which Pushkin presents the founding of the city by Peter the Great in mythic terms and celebrates its beauty. Part I follows with the presentation of Yevgeni, a clerk whose story the poem narrates. Yevgeni’s hopes of marriage and family are destroyed when a cataclysmic flood sweeps St. Petersburg and kills his fiancé. Fighting for survival, Yevgeni climbs atop a marble lion statue and waits for the water to recede. Part I ends with an image of Yevgeni perched on the lion and staring at an imposing statue of Peter the Great before him. Part II details Yevgeni’s frantic search for his fiancé and his descent into madness upon the discovery of her death. The poem’s climatic moment occurs when Yevgeni returns to the statue of Peter and screams at it in a fit of rage. He then runs from the statue and imagines that it is chasing him.  

M. Khrapchenko, writing for the VOKS collection, finds in *The Bronze Horseman* proof that Pushkin anticipated the arrival of a momentous struggle between the common people and the upper classes. He pitches the introduction of the poem as Pushkin’s recognition that Peter the Great’s “all-conquering culture” had brought order to chaos and civilization to the wilderness. At the same time, Pushkin—in Khrapchenko’s estimation—sought to expose the cost this culture exacted on the powerless masses:

> The loss of all that is dear to Yevgeni is perceived as a symbol of the sacrifices which again and again are being brought for the glory of the autocrats […] Yevgeni recognizes the ‘potentate,’ the ‘lord of doom.’ In his soul there awakens the feeling of protest; Yevgeni is full of indignation and hatred. Yevgeni blames Peter for the miserable life man is forced to lead in the city, which bears his name and which he founded for the well-to-do. In the accusation one hears plainly the voice of the lower orders, of the disinherited.

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117 Khrapchenko. p 103.

118 Khrapchenko. p 104.
Khrapchenko thus transforms Yevgeni into an early incarnation of the positive hero upon which socialist realism is built. Yevgeni becomes a stand-in for an entire class, and his fury toward the monument of the city’s founder is a clear sign that the population he represents will soon rise against their autocratic oppressors.

The problem with the VOKS study of *The Bronze Horseman* is that it fails to account for the complexity of the poem. It skims the surface and cherry-picks the sections that support the agenda it seeks to push. Consider first that the treatment of Peter in the odic introduction:

And he thought: From here we will outface the Swede;  
To spite our haughty neighbor I shall found  
A city here. By nature we are fated  
To cut a window through to Europe,  
To stand with a firm foothold on the sea.  
Ships of every flag, on waves unknown  
To them, will come to visit us, and we  
Shall revel in the open sea.\(^\text{119}\)

Peter is sketched by Pushkin as a monarch concerned, not with the fate of the upper class or the elite, but with the fate of his entire people. As Michael Watchel explains, Peter is glorified here as a deity-like figure. Watchel agrees with the VOKS analysis that Pushkin sees Peter as a force that shaped a new city and a new culture out of a wasteland, but he denies the callous disregard of Peter for the common man that the VOKS essay insists the poem criticizes.\(^\text{120}\)

Similarly, VOKS mischaracterized the nature of the conflict that drives the body of the poem. Watchel correctly demonstrates that the poem brings two contradictory attitudes that are left unresolved at the end of the piece. The veneration of Peter in the

\(^{119}\) Translation by Thomas in *The Bronze Horseman*. p 247.

\(^{120}\) Watchel, Michael. “Pushkin’s long poems and the epic impulse.” *A Cambridge Companion to Pushkin*. pp 75-89.
introduction is contrasted with Pushkin’s overt sympathy for Yevgeni’s plight. The poet transitions from the introduction to Yevgeni’s story with the words, “There was a dreadful time—the memory of it/ Is still fresh…I will begin my narrative/ Of it for you, my friends. My tale will be sad.”\textsuperscript{121} Primed with that opening, the reader perceives an anxiety toward Yevgeni’s suffering throughout the body of the poem. And yet, when Yevgeni confronts the image of the leader whose city was the stage for his suffering, Pushkin does not give him a victory. Nor does he fully recast Peter and the autocracy as villains. Instead, he portrays the tsar on the throne at the time of the flood as distraught over the agony of his people:

\begin{quote}
In that dread year the late Tsar in his glory  
Still ruled Russia. He came out onto his balcony,  
Sad, troubled, and said: ‘Tsars cannot master  
The divine elements.’\textsuperscript{122}
\end{quote}

The tsar is not indifferent to the pain of the masses, but distressed by it. Pushkin further highlights the tsar’s weakness in the face of nature, such that his limitation reveals that Peter’s conquest of the wilderness was not absolute. The tsar’s reaction also suggests that Yevgeni’s anger at the Peter monument is misguided. As Watchel explicates, “the apparently ‘conquered element’ has triumphed over both Yevgeni and Peter.”\textsuperscript{123} Thus, the confrontation between the Peter’s city and the individual Yevgeni ends ambiguously, and it is a third force, nature, that causes destruction. Watchel hits on the factor of uncertainty in the denouement by stating: “[Pushkin] shows Peter in a battle with destiny, but refuses to judge the outcome.”\textsuperscript{124} To say, as VOKS did, that \textit{The Bronze Horseman} is

\textsuperscript{121} Pushkin and Thomas (trans). p 249.  
\textsuperscript{122} Pushkin and Thomas (trans). p 251.  
\textsuperscript{123} Watchel. p 85.  
\textsuperscript{124} Watchel. p 86.
a foretelling of the revolutionary conflict between the autocracy and the people ignores both Pushkin’s political beliefs and an honest reading of the poem.

*Pushkin in Tale of Tales*

Yuri Norstein breaks from the socialist realist conception of Pushkin by paying him a nonpartisan (and more genuine) tribute through *Tale of Tales*. Norstein’s admiration for the poet was well known in the animation community in 1970s Moscow. In fact, Norstein’s fellow animator Andrei Khrzhanovsky recruited him to draw segments of an animated Pushkin biography he was directing. The project (which produced so much material that it became a trilogy) drew its inspiration from the drawings Pushkin frequently made in the margins of his manuscripts while writing. The doodles were famous for their simplicity and spontaneity, and many of Norstein’s characters in *Tale of Tales* seem to have been drawn to reflect Pushkin’s approach to sketching. The figures in the dream world, in particular, feature a minimalist, almost unfinished look that suggest that Norstein, like Pushkin, crafted them quickly, in a fit of creativity. Compare, for example, the Pushkin’s drawing of a scene from his *Eugene Ogenin* and Norstein’s jump-roping bull:

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125 Kitson. p 71.
126 Kitson. p 73.
Both images emphasize strong lines over detail, which imbues them with a feeling of movement. Norstein’s use of this style throughout much of the film, when combined with the fact that production on *Tale of Tales* immediately followed his work on the Pushkin trilogy, suggests that he adopted the poet as a muse.

That impression becomes stronger when one considers that Norstein believed animation was an art form very closely related to poetry. Indeed, the poet and his role in contemporary society is a theme touched upon by the film. More specifically, Norstein identified strongly with Pushkin’s assertion that poetry has the ability to find beauty in decay. That leitmotif finds its fullest expression in Pushkin’s “Autumn,” in which he compares his favorite season to a consumptive girl and celebrates the splendor of life in fast decline. Norstein picks up this idea and runs with it in *Tale of Tales*. One of the central stories within the film is the eulogy of the communal apartment lifestyle of his childhood. In the late 1970s, the Soviet government razed many of the post-World War II

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Shanahan

communal apartment buildings to make way for new high-rise developments. While writing the treatment for *Tale of Tales*, Norstein visited his family’s old apartment, which was about to be bulldozed. In his discussions with Kitson, Norstein indicates that he was inspired by the particular aesthetic of the crumbling structure and the sight of piles of old furniture and house ware that had been cleared from the interior.\(^{129}\)

That inspiration translates to the screen in a sequence in which the audience sees a pile of old wooden chairs, a rejected sewing machine and a condemned communal apartment building whose windows are boarded up by an invisible force. The grey wolf character (whose significance will be discussed in the next chapter) watches curiously as a line of cars speeds away from the site. Society, in effect, is speeding away from the old mode of living, and over the horizon a skyline of new, clean, modern buildings comes into view. The camera, however, returns to dilapidated apartment, where the pile of chairs bursts into flames. Destruction is followed by moments of serenity, as the wolf swings on the sewing machine. The colors of the scene, though dark, are rich and the vibrant images lends the deterioration an element of loveliness that Pushkin would likely have recognized. As if to render the influence of the poet even more obvious, Norstein places the scene in an autumnal setting, with orange and yellow leaves cascading over the debris. The synthesis of autumn and detritus, beauty and decline emerges from the screenshots of the scene below:

\(^{129}\) Kitson, pp 61-4.
Source: All pictures are screen shots of *Tale of Tales*. Note the cars about to leave in the bottom left image and the new skyline in the bottom right.
It is thus evident that Pushkin’s fascination with decay shines through Norstein’s treatment of his childhood home, and that what Kitson refers to as Norstein’s “poetry from garbage” owes much of its genesis to the legacy of Pushkin.¹³⁰

Pushkin’s mark is also apparent in the broader, apolitical focus on everyday life that pervades *Tale of Tales*. The enigmatic political dimension of *The Bronze Horseman* aside, Pushkin’s body of work is, for the most part, composed of poetry of the ordinary. Thomas, in his introduction to Pushkin’s writing, states, “In standing on the common, even commonplace, ground of human experience, he resembled Shakespeare […] he believed that there is no happiness outside the ordinary.”¹³¹ Texts like *Eugene Ogenin* and *Count Nulin* are rooted in Pushkin’s (often humorous) observations and reflections on individuals, their emotions, and their relations. As Thomas points out, neither of these two works aspires to convey deeper symbolic or political messages.¹³² Likewise, Norstein immerses himself in icons of the ordinary with *Tale of Tales*. The film is peppered with shots of end tables, dishware, tablecloths and other objects he associates with his childhood, all beautifully recreated with his unique animation technique.¹³³ Moreover, a central theme in the film (explored further in the next chapter) is Norstein’s belief that eternal happiness was to be found in part in family life. Given his esteem for, and artistic engagement with, Pushkin, it is reasonable to conclude that the poet’s elevation of the everyday was integral to Norstein’s exploration of ordinary.

¹³⁰ Kitson, p 51.
¹³¹ Thomas. pp 11,14.
¹³² Thomas. pp 12,19.
¹³³ Kitson, pp 13-6.
Summary

With one film, Norstein undercuts the politically motivated perversion of Pushkin that had been accomplished by socialist realism four decades earlier. Pushkin echoes throughout *Tale of Tales*, both in its general focus on routine life and its particular examination of the aesthetic allure of a dying landscape. In defying the socialist realist monopoly of Pushkin, Norstein defies the genre itself. The subjects of his film are, for the most part, features and idiosyncrasies of Soviet life, but he refused to constrain his film the artistic boundaries pushed by the Soviet order. The interpretation of Pushkin, therefore, is one of the critical points of departure from socialist realism that sets *Tale of Tales* apart as a significant artistic achievement of the Brezhnev era.
Chapter 4: Norstein’s Alternative Solution to the Great Divide

In order to accomplish the second goal laid out in the introduction—to demonstrate that Tale of Tales bridged the great Russian cultural divide in a manner that was more laudable than that of socialist realism—this final chapter will establish three premises: First, it will affirm that Norstein’s classic film is a work of art that is positioned outside of the socialist realist framework. Second, it will consider Tale of Tales as a piece of high culture that both deals with eternal questions (as Stites informs his reader high art should) and pushes the boundaries of animation as a creative form. Third, this chapter will examine where Norstein incorporates low culture into his premier film and testify to the intense popularity the film found among the general population, in spite of obstacles placed in its way by the cultural authorities. By pulling all of these threads together, this chapter will prove definitively that Norstein’s Tale of Tales epitomized an alternative, preferable mode of transcending the cultural gulf.

A Non-Socialist Realist Animator in a Socialist Realist World

The optimal place to begin exploring Tale of Tales as a film that resisted the grip of socialist realism is with the animator himself. Norstein came of age in a cultural world in transition. Born just after World War II, he lived for his first fifteen years in the Stalinist cultural milieu before experiencing, with the rest of the Soviet Union, a breath of fresh air under the Stalin’s successor as the First Secretary of the Communist Party, Nikita Khrushchev. It ought to be reiterated that the socialist realist order—for all its success in integrating the two camps of Russian culture—was incredibly stifling. Not only did socialist realist cultural hegemony require the suppression of already existent
high and low culture that did not meet its aesthetic specifications, the cultural authorities that enforced it smothered any creative impulses that pushed beyond the boundaries of the genre. During the interval between 1956 and the mid-1960s, a period widely referred to as the Thaw, Khrushchev’s government partially reversed the policies of political repression and cultural censorship that the Stalinist state had so stringently enforced. The Thaw, as this section will illustrate, was therefore an important period for Nortstein’s formation as an artist as it allowed him access to cultural influences that would not have been available under Stalin.

The Thaw began with a bang in 1956, when Khrushchev delivered what is known colloquially as “the Secret Speech.” Although Stalin had passed away in 1953 and Khrushchev immediately succeeded him as First Secretary of the Communist Party, the subsequent power tussle meant that Khrushchev spent almost three years accumulating the political capital necessary to assert himself as the undisputed leader of the Soviet government. In February of 1956, he finally played his trump card. At the Twentieth Congress of the Communist Party, Khrushchev gave an unscheduled, four-hour address to the Soviet delegates to the conference entitled, “On the Cult of Personality an Its Consequences.” In it, he denounced Stalin for warping the ideology of the Communist Party and, essentially, deifying himself as the infallible head of the communist mission. He called for a return to the Party’s Leninist roots and even went so far as to accuse Stalin of being a murderer. Scholars have spilled thousands of pages of ink debating Khrushchev’s exact unspoken motives, but it is clear that at least one of his ulterior objectives was to set himself apart from Stalin and thereby consolidate his own power within the Party and the government. As such, he and his allies ensured that the secret
speech did not remain a secret for long. It was leaked to the Western press and disseminated to regional party leaders who read it out loud at to thousands of Communist Party chapters. The effect of the speech cannot be over-emphasized. Less than three years earlier, millions had wept on the occasion of Stalin’s death; to condemn him so emphatically was to shake the foundations of the dominant political ethos of the previous twenty years.\textsuperscript{134}

The Secret Speech heralded the arrival of political and cultural liberalization in Soviet Russia. In the political sphere, Khrushchev took measures to alleviate the fear that Stalin’s despotic domestic policies had created. Show trials and political prosecutions, for instance, largely ceased, and many of those imprisoned in forced labor camps under Stalin were freed. This is not to say that Khrushchev moved the Soviet Union to a rule of law system. The repression of dissidents continued—if on a less draconian scale—but it was generally accomplished through bureaucratic rather than violent means. A nonconformist under Khrushchev was more likely to suffer the loss of employment or excommunication from the Party than exile or death.\textsuperscript{135}

On the cultural plane, the Thaw years represented a parallel walk-back from the rigidity of the Stalin period. While socialist realism continued to be the dominant (and dominating) force in the cultural field, Khrushchev’s cultural brass were less militant about cracking down on art that did not exactly fit the socialist realist pattern. As a result,

\textsuperscript{134} There is a large entire corner of Russian and Soviet studies devoted to Khrushchev and the Secret Speech, so the options for further reading are virtually endless. With that said, a good starting point is: Chamberlin, William Henry. “Khrushchev’s War with Stalin’s Ghost.” \textit{Russian Review}. Vol 21, No 1. 1962. pp 3-10. English translations of the text of the speech itself is also easily located online.

\textsuperscript{135} For more on the Khrushchev political and economic agenda, see: Medvedev Roy A. and Zhores A. Medvedev. \textit{Khrushchev: The Years in Power}. New York: Columbia University Press. 1976.
the Khrushchev years were distinguished by a greater diversity in cultural offerings than Soviet Russia had seen since the Cultural Revolution. For example, although regime-approved mass songs in the socialist realist style remained popular, looser cultural boundaries meant that they faced new competition from the influence of Western-style music. Jazz reemerged and rock and roll burst onto the scene, winning legions of fans, especially among the youth. Similarly, American movies were again brought to the Soviet Union, although Khrushchev’s cultural authorities ensured that they were dubbed with politically correct dialogue. Both of these trends contributed to the rise of a subculture called (derogatively) stilyagi by the regime and other critics. The stilyagi was comprised primarily of youth and was marked by a fascination with Western (i.e. American) art, fashion and lifestyle. This affinity for Western culture was in large part an outgrowth of the stilyagi’s frustration with the ideological moralizing of official culture (in particular, with its prudish approach to sex in art). Though the stilyagi was a minority, its defiance represented a challenge of a part of the masses to the unifying socialist realist culture. The cultural powers that be responded in kind with a propaganda push against the misguided youth, and the stilyagi thus became a flashpoint for tension that arose between proponents of the official culture and those who were disillusioned by it during the Thaw.136

Khrushchev’s cautious cultural liberalization also opened the door to a new wave of high art, especially in the literary sphere. High culture poets began composing experimental art and performing it for enthusiastic audiences in cities. Similarly, the late 1950s and early 1960s was a period during which a “literature of conscience” surfaced, with authors such as Vladimir Dudintsev, Boris Pasternak and Alexander Solzhenitsyn

136 Stites. pp 123-47.
leading the charge.\textsuperscript{137} Dudintsev’s 1956 novel \textit{Not By Bread Alone} follows an engineer protagonist who encounters heavy bureaucratic opposition as he attempts to build and distribute his invention. Dudintsev was able to publish the book because of cultural warming of the Thaw, but he nevertheless faced attacks from Party voices, including Khrushchev. He was shunned so severely, in fact, that he became consigned to poverty, unable to find substantial work again until the late 1980s.\textsuperscript{138}

Pasternak’s \textit{Dr. Zhivago} fared even worse, failing to make it to print. A novel that follows its protagonist as he grapples with the effects on his life of the 1917 Revolution and the Civil War, \textit{Dr. Zhivago} blatantly rejected the norms of socialist realism and, as a result, drew the ire of regime censors. Printed first in Italy, \textit{Dr. Zhivago} was available to Russians only as \textit{samizdat}—or clandestine printing—that was smuggled into the Soviet Union.\textsuperscript{139} Solzhenitsyn’s \textit{One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich} also subverted socialist realism. A veteran of World War II, Solzhenitsyn was imprisoned in several labor camps after the war because of criticisms he made about Stalin in a letter to a friend. After his release in the 1950s, he wrote \textit{One Day} as a novel based on his experience. Khrushchev allowed it to be published in 1962 and sent it shockwaves through Soviet society.\textsuperscript{140}

Kitson notes that Norstein was influenced by all of these writers, and particularly by

\begin{flushright}
137 Stites, p 127.
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Solzhenitsyn. As will be discussed later in this chapter, Solzhenitsyn set a precedent that helped inspire Norstein to barrel through the barriers of socialist realism and forge his own aesthetic.

As the regime vacillated between allowing increased cultural openness and squeezing those in both high and low culture that stepped too far out of bounds (such as the low culture *stilyagi* and the high culture writers of conscience), some in the cinema industry capitalized on the chance to retreat from the bombastic, grandiose demonstrations of ideological fervor and optimism that characterized the filmmaking of the 1930s. Specifically, directors in the late 1950s and 1960s used the new leeway granted to them to respond to the need for emotional release of the immediate post-war population. Reeling from the physical and economic devastation caused by the fighting on the WWII eastern front, as well as loss of an estimated twenty-three million soldiers and civilians, the Soviet population in the 1950s was quite clearly not experiencing the communist paradise that had been foreshadowed by early socialist realist art. Filmmakers picked up on the desire for catharsis among mass audiences and began producing films that focused on the challenges of recovering from the war.

Two illustrative examples of this trend are *The Cranes are Flying* (1957) and *Ballad of a Soldier* (1960). Both films, which were box-office hits, deal with the hardship of war and the tragedy of love shattered by war. Their plots are infused with elements of honesty about everyday living in the Soviet Union during and after World War II.

Because of these films and others, Stites writes, the reality of life in the USSR began to

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141 Kitson. pp 24-5.
142 Stites. p 142.
seep onto the silver screen. Moreover, while both films celebrated their fallen soldier
characters as Soviet heroes and mixed in the politically-correct, audience-gratifying
action and melodrama that socialist realism encouraged, they also tested the boundaries
of socialist realism by including heavy themes of melancholy and human weakness. *Tale
of Tales* would later pick up on and magnify this melancholic tendency in addressing the
dynamic of post-war life. And so, the cinema of the Thaw joined the literature of
conscience as a significant force in Norstein’s artistic development.144

The new policies of (relative) openness touched all branches of culture and the
extended exposure to art forms outside the socialist realist model served to cultivate in
Norstein, as well as in many others of his generation, what Kitson calls a “taste for
independent thought” that stuck with him even as Khrushchev’s successor, Leonid
Brezhnev, turned Soviet culture back toward stagnation and socialist realist hegemony.145
This independence of thought is evident in the questions toward which Norstein orients
*Tale of Tales*. To begin, it addresses the universal search for happiness. By socialist
realist principles and Soviet ideology, of course, fulfillment is found through
participation in the project of societal transformation. Norstein, however, avoids any sort
of political or ideological dimension and instead celebrates the joy that can be found on
the personal level, through familial ties.

The focus of *Tale of Tales* on locating satisfaction in the personal sphere rather
than the collective political one was made explicit by the film’s treatment, or proposal,
submitted to the State Committee for Cinematography (Goskino) in 1976. As the state
agency that allocated the funding for Soviet film production, Goskino required film

144 Kitson. p 26.
145 Kitson. p 23.
studios to submit treatments for each of their projects before approval and funding were granted. The *Tale of Tales* treatment—which reads like a free-form poem—clearly lays out Norstein’s conviction that fulfillment comes from within rather than solely from involvement in the building of a communist society:

What we need to grasp is not so much that children hold the secret of happiness—but that we also hold that secret. Each of us has this, his own secret, but we often keep it secret from ourselves…

One sees here a clear defiance of the collective spirit of socialist realist art, as Norstein promotes an individualistic approach to locating happiness. While the final film differed in many ways from the treatment (as will be discussed later in this chapter), this core philosophy was retained and permeates the film that debuted in 1979.

To understand where in the intricate tapestry of *Tale of Tales* Norstein weaves in this approach to happiness, the viewer must begin with an image that appears early in the film. The frame is filled by an exterior shot of the communal apartment building, accented by the Pushkinian autumnal tree. It is night and the image is dark, but a light begins to emanate through the door of the house. The camera zooms in on the radiant doorway before passing through it and emerging into a dream world. Here the viewer encounters first a bull turning a skipping rope while a girl jumps (pictured in Chapter three). The dream world is also home to the girl’s mother, who appears tired as she juggles washing clothes and rocking her infant in a pram. The girl and the bull seem to bicker before the mother calls to her to help with the baby. The daughter responds by clumsily rocking the pram until her father, a fisherman, arrives with the day’s catch to relieve the girl and aid his wife by rocking the baby himself. The girl proceeds to

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reconcile with the bull by granting him a turn at skipping rope. This dream world is explicitly set apart from the other scenes in the film by the distinct style in which Norstein drew it which, as the previous chapter noted, is reminiscent of Pushkin’s manuscript doodles. Norstein returns to the dream world several times throughout the film, and the viewer is granted additional glimpses at the family that inhabits it. One moment that Kitson writes Norstein mentioned repeatedly in her conversations with him occurs when the family sits down for dinner. A stranger walks by their picnic and is immediately invited to join them and offered a glass of wine.147 This sort of convivial family environment is something Norstein experienced as a child in the communal apartment that he mourns later in the film. And what emerges from Norstein’s talks with Kitson is the sense that he recalls his early childhood with nostalgia, a theme that will be touched upon later in this chapter.148 Family ties, then, constitute a part of Norstein’s particular secret to happiness.

Pictured here are the mother rocking her baby in the dream world (right) and the luminescent doorway (left). The source for both is screen shots of Tale of Tales.

147 Kitson. p 19.
The film and its treatment, however, inform the audience that while the passing of childhood also heralded the passing of its particular joys (the treatment states, “we’ve already lived out that happiness”\(^{149}\)), happiness on par with that of childhood is not lost forever. Nor, in fact, was the happiness of childhood as complete, in Norstein’s estimation, as happiness can be. In his talks with Kitson, he revealed that the image of the illuminated doorway was drawn from a dream he used to have as a child. In it, he would gaze down the apartment’s dark hallway to the door where light would be pushing to get through. In order to stress the significance of the shining portal, the film is revisits it when the central character, a little grey wolf (who is analyzed more closely in a subsequent section) walks through it and into the dream world. Norstein remembers feeling certain as a child that beyond the door lay “eternal happiness, light, a talking cat, and bread sprinkled with sugar.”\(^{150}\) Even as a child, then, Norstein believes he recognized the potential to attain greater fulfillment.

He carries this theme from his imagination forward into his signature film as a metaphor for the message regarding happiness that he verbalized in the film’s treatment. The viewer finds, as the film explores the dream world, the important elements that were missing from Norstein’s childhood universe: art and poetry. For in addition to the idyllic family scene, the dream world also contains a poet attempting to write. He is identified as such by association with classic symbols of a poet: He haphazardly strums a lyre and briefly dons a toga in a moment of spontaneity. Moreover, he is presented to the audience as struggling to put words to paper and, appropriately, the talking cat of Norstein’s youthful dreams lounges on the his desk. In one of the film’s comedic moments, the cat

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\(^{149}\) Norstein and Kitson (trans). p 126.

\(^{150}\) Norstein, as quoted in Kitson. p 11
seems to either scold the poet or give him a pep talk as he crumples yet another rejected
draft and begins to pace. The audience also spots a fish floating in the sky, perhaps a nod
to the fantasy that art of all types can conjure. Later in the film the viewer meets the poet
again, this time in a candlelit room in what is clearly not the dream world, but the actual
world. The poet, then, crosses the boundary between the dream realm of eternal
happiness and the realm of the real. But the possibility of eternal happiness is not lost as,
in fact, the sheet the poet scribbles on begins to glow with the same light as had filled the
doorway. Norstein, moreover, identifies himself as a poet. He informed Kitson that he
perceives animation to be more similar to poetry than it is to live-action film, and he
declares unequivocally in the film’s treatment, “I am a poet.”

Kitson explains that
Norstein’s use of the first person tense in the treatment was highly unusual, and there thus
can be no doubt that the poet of the treatment and the film is intended to represent
himself. And so one finds that Norstein is chronicling his own struggles to find his
footing as an artist and to encounter art. For, as discussed earlier, although the
Khrushchev Thaw made a diversity of art somewhat more accessible, a life in the Soviet
Union placed heavy constraints on the artistic experiences and opportunities open to an
individual. Through the film, then, Norstein represents the two axes—family/friendship
and art/poetry—around which his personal happiness turns, as well as the difficulties he
has met in walking down the corridor toward the lit door and turning his dream into
reality.

In presenting the dream world as his conception of happiness, Norstein infuses

Tale of Tales with an individualism that was antithetical to socialist realism. Here he

152 Kitson. p 59
153 Kitson. p 19
likely drew heavily on the influence of the work of Alexander Solzhenitsyn. The book was the first candid look at Soviet prison system for most of the Soviet citizenry, as it had previously been shrouded in mystery by Stalin’s command. Norstein, like many of his contemporaries, devoured it. While he would certainly have been struck by the egregious human rights abuses to which Solzhenitsyn testifies, Kitson observes that Norstein was even more impressed by the form of Solzhenitsyn’s narrative.¹⁵⁴ Lucid, in his analysis of Solzhenitsyn, explicates that, in order to make a political statement opposed to the official Party line, Solzhenitsyn bucked the conventions of the socialist realist style. Because the novel takes place over just one day, there is no character evolution—no positive hero achieving consciousness or contributing to the communist project over the course of the novel. And there is certainly none of the requisite socialist realist optimism. Instead, the reader encounters a prisoner narrator who simply observes the conditions of the quotidian. Unlike those of socialist realist novels, Solzhenitsyn’s purpose is not to catalyze action in line with Party ideology, but to pull back the curtain on the truth that the “fabricated myths” of socialist realist art had obscured. In doing so, One Day foregoes the universal worldview promoted by socialist realism in favor of affirming, in Lucid’s words, the “totality of individual reactions.”¹⁵⁵ This same model applies to Norstein’s exploration of the idea of happiness. He depicts, not a universal mode of happiness imposed by socialist realism, but his individual striving for it as one amidst a totality of strivings. In this sense, Norstein, like Solzhenitsyn, defies the restrictive structure of socialist realism.

¹⁵⁴ Kitson. pp 24-5.
¹⁵⁵ Lucid. pp 498-505.
Tale of Tales also locates itself outside the boundaries of socialist realism in its refusal to adopt the unquestioned optimism that marked socialist realist art. As Kitson notes, there is an air of melancholy that pervades much of the film.\textsuperscript{156} To begin, although Norstein clearly expresses fondness for the flat he grew up in, he does not sugarcoat the harsh aspects of that lifestyle. The viewer senses through the gloomy coloring of the scenes in and around the apartment—where brown, gray and black reign—that Norstein’s childhood was dimly lit. He told Kitson that the corridor of his family flat (and of his dreams) was generally illuminated by a single twenty-five watt bulb, as the occupants could not afford more light.\textsuperscript{157} This murkiness is another instance of Norstein’s celebration, inspired by Pushkin, of the beauty that can be found in sparseness and debris; he recounted to Kitson how the darkness of the flat engendered in him a sense of security during his youth. Yet even so, Norstein’s portrayal of the privations of his childhood communicates to his audience that the environment of the post-war communal apartment was laced with a strain of grimness.

The melancholic theme becomes starker and more somber during the portions of the film Norstein devotes to the physical and emotional toll of the war. Although he was too young to recall the war itself, Norstein holds sharp memories of its aftermath. The film opens, in fact, with a scene drawn from one such memory. The first image the audience sees is a close-up of a baby nursing on a bare breast. In addition to functioning as another direct jab at the socialist realist order, where nudity was frowned upon, Kitson learned from Norstein that the visual of the nursing mother was inspired by the comfort and security he remembers feeling as a small boy while watching his aunt pump milk. As

\textsuperscript{156} Kitson. p 3.
\textsuperscript{157} Kitson. p 11.
with the dark hall, however, Norstein draws here a fine line between his own sense of contentment and the gloomy reality that occasioned it. For, as he revealed to Kitson, his aunt had become pregnant while in the air force but lost the baby after returning home from the front. The image that for him was so reassuring as a child was in fact a result of his aunt’s need to pump her excess milk after a tragedy.\footnote{Kitson. pp 11-2.}

In a similar fashion, Norstein includes in the film a wartime song that was popular during his early childhood. A tango called \textit{Weary Sun}, the song was associated by Norstein with pleasant memories of happy summer evenings playing in his yard.\footnote{Norstein and Kitson (trans). p 125.} He uses the tango, however, as a backdrop to the most heart-wrenching scene in the film. As it plays, the viewer sees a crowd of couples dancing. Suddenly, the men of the pairs are swept up, and reappear as soldiers marching off to war. Some of the women express horror as notices of injuries and death fly through the tumultuous sky. A few scenes later, the film returns to the dance floor where some, but not all, of the men rejoin their women. One veteran, having lost a leg, sits on a bench next to his girlfriend (or wife) and plays \textit{Weary Sun} on an accordion. This sequence very clearly picks up on the melancholy war themes touched on by films such as \textit{Ballad of a Soldier} and \textit{The Cranes Are Flying} as a further demonstration of the blurry boundary between contentment and tragedy.

See to the left the first image of \textit{Tale of Tales}: Norstein’s aunt nursing her lost child. Source: Screenshot of the film.
But where *Cranes* and *Ballad* mourned the destruction of war while maintaining a socialist realist hint of hope (*Cranes*, for example, ends with the girlfriend of a fallen soldier handing out flowers to returning veterans while his friend waxes poetic on the need to uphold peace), *Tale of Tales* does not guarantee that all will improve during peacetime. Norstein shared with Kitson that he has long believed that “you need a great talent to live in peacetime.” He explained that war provides a people with a common enemy against which to unite; when that enemy is removed, a society can fall victim to its difficulties and vice and thereby injure itself internally. He explores the potential for a society to be consumed by weakness in a pivotal episode known as the winter scene. Sandwiched between the two halves of the *Weary Sun* sequence, the winter scene is marked by overly bright colors that diverge sharply with the subdued tones of the rest of the film. Kitson explains that the contrast indicates to the viewer that the winter scene takes place in the contemporary time period, rather than in the period of Norstein’s childhood or in his dream world. It is set in a snow-covered park, and begins with a shot of a boy eating an apple. The audience catches a glimpse of the boy’s parents sitting on a bench before returning to the boy, who is now seated on a tree branch sharing his apple with a pair of crows. This moment of brevity and the gorgeous backdrop are juxtaposed with the friction between the parents. The mother appears to be nagging her husband and, as the scene progresses, he begins to take hefty swigs from a bottle pulled from his pocket. Emptying the bottle, he smashes it on a nearby tree and motions for his family to leave. A Napoleon-style hat materializes on his head, perhaps to signify his

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160 Norstein, quoted in Kitson. p 16
161 Kitson. p 78.
domineering attitude.\textsuperscript{162} His wife and son fall in step behind him, and as they exit a smaller Napoleonic hat appears on the boy’s head.

Pictured here is the winter scene family. Note the matching Napoleonic hats of the father and son. Source: Screenshot of \textit{Tale of Tales}.

The message of the scene, according to Kitson, is clear. The father’s vices (aggression, drunkenness) when left unchecked will pass to his son. And in this way, they will be perpetuated indefinitely in society. This sentiment is a far cry from the optimism of socialist realist art; Norstein is elegantly asserting that Soviet society has not moved closer to the perfection that socialist realist culture has promised for fifty years. When combined with Norstein’s memories of post-war life, the winter scene makes a strong, if subtle, case that Soviet society is plagued by serious problems. It is against these difficulties that Norstein maintains one must strive to find happiness. In some sense, the

\textsuperscript{162} Kitson provides her reader with a reproduction of an early sketch for the scene, in which the father is labeled as “Napoleon, our contemporary.” Kitson. p 80.
interweaving of the winter scene with the dream world sequences, as well as the poet’s appearance in reality, offer a note of hope that one’s deficiencies can be overcome in the pursuit of fulfillment. What is clear, however, is that Norstein conceives of this victory over vice as emanating, not from a collective struggle to achieve communism, but from an individual, self-searching quest for the door at the end of the corridor and personal happiness.

Norstein thus steamrolled over the norms and conventions of socialist realism in crafting the content of his film. His depiction of the search for happiness as an individualistic enterprise, as well as the revelation that his own conception of ideal happiness involves family and art rather than social consciousness and a place in the achievement of a communist world defy the principles upon which socialist realism was built. Moreover, his consistent portrayal of his childhood contentment and post-war melancholy as two sides of the same coin flies in the face of the optimism that was the hallmark of socialist realist art. Finally, the film’s frank look at some of the weaknesses of Soviet society undercuts the socialist realist assumption that masses could continually draw ever closer to the achievement of an ideal socialist existence.

Tale of Tales as High Art

The content of Tale of Tales was not, however, the only area in which it deviated from the socialist realist gestalt. Norstein’s film also forged a new path with regard to its technical form and plot structure and in this way made its distinct mark as a piece of non-socialist realist high art. When Norstein first began training as an animator, he was put off by the stagnant nature of Soviet animation, which was limited by socialist realist
strictures to the production of children’s films based on approved folk tales and drawn in the style of Disney. Indeed, a survey of the films released by Soyuzmutfilm, the state animation studio that was founded in 1936, reveals a list steeped in titles such as *The Snow Maiden* (1952), *The Scarlet Flower* (1952) and *The Golden Antelope* (1954), all of which were films based on politically acceptable fairy tales. While the aesthetic of these films was pleasing, it was highly derivative of work already done by Disney. In fact, some Soviet animated pieces—such as *The Tale of the Dead Princess and the Seven Knights* (1951)—were so obviously imitations of Disney (*Snow White*, in this case) that it was almost comical. They mimicked the rounded animation style, plot composition and character development of the American powerhouse. With the arrival of the Thaw, some animators began to push out of the Disney-like shell that they had been shut into under Stalin. Fyodor Khitruk in particular stood at the cutting edge of Soviet animation in the 1960s. Although any one of his films during that decade can be held up as an example, he first broke the mold in 1962 with *The Story of a Crime*, a film that begins with a man attacking a neighbor and then backtracks in a wacky manner over the previous twenty-four hours to investigate what pushed him to do it. The audience finds that the man was driven mad by the cramped living conditions of the city, and his insanity was exacerbated by the cheery state slogans that seem to follow him everywhere. The result is a funny film with a biting undertone that deftly digs at the Soviet urban environment.

Khitruk, however, did not venture nearly as far beyond the status-quo as did Norstein. While Khitruk tended to keep his films within the bounds of lighthearted satire

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in order to temper the critiques he leveled at the regime and thereby remained tenuously under the socialist realist umbrella, Norstein went full-throttle in his defiance of the genre. In addition to his daring approach to content, detailed in the previous section, Norstein also rejected the typical animation technique. *Tale of Tales* represented the crescendo of a new style of animation that Norstein had been developing since the early 1970s. Those readers interested in the details of Norstein’s original technique are strongly encouraged to delve into Kitson’s text, as her expertise in the world of animation shines through in her delineation of what exactly made Norstein’s method unique. For the purpose of this paper, however, the reader needs only a general explanation.

In essence, the Disney-style animated films of the 1950s, as well as most of Khitruk’s films and others of the 1960s, were based in what is known as cel animation. What that entailed was the drawing of each frame on a sheet of celluloid, photographing it, and then flipping through the photos of the frames quickly to give the appearance of movement. This was Disney’s modus operandi until the advent of computer animation in the 1970s. Khitruk and others experimented slightly with this technique in the 1960s by using cutout figures to achieve movement rather than redrawing the figures in each separate frame. But it was Norstein who was the greatest innovator of Soviet animation before 1980. Through some of his early films, especially *The Heron and the Crane* (1974) and *Hedgehog in the Fog* (1975), Norstein perfected a technique whereby he combined elements of cel animation and cutout animation while layering multiple sheets at once to create a textured look to his frames that had never been seen before. His

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165 Khitruk’s *Film Film Film* (1968) is another excellent example of this tendency. The film chides the state for its overly complicated, overly bureaucratic approach to film production, but in an entirely comedic manner that is more charming than seditious.

166 Kitson. pp 30, 43.
signature style gave him versatility in addition to originality, such that he could create environments with entirely different looks (compare, for instance, the dream world and the winter scene) using slight variations on the same technique. Layering also allowed him to achieve sophisticated depth and flexibility in zooming in or out that many contemporary animators would not achieve until switching to computer animation.\footnote{Kitson. pp 40-46.}

Therefore, Norstein’s innovation in the field of animation—when added to his willingness to tackle the big, eternal question of happiness—place *Tale of Tales* squarely in the realm of high culture.

**Tale of Tales and Low Culture Influences**

The status as a piece of high art does not, however, preclude *Tale of Tales* from resonating with the mass population. As hinted throughout this paper, Norstein’s fond tribute to the communal flat of his childhood coincided with a surge of nostalgia among the Russian population for that way of life.\footnote{Kitson. p 9.} Harvard scholar Svetlana Boym, who has written about nostalgia in Europe and the Soviet Union, theorizes that nostalgia is “an intermediary between collective and individual memory.”\footnote{Boym, Svetlana. *The Future of Nostalgia.* New York: Basic Books. 2001. p 54.} In the case of *Tale of Tales*, this certainly seems to have been true. Norstein’s particular memories of his communal flat likely primed his contemporaries who saw the film to recall similar experiences, thereby adding a dimension of collective memory to the viewing experience.

Additionally, *Tale of Tales* relies heavily on a symbol of folk culture that was a unit in what Stites labels the “cultural code” shared among the masses.\footnote{Stites. p 5.} The motifs and

\begin{footnotes}
\item[167] Kitson. pp 40-46.
\item[168] Kitson. p 9.
\item[170] Stites. p 5.
\end{footnotes}
themes that make up this code are those that are repeated throughout low culture, thereby generating some degree of continuity across generations. The little grey wolf that appears in almost every scene of the film, observing the action along with the audience, is a perfect example of such a motif. He would have been immediately recognized as the wolf from a popular lullaby, “The Little Grey Wolf Will Come.” The Russian equivalent of “Rock-a-bye-Baby,” the song had (and still has) cornered the market on bedtime tunes. As if to drive home the association, the nursing mother of the first shot hums the lullaby while the little wolf looks on.171 The wolf is a constant presence throughout the film—watching the furniture of the flat burn, wandering through the illuminated door and into the dream world, and even watching the poet struggle for inspiration in the real world. The film closes with a charming sequence in which the wolf finds the baby crying in the words. Rather than kidnapping the child—as the borderline scary lyrics to the lullaby warn children he will—the wolf acts like an anxious babysitter, rushing the baby back to its cradle and rocking it to sleep. The wolf, then, provides an anchor and a companion for the viewer as he makes his way through the seemingly chaotic jumble of worlds, themes and developments in *Tale of Tales*.

The positive effect of the wolf character, as well as the tones of nostalgia, on mass audiences cannot be underestimated. They were endearing aspects of a film that was otherwise a mystery to many first time viewers. And first time viewers—as well as repeat viewers—arrived in droves to see the film after its premier. Soviet cultural authorities were expectedly less than thrilled with the coup Norstein pulled off in entirely subverting the official socialist realist framework, but when they tried to pull *Tale of Tales* from

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171 Kitson. p 12
theaters, they were forced to back down by a public outcry. *Tale of Tales* first run was over a year long, and it drew waves of ticket sales despite the regime’s ban on a marketing campaign and its effort to discourage Soviet newspapers from reviewing it. Therefore, one can say with certainty that *Tale of Tales* not only defied the socialist realist schema and carved its own path as a work of high art, but it also succeeded with the mass audience. It, like the socialist realist genre, bridged the great cultural divide.

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172 Kitson. pp 3, 111.
Conclusion

A reader might reasonably ask how it is that *Tale of Tales* was able to get past the censors if the cultural authorities were so obviously displeased with final product. The answer, quite simply, is that Norstein left the most offensive parts of the film—such as the winter scene and the clear emphasis on individualism—out of the treatment. Once the authorities realized that the film he made was not exactly the film he had pitched, it was too late to turn back. And so, Norstein accomplished the goal that had been pursued by generations of intelligentsia before him: He transcended the high-low culture dichotomy.

Rather than reiterating the narrative of how high-low divide that developed in the nineteenth century, how the intelligentsia of the nineteenth and early twentieth century developed a moralistic ambition to unite the two poles of Russian culture under a single, high culture, how the Stalinist engineers of socialist realism finally achieved that goal by incorporating low culture tastes into their political-cultural project, and how Norstein also achieved that goal in a very different manner, this writer will close with this reflection: Norstein’s classic film, unlike the socialist realist framework, did not justify terror. It did not shroud human rights abuses and economic abuses under an optimistic veneer. It accomplished the unity of the two cultural Russias without destroying any culture that had come before it. If any reader harbors doubt that Norstein’s method of bridging the cultural divide was greatly preferable to that of socialist realism, this writer encourages him to watch the film for himself. Norstein’s success demonstrated irrefutably that the closing of the cultural gap can be achieved in a non-destructive manner by allowing for the development of bridges—like *Tale of Tales*—on a micro-level rather than by forcefully creating a sweeping, universally unifying culture.

173 Kitson, p 111.
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