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Maya Balakirsky Katz. *Drawing the Iron Curtain: Jews and the Golden Age of Soviet Animation.* New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2016. Illustrations. xi + 289 pp. \$37.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8135-7662-6; \$120.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8135-7701-2.

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Maya Balakirsky Katz's *Drawing the Iron Curtain: Jews and the Golden Age of Soviet Animation* is a noteworthy contribution to such disparate fields as animation history, Soviet cultural history, and Jewish studies, the author's primary disciplinary affiliation. The book is significant as the most recent effort to expand English-language scholarship about the history of Soviet animation, a subject that deserves more attention and has been covered in only a handful of English-language books, including David MacFadyen's *Yellow Crocodiles and Blue Oranges: Russian Animated Film since World War Two* (2005), Laura Pontieri's *Soviet Animation and the Thaw of the 1960s: Not Only for Children* (2012), and Clare Kitson's *Yuri Norstein and Tale of Tales: An Animator's Journey* (2005), a study of Soviet animation's single best-known auteur.

Katz's primary aim is to provide an account of the role that Jewish animators, scriptwriters, composers, and other participants in the filmmaking process played in creating the output of Soyuzmultfilm, the Soviet Union's largest and most prolific animation studio. She analyzes a large corpus of films, both iconic and lesser known, rooting her analysis in Soviet social history and, to a lesser extent, the context of international animation. Her approach, however, is ambitious because the book considers Soyuzmultfilm's output from the studio's founding in 1936. Thus, even though it is not meant to be an overview of the studio's oeuvre, the book offers a useful survey of Soyuzmultfilm's history and accomplishments. However, the book's focus means that one has to wonder how many significant contributions and developments were left outside the frame because they were not made

by Jews and why certain iconic films by Jewish directors, for example, the inimitable *Winnie-the-Pooh* (*Vinni-Pukh* [1969]), get no mention. Another one of the book's strengths is its use of sources. Katz draws on archival research (for example, the minutes of the studio's Artistic Council meetings), which allows insight into the studio's day-to-day creative process, technological innovations, administrative structures, and power dynamics, as do the first-person accounts collected through interviews with studio veterans. What emerges from these sources, as well as readings of the films themselves, calls into question Cold War era clichés about the hegemony of socialist realism and top-down aesthetic mandates permeating Soviet cultural life.

Katz's work shows how a significant number of creative people, many of them marginalized because of their ethnic background, class origins, or gender, worked around the edges of the Soviet system's conservative views on art and found a notable degree of creative control—a structural observation that demonstrates the importance of examining “minor” art forms. Similarly, Katz offers a methodological role model by looking closely at what was undeniably state sponsored work and by implicitly questioning the validity of any clean divisions of Soviet culture into “official” and “unofficial” (p. 21). She similarly provides nuance on the issue of censorship: “even a brief recounting of the ... constituencies that laid claim to editing rights ... dispels the notion of a centralized body making informed decisions of national importance” (p. 24).

Her primary argument, however, is that unlike So-

viet live action cinema, which provided few representations of the Soviet Jewish experience, Soyuzmultfilm attracted a “disproportionate number of artists and technicians from Jewish backgrounds,” whose presence brought animation “as close to Jewish integration as any Soviet cultural industry achieved during the entirety of the Cold War” (pp. 2, 4). “Although they aimed to create technically and aesthetically sophisticated national films,” she writes, “Soyuzmultfilm animators also significantly engaged Jewish material” or “Jewish themes,” disproving the “staid image of a Russo-centric Soviet culture” (a construct that struck me as a straw man), proving that there was “Jewish culture” in the USSR and that Soviet Jews were neither invisible nor silent (pp. 3, 5).

It is undeniably noteworthy that Jews, who contended with state-sponsored anti-Semitism in the USSR in the postwar period, worked in significant numbers at the country’s flagship animation studio. Yet the conclusions Katz draws about this fact raise more questions than they answer. Because the author cherry-picks her Jewish protagonists, it never becomes clear what proportion of the studio’s staff they made up and how ethnically diverse the studio was on the whole—a question whose answer might reframe Soyuzmultfilm as a haven for a variety of minorities and marginalized people.

Even more important, the book does not clearly articulate the set of uniquely “Jewish themes” on which it bases its argument, aside from the shared trauma of the Holocaust, which was amplified in the USSR by the refusal to acknowledge the special targeting of Jews. As a reader from outside Jewish studies, I wished that the author would have engaged with the “tedious if heated” debate about the meaning of the term “Jewish artist” (p. 6). Instead, Katz leaves one wondering how this amorphous entity can become the basis for the book’s premise. Moreover, Katz’s construction of Jewishness serves her present-day ideological needs but directly contradicts her protagonists’ statements on how they themselves understood their identity. In several instances, they state that their own and others’ Jewish heritage was *not* central to their artistic pursuits, even if everyone knew the ethnic roots of the people around them, a trait that was characteristic of *all* Soviet citizens.

Katz believes that engaging in such denials was a specifically Jewish problem within the Soviet system, a core part of the Jewish experience. She suggests that denial of one’s identity does not erase it and seeks to show that her subjects’ Jewishness can be discerned in their sublimations of their biographies within the narra-

tive arcs and symbolism of their work. If these claims were borne out by her readings of the films, they would, indeed, offer deep insight. Yet Katz’s insistence on the centrality in the films of a distinctive yet largely invisible Jewish identity results mostly in interpretive overreach. In the process, the selectivity of her focus on Jewish members of large filmmaking crews ignores or denies the agency of the non-Jews who shaped the films during the team-based creative process that, by Katz’s own account, was central to the studio’s success.

The book contains eight chapters, arranged largely in chronological order. With the exception of the first one, each chapter is concerned with films that serve as case studies in the “construction of Jewishness that [Soyuzmultfilm] employees developed ... and that informed the reception of their work” (p. 25). Thus, chapter 1, “Behind the Scenes,” offers an introduction and periodization of the history of Soviet animation and Soyuzmultfilm, weaving in an overview of Jewish participation in both. The chapter highlights the importance of “horizontal structures” of informal social relationships, significant for the big Jewish presence at the studio (p. 31). It also discusses the revealing episode of the fight against *Disneevshchina* (i.e., an infatuation with a Disney-inspired visual style), which captures how Soviet citizens harnessed changing political winds to solve personal problems but does not actually demonstrate that such political opportunism was used at Soyuzmultfilm exclusively to target Jews. This chapter also reveals the book’s main shortcoming: identifying as distinctly Jewish issues of wide relevance to Soviet citizens from numerous ethnic backgrounds and backing such claims with meager evidence. The only film discussed in detail in this chapter is Dziga Vertov’s *Soviet Toys* (*Sovetskie igrushki* [1924]) of which Katz writes, “Locating the techniques and styles of these animators in Russian modernism does not preclude their engagement with Jewish-inflected material... Vertov and [Alexander] Bushkin expose the evil nature of the allegorical ‘NEP-Man’ through ... social ills that specifically reflected the Jewish collective experience in the Pale of Settlement, such as abuses of the Church, dangers of alcoholism, and the persecution of minorities” (p. 34). Calling these concerns “Jewish-inflected” seems dubious; in 1924, they more likely revealed the animators’ loyalty to uncompromising war communism. Katz goes on to argue that the film’s figure of the “Movie-Man,” who has “camera lenses for eyes and a propeller for a mouth,” is “a heroic portrait of ... Trotsky” (p. 34). Since this is the “Movie-Man,” his mouth was likely meant to be a film reel. More important, there is no evidence that he

was modeled on Leon Trotsky, to whom he bears only passing resemblance. Katz's improbable reading here is the first of many that put into question the validity of her larger argument.

Chapter 2, "Black and White: Race in Soviet Animation," details the history of *Black and White* (*Blek and uait*), a 1932 animated short about racism in the United States that was created after a bigger live action project fell apart. Katz argues that the short played an important role in establishing animation as independent art form and that it allowed its makers to draw parallels between "the Jewish question" and American racism. She relates the story of the arrival in Moscow of African Americans who planned to take part in the making of a film about racism in the US. The project fell through due to irreconcilable creative differences between the American and Soviet participants, and the animated short was made to recuperate the whole effort in the eyes of the Soviet studio. Katz's discussion of the Soviet concept of "narodnost'" (p. 66)—an understanding of race and ethnicity as a "nationality" defined by both biological and cultural characteristics—is enlightening in explaining how the Soviets and the Americans grasped identity through different sociological frameworks. Yet the author's reading of the film does not sustain the argument that the representation of racism in *Black and White*, conceived by two non-Jewish directors, drew parallels between American racism and the Jewish question. The strongest argument the author provides is that *Black and White* had a score (ultimately not used in the film!) by the Jewish composer Grigorii Gamburg, who *in other contexts* conducted Jewish music. She attributes to the composer a treatment of African American racial identity as *narodnost'* but does not clarify how this would mean that the film implicitly addressed "the Jewish question."

Chapter 3, "The Brumberg Sisters: The Fairy Grandmothers of Soviet Animation," discusses the long careers of sisters Zinaida and Valentina Brumberg, who in the late 1940s, according to Katz, ran a directors' group that hired underemployed creatives, many of them Jewish, struggling after the lively interwar avant-garde theater scene they'd been part of fell into official disfavor. Noting that the sisters' father was an ardent Zionist and promoter of Jewish culture, Katz more persuasively than before interprets *The Samoyed Boy* (*Samoedskii mal'chik* [1928]) and other later films as sensitive depictions of "dozens of ethnic characters" who experience "exploitation, migration, and acculturation" (p. 81). The great strength of this chapter lies in its discussion of the way the sisters navigated the studio's division of the work-

force into permanent employees and freelancers (*shtatnye i vneshtatnye*). Katz offers insight into the network of support that the Brumbergs built for persecuted people from various artistic milieus (writers, composers, actors) to remain active on the fringes of official arts funding. In the discussion of staffing at the studio, Katz cites compelling accounts of anti-Semitic prejudice (Jews were rarely hired to be permanent employees) and of the ways Jews tacitly fought prejudice by hiring other Jews. Yet without a fuller picture of the ethnic makeup of the entire staff, it is difficult to ascertain if the prejudice Jews experienced was exclusive to them or part of a larger and more complicated pattern. The film discussed in this chapter, *Fedya Zaitsev* (1948), is an example of how at the height of socialist realism's dominance, animators were able to recuperate the modernist idea that "art is entitled to its own reality" (p. 90). Yet while I was fully persuaded of the Meyerholdian roots of *Fedya Zaitsev*, it was hard to see how the production of the cartoon might have "dove-tailed" in any direct way "with the 'Zionist' activism" of the Brumbergs' father (p. 95).

Chapter 4 looks at three individual films and one series that, according to the author, show how Jewish animators with roots in the Pale of Settlement translated their experience of big-city life into film. Here again Katz's discussion of a larger theme—the effects of rapid urbanization that started in the 1960s—is limited rather than enriched by her focus on a supposedly unique Jewish experience. This is the case with her discussion of *The End of the Black Morass* (*Konets chernoi topi* [1960]), a film made by two ethnically Russian directors interested in reviving the art of puppet animation. Katz inexplicably sees the story's protagonists, supernatural beings from Russian folklore who speak in a distinctly Slavic rural idiom, as stand-ins for "shtetl-dwelling archetypes" (dis)placed into large cities (p. 105). As evidence, Katz selectively cites records of Artistic Council discussions, arguing that Jewish members of the council used the studio's censorship mechanism to improve the representation of the characters with whom they identified. The author's reading of the film is built again on flimsy conjecture and misses an opportunity to produce a more compelling analysis of urbanization as an experience that shaped the lives of millions of Soviets from highly varied backgrounds. In her analysis of *Just You Wait!* (*Nu, pogodi!*), an episodic series that was Soyuzmultfilm's most popular product between 1969 and 1989, Katz similarly looks for Jewish experience despite her own information suggesting that urban relationships shaped by class, rather than ethnic origin, were the filmmakers'

central concern and the reason for the cartoons' popularity.

Chapter 5 continues to examine some of Soyuzmultfilm's most iconic output—cartoons about Cheburashka, a beloved bear-like creature. Katz shows that the predominantly Jewish creative team behind Cheburashka conceived of him as the ultimate outsider who elicits sympathy because he remains innocent in the face of a world that rejects and belittles him. (The themes of the “little man” and “unwanted man” so central to Russian literature also come to mind here but do not get a mention in the book.) One could compellingly argue that for Cheburashka's creators, the larger *attitude* of siding with marginalized members of society was a Jewish one, informed by the tragedies and indignities faced by Soviet Jews, as exemplified by the biographies of Roman Kachanov and Leonid Shvartsman, two key members of the team that created Cheburashka. Instead, Katz wants to map Jewish connections onto every possible plot point. Too much is made of the fact that Cheburashka first comes out of a crate used for oranges, and the author's literalism reaches its apotheosis with the justification of why Crocodile Gena, Cheburashka's best friend, might also be Jewish: “Crocodile Gena's African roots speak to his status as a member of the ancient Hebrew race. [He] is a sell-out: an old Party Jew who walks around with a pipe dangling from his mouth but without a pair of pants to show for all his compromises” (p. 133). This chapter also raises the questions of audience and reception, that is, for whose benefit were the elaborate Jewish narratives that Katz extrapolates constructed and whether they registered with a broad audience. Even when Katz demonstrates that Jewish animators, largely anonymous in the eyes of the public, sometimes engaged in subtle dog-whistling to fellow Jews, she leaves unaddressed why their stories appealed to a broad spectrum of Soviet viewers.

Chapter 6 gathers together four animated films that Katz argues engage with the history of the Holocaust and “insist on the Jewish presence” in the face of the Holocaust being ignored in mainstream Soviet cinema, leaving us to “look to animation to see the Soviet Holocaust film” (pp. 188, 154). The interpretation of the 1949 film *Polkan and Shavka* as a condemnation of citizen collaboration with Nazis struck me as improbable. Two of the four films discussed, *The Pioneer's Violin* (*Skripka pionera* [1971]) and *Story of a Doll* (*Istoriia odnoi kukly* [1984]), undeniably deal with stories of the Holocaust, though neither explicitly references Jews as victims, raising again the question of how actual audiences would

have received the films. The most bewildering film discussed in this chapter is *A Lesson Not Learned* (*Urok ne vprok* [1971]), for which the legendary Soviet political cartoonist Boris Efimov wrote the script and provided much of the art. Katz demonstrates that this film centers images by Jewish makers as essential to the Soviet visual narratives of the Great Patriotic War but glosses over the film's shameless propagandizing of the Berlin Wall. Efimov is a complicated figure; his personal story was as tragic as much of his work was morally odious. While that work deserves scholarly attention, Katz's celebration of Efimov as a proud Jewish artist is a tone-deaf misreading of the complexities and ethical ambiguities of the Soviet Jewish experience.

Chapter 7 deals with the appearance in the '60s and '70s of a new formalist animation, including films by directors Andrey Khrzhanovsky and Yuri Norstein, that created what Katz calls a “fresh vision of Slavic Jewish heritage” by looking at the legacy of the historic avant-gardes (p. 26). Katz, therefore, looks for the “identification of Jewish themes in the retro trends of the 1960s,” even as the nature of those “Jewish themes” remains elusive beyond allusions to art made by ethnic Jews who, by Katz's own admission, strove toward universality in their art (p. 191). In a deeply problematic generalization, Katz conflates Soviet avant-gardism, dissent, and Jewishness, rooting her analysis in a single frame of Khrzhanovsky's *There Once Was Kozyavin* (*Zhil-byt Kozyavin* [1966]).

Finally, chapter 8 examines Jewish identity in *Tale of Tales* (*Skazka skazok* [1979]), the masterpiece made by Norstein, the most defiantly auteurist filmmaker in Soyuzmultfilm's history. A close reading of a single film, this chapter is more compelling because Katz identifies a broader message—a call for viewers to examine their preconceived prejudices—and links this as a general sensibility to Norstein's biography and his personal experiences with anti-Semitism. This chapter is also useful methodologically because it discusses the strategic deployment of Jewish identity by Norstein for political reasons—a counterbalance to the book's otherwise essentializing idea of Jewishness.

Throughout, I was torn between appreciation of the book's insights on an underexplored topic and frustration with the Jewish exceptionalism that leads in its lopsided representation of the Soviet Jewish experience, further marred by errors in transliterations and translations from the Russian. One hopes that Katz's book will inspire others to pursue further research into Soviet animation, to examine more comprehensively how animation grap-

pled with the USSR's ethnic diversity, and to heed the testimony of animators about the ways they achieved a remarkable degree of creative freedom—an accomplishment that, if framed more inclusively, would illuminate how the pursuit of artistic self-expression functioned in both unofficial and official Soviet culture.

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