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CULTURAL AND SPATIAL DIMENSIONS OF ANIMATION FROM THE USSR AND THE EASTERN BLOC TO INDEPENDENT EURASIA

SSCB VE DOĞU BLOKU'NDAN BAĞIMSIZ AVRASYA'YA ANİMASYONUN KÜLTÜREL VE MEKÂNSAL BOYUTLARI

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ÖZET
Bu makale, Soğuk Savaş Dönemi'nden bağımsız Avrasya ülkelerinin ortaya çıkışına kadar animasyonun bölgede kültürel ve mekânsal boyutlarını incelemektedir. Teknolojik yenilik ve estetik ifadenin melez ve çağdaş bir aracı olarak animasyon, her iki dönemde de bölgedeki ideolojik söylemleri yansıtmakla kalmamış, aynı zamanda didaktik amaçlara hizmet etmiş, kültürel bir araç ve yumuşak güç kaynağı haline gelmiştir.
Soğuk Savaş döneminde animasyon Doğu Bloku ülkelerindeki toplumsal yaşam tarafından şekillendirilmiştir. Animasyonlar mekan ekseninde bazen ütopya, bazen de distopyalar kurgulamışlardır. Ayrıca teknik ve sanatsal anlayış bağlamında öncül örnekler de ortaya koymuşlardır. Paylaşılan anlatı dili ve imgeler kolektif bir kimliği karakterize ederken, öznel stiller ve özgün yaklaşımlar da sergilenmiştir. Bu dönemin dezavantajı nitelikli örneklerin Dünya'ya açılmasında yaşanan gecikmedir.
Sovyet sonrası dönemin ilk on yılında devlet sübvansiyonlarının eksikliği üretim sürecine sekte vurmuştur. Ancak akabinde animasyon ulusal kimliğin inşasında animasyon önemli rol oynamıştır. Bağımsızlıktan sonra, folklorik unsurlar, küresel ürünler, kurgusal mekanlar ve Auteurlar ön plana çıkmıştır. Sonuç olarak, bu çalışma animasyonun kültürel belleğin görsel bir arşivi işlevi gördüğünü göstermektedir.
Anahtar Kelimeler: Animasyon, Kültür, Mekân, SSCB, Doğu Bloku, Sovyet Sonrası Bağımsız Avrasya

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the cultural and spatial dimensions of animation in the region from the Cold War to the emergence of independent Eurasian countries. As a hybrid and contemporary medium of technological innovation and aesthetic expression, animation not only reflected ideological discourses in the region in both periods but also served didactic purposes, becoming a cultural tool and source of soft power.

During the Cold War, animation was shaped by the social life of the Eastern Bloc countries. Animations sometimes constructed utopias and sometimes dystopias within their spatial framework. They also presented pioneering examples in terms of technical and artistic understanding. Shared narrative language and imagery characterized a collective identity, while subjective styles and unique approaches were also showcased. A disadvantage of this period was the delay in the emergence of qualified examples to the world.

In the first decade of the post-Soviet era, a lack of state subsidies hampered the production process. However, animation subsequently played a significant role in the construction of national identity. After independence, folkloric elements, global products, fictional settings, and auteurs came to the fore. In conclusion, this study demonstrates that animation functions as a visual archive of cultural memory.

Keywords: Animation, Culture, Space, USSR, Eastern Bloc, Post-Soviet Independent Eurasia

1.INTRODUCTION

Animation, a time-based representational medium that creates the illusion of movement through the sequencing of still images, has been central to both cultural expression and ideological discourse (Wells, 1998; Furniss, 2008). While animation generally produced commercial products in the West, it established a state-funded political, pedagogical, didactic, artistic, and experimental identity in the USSR and other Eastern Bloc countries. It also played a significant role in the construction of national cultural identity in independent Eurasia. This article examines the Eurasian perspective on animation art following the dissolution of the Eastern Bloc and the Soviet Union during the Cold War, and the changes and transformations that occurred during this period, through a comparative perspective on culture and space. Because the subject matter is so broad, the study presents a dimensional perspective. The examples cited in this study were selected randomly based on their qualities. Following common expressive languages and regional characteristics, the study narrows its scope by focusing on Russia in the context of globalization, Czechoslovakia in the context of authenticity, and Uzbekistan in the context of cultural traditionalization in contemporary animation.

Animation can be defined as a representational art form based on time and fictional space, creating the illusion of movement and transformation by rapidly sequencing static images, drawings, puppets, clay sculptures, or digital frames. As Wells (1998) emphasized, animation goes beyond the mere mechanical reproduction of movement; it constructs a synthetic spatial reality in which imagination, symbolism, and abstraction coexist. Unlike live-action cinematography, which records a pre-existing reality, animation expands the possibilities of visual expression by creating its own space of movement, temporality, and narrative (Furniss, 2008). In this sense, animation functions as both an aesthetic and a cognitive system; it is one of the mediums through which the human mind externalizes memory, dreams, and mythological structures (Bendazzi, 2016). In the production of works of fantasy, seriousness, politics, didacticism, and epic genres, fictional settings and fictional characters are also the most influential components that define each other in an art work.

According to Taşkıran (Taşkıran, 2019), animation “redefines space through the rhythm of motion, thereby transforming narrative into a dynamic architectural experience.” Similarly, Özkan (Özkan, 2021) argues that the animated image functions as a site of cultural negotiation, mediating between tradition and modernity, particularly in post-socialist and Eurasian visual cultures.

Furthermore, Yavuz (Yavuz, 2018) emphasizes that animation's potential lies in its interdisciplinary capacity—bridging design, communication, and cultural studies—thus making it an essential tool for understanding contemporary visual culture and spatial perception. The creative manipulation of time and space in animation, therefore, becomes a visual language of transformation, allowing cultural narratives to be reconstructed within various frameworks.

Within the context of media theory, animation has been positioned as a fundamental component of digital culture. Manovich (Manovich, 2001) argues that contemporary digital media, ranging from cinema and virtual reality to user interfaces, have been profoundly shaped by the principles of animation in that the manipulation of images over time forms the basis of digital representation. Therefore, animation operates at the intersection of art, technology, and communication, functioning both as a technical process (e.g., frame-by-frame processing with traditional hand-drawn, stop-motion, or computer-generated imagery) and as a cultural practice of meaning-making (Lasseter, 1987). Therefore, in academic discourse, animation can be understood as a hybrid medium that combines technological innovation with aesthetic expression, enabling the creation of movement, transformation, and storytelling in ways that affect audiences cognitively, emotionally, and culturally. Through this hybrid medium, emotions and thoughts find a way to express themselves through multiple media.

As Monaco (Monaco,2001) notes, there is a reciprocal and dynamic relationship between architecture and cinema; both disciplines share a shared interest in the conceptualization, organization, and experience of space. Within this continuum, animation, while a relatively recent addition to the spectrum of artistic and cinematic expression, has emerged as a powerful medium for spatial exploration. Unlike live-action cinema, animation constructs its spatial realities entirely through design, composition, and imagination, thus transcending the physical limitations of built environments. The spatial framework of the animated world is not limited by material constraints; instead, it is shaped by the design vocabulary and aesthetic perception of its creator(s). This creative autonomy allows animated spaces to be characterized as performative, emotional, and symbolic artistic products rather than merely representational backdrops. Cinema is one of the most influential fields pioneering the integration of these developments, which initially emerged as design ideas or conceptual insights, into everyday life. Cinema not only visualizes abstract design concepts but also transforms speculative ideas into spatial and emotional experiences accessible to the public. By synthesizing narrative and technology, visual design serves as a bridge between imagination and reality, shaping how societies perceive innovation, aesthetics, and the future of their human environment (Kavut, 2020) (Türkmen&Kavut, 2021) A space can evolve into a living organism by bringing together and accommodating numerous values that belong to life and the act of living itself. These values emerge through the dynamic interrelations established between the human beings inhabiting space and the surrounding environment. In this sense, spatial identity is not a fixed construct, but a synthesis shaped by human experience, environmental context, and the cultural meanings attributed to the act of dwelling (Eke&Fitoz, 2006).

In this sense, space within animation is more than just a backdrop; it becomes an active narrative tool that defines character identity, articulates cultural context, and conveys ideological meaning. Architectural elements such as proportion, scale, and light are reinterpreted in animation to evoke psychological and emotional resonance. Similarly, the spatial syntax of animated environments can reflect or distort actual architectural typologies, creating atmospheres simultaneously familiar and fantastic. With its hybrid identity, oscillating between visual art and cinematic experience, animation creates immersive spatial narratives that engage the viewer not only visually but also phenomenologically. This spatial dynamism enhances the storytelling process, positioning animation as both an artistic and architectural practice that embodies the invisible dimensions of imagination and cultural expression.

During the Cold War (approximately 1945-1991), animation in the Soviet Union and other Eastern Bloc countries was based on the definition and promotion of state ideology, cultural policies, projects, didactic and educational elements, folkloric motifs, satire, social norms and moral values, and social responsibilities. In this context, animation served both as a medium of cultural expression and as an ideological educational tool. The focus was on depicting traditional spaces, folkloric details, the operating principles of the region's leading public institutions and organizations, the living space and daily life carried out in this area, and the built environment of all these.

The Soviet Union was at the forefront of animation art during this period. Founded in the Soviet Union in 1936, the Soyuzmultfilm studio became the main center of animation for the entire region. As Bendazzi (2016) notes, the studio served not only as an industrial hub but also as an ideological and aesthetic core that shaped the animation culture of the entire Eastern Bloc. Iconic works such as Nu, Pogodi! (1969–) and Yuri Norstein's Hedgehog in the Fog (Yozhik v tumane, 1975) combined moral allegories, folkloric motifs, and poetic visual language. These works reflected a synthesis of Eastern Bloc art, cognition, ethics, and pedagogy, conceived as tools for both education and moral development while also offering subtle reflections on imagination, melancholy, and existentialist crisis.

Another notable example is the achievements of Czech animators, whose achievements have attracted global attention. In Czechoslovakia, animator Jiří Trnka has become a prominent figure, achieving international recognition for his unique expressive language and mastery. His 1965 film Ruka, demonstrating a profound artistic sensitivity while utilizing critical political allegory, marked a turning point in the history of puppet animation and contributed to the creation of fictional settings for puppet animation. Another notable Czech animator, Zdeněk Miler, created the beloved Krtek (Little Mole) series, which premiered at the 1957 Venice Film Festival. Spanning both the socialist and post-socialist eras, Krtek ran from 1957 to 2002, becoming one of the longest-running animated series in European history, symbolizing continuity amidst ideological transformations. In Hungary, Pannonia Film Studio played a pioneering role in reinterpreting folklore in modern and experimental forms. In his masterpiece, Fehérlófia (Son of the White Mare, 1981), animator Marcell Jankovics combined mythological archetypes with psychedelic visual narratives to create a symbolic mythology of national identity and collective memory. Similarly, in Yugoslavia, the Zagreb School of Animation emerged as both an artistic and academic movement emphasizing minimalist design, abstraction, and philosophical depth. The Zagreb School redefined animation as an avant-garde form capable of critical thinking and visual experimentation. Works such as Ersatz (The Spare, 1958), by Dušan Vukotić, also a cartoonist, became one of the school's most recognizable figures on the global stage, becoming the first non-American animated film to receive an Academy Award.

When these regional schools are considered together, it can be safely said that animation in the USSR and other Eastern Bloc countries was multifaceted, appreciated by local artistic authorities, and exhibited unique styles and approaches that contributed to world cinema. Moral didacticism, symbolic folklore, and myths formed an aesthetic vocabulary based on spatial imagination; these elements laid a strong foundation for subsequent eras. This artistic legacy influenced the conceptual and stylistic forms with which independent Eurasian nations constructed their contemporary animation cultures. As these newly independent countries reinterpreted their cultural narratives after 1991, animation became a crucial tool for revitalizing national identity, collective space, and cultural memory in a rapidly evolving geopolitical environment. In this context, the powerful legacy of cultural heritage is effectively built upon.

Eastern Bloc countries produced works of considerable artistic value in many disciplines, including fine arts, visual arts, literature, music, and cinema. However, due to the region's closed cultural identity policy, the region's artistic value only became globalized after the collapse of the USSR.

Although the dissolution of the Soviet Union officially occurred in 1991, signs of disintegration had already begun to appear as early as 1988, marked by issues such as rising unemployment and problems in income distribution. (Akyol and the others, 2011). The most negative impact of the USSR's collapse on animation was the decline in state subsidies. In their early years, the newly established independent states prioritized the construction of vital issues over the construction of artistic identities. This led to structural economic crises focused on funding in their animation industries. However, independent Eurasian countries quickly regained their capacity for original contributions and artistic expression. In this context, Russia played a central role, achieving significant success with both auteur animation examples such as Aleksandr Petrov's The Old Man and the Sea (1999) and global commercial projects such as Masha and the Bear (2009). While animators like Priit Pärn in the Baltic states cultivated surrealist and grotesque traditions, Central Asian animation used narratives as a tool for nation-building, tradition, and cultural diplomacy. Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan have revived folklore-based storytelling through animated short films, often with NGO's and UNESCO support (Shlapentokh, 2007; Dobrowska, 2015). In the Caucasus region, which lags behind other regions in animation, religious and local motifs can be observed.
Like all forms of artistic expression, animation has undergone various changes and transformations over time. The historical process of change and transformation in animation can be examined in six distinct periods: Early Movement Experiments (Pre-20th Century), Foundations of Silent Cinema (1900-1920s), Golden Age of Animation (1930-1950s), Technological Diversification (1960-1980s), Digital Transformation (1990-2000s), and Contemporary Era (2010-Present).

2. METHODOLOGY

The methodological approach adopted in this study can be described as a qualitative comparative cultural and spatial analysis that integrates elements of historical contextualization, semiotic film interpretation, and spatial discourse analysis. This method allows for a detailed examination of how animation as a cultural product reflects ideological transformations, spatial identities, and aesthetic shifts spanning the USSR and the Eastern Bloc to independent Eurasia. Using a comparative framework, the research systematically explores the interaction between political ideology, visual language, and spatial imagination across diverse historical periods and cultural contexts.
The approach is based on qualitative research that emphasizes interpretative depth rather than quantitative generalization and aims to reveal how cultural narratives and visual immersions contribute to the construction of collective memory and post-Soviet identity within Eurasian animation traditions. The examples presented in this research are randomly selected from works representing artistic significance (award-winning, unique, or pioneering) and their creators.
Due to the broad scope of the research, periods and locations are categorized according to their subjective and general characteristics. Challenges encountered include a lack of international archives and databases on the subject, language barriers and translation issues, and a lack of knowledge of past examples. Therefore, this study also attempts to identify keywords that researchers may need for future studies.

3. ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

The study examines, within a historical and comparative framework, how animated films spatially structure and transform the shifting cultural identities and socio-political contexts of their respective eras. The findings reveal that animation plays a dual role in spatialization, both as a political tool and as an artistic practice, with lasting impacts on global visual culture. For example, Cheburashka, a highly acclaimed film first in the USSR and then in Russia, has become a global art object, possessing both national iconicity and global cultural symbolism. The concept of the "Historical City" holds a central position within cultural tourism studies. Therefore, the analysis of urban narratives and spatial representations in animated works plays a critical role in enhancing a city's cultural visibility and tourist potential.

By interpreting the city as both a symbolic and experiential construct, such analyses contribute to understanding how animation can function as a tool for cultural communication, heritage interpretation, and urban identity formation (Beşir and the others, 2022).

3.1 HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF ANIMATION

In Early Experiments in Motion, one of the earliest finds related to early experiments in motion is a pot in the Tehran Museum, which bears images depicting objects animating through rotation. However, the roots of modern animation can be traced back to pre-cinematic devices such as the zoetrope (1834), the phenakistoscope (1832), and the praxinoscope (1877), as well as devices such as the kinetoscope (1891). The first animation efforts emerged during the Silent Era (1900–1920s) to explore the potential of drawn animation. Examples from this period include Émile Cohl's Fantasmagorie (1908), Winsor McCay's Gertie the Dinosaur (1914), and the first feature-length animated film, The Adventures of Prince Ahmed (1926).

The Golden Age of Animation (1930s–1950s) marked the beginning of the institutionalization of animation and its use as a mass medium. The Walt Disney Studios is one of the most well-known examples. During the Era of Technological Diversification (1960s–1980s), television became the primary platform for animation. Hanna-Barbera's pioneering television series, including The Flintstones (1960) and The Jetsons (1962), served as key examples of the era, and these works continue to shape the global market for numerous design objects. The Digital Transformation (1990s–2000s) marked a period in which computer-aided imaging (CGI) transformed animation practices.

All efforts made by living beings driven by survival such as finding food, seeking shelter, hiding from danger, and communicating—can be interpreted as a form of play. (From a broader perspective, these instinctual actions embody the fundamental dynamics of interaction between organisms and their environment. They represent a natural, spontaneous, adaptive play in which every species participates. In this sense, play is not merely a human or recreational concept but a universal behavioral strategy reflecting creativity, learning, and the constant negotiation between life and its environment (Canli & Demirarslan, 2020) Pixar's first fully CGI feature film, Toy Story (1995), marked a significant turning point. Today, animation is a hybrid, cross-platform art form encompassing film, television, video games, VR/AR, advertising, and digital interfaces.

3.2 ANIMATION IN THE EASTERN BLOC IN COLD WAR ERA

During the Cold War, animation in Eastern Bloc countries, while profoundly shaped by ideological directives and state-sponsored production systems, also became fertile ground for creative artistic innovation. Within the centralized structure of Soyuzmultfilm (founded in 1936) and its satellite studios in the Soviet republics, animators reinterpreted political ideals through allegory, folklore, and surrealist symbolism. Despite censorship, filmmakers from the region—such as Yuri Norstein in Russia (The Hedgehog in the Fog, 1975), Jiří Trnka and Zdeněk Miler in Czechoslovakia, and Béla Ternovszky in Hungary—developed distinctive languages that visually transcended borders.

Similar developments occurred in the Baltic and Central Asian republics, where animation became a subtle vehicle for cultural identity. In the Baltics, directors such as Priit Pärn and Rein Raamat (Estonia) employed absurdism and expressionist designs, while Arnolds Burovs (Latvia) and Ilja Bereznickas (Lithuania) combined national folklore with experimental aesthetics. In Central Asia, studios such as Uzbekfilm (Tashkent) and Kazakhfilm (Almaty) localized animation through regional myths and nomadic symbolism; Soviet pedagogy was blended with local storytelling traditions, as seen in Rauf Adaletov's Once Upon a Time in the Desert (1986) and Anuarbek Nurpeisov's Aldar Köse series.

Common themes within the bloc were ideology, morality, education, folklore, tradition, experimentation, and allegory. Many works conveyed messages about collectivism, morality, and human values.

Furthermore, didactic stories were designed to contribute to children's education and the development of virtuous individuals. Folktales, legends, and traditional literature were frequently used as sources linking national identity to cultural heritage. Compared to Western commercial animation, the Eastern Bloc generally embraced avant-garde forms, surrealism, expressionism, and satire as core themes. While censorship was widespread, state subsidies facilitated the emergence of many new techniques and independent themes.

During the Cold War, animation in the Eastern Bloc can be interpreted as a narrative form that reconstructed the shared spatial sensibility of architecture and cinema. Within the central structure of Soyuzmultfilm, animated space functioned simultaneously as a site of ideological organization and an artistic space. Artists such as Yuri Norstein, in his work Hedgehog in the Fog (1975), transformed the forest into a timeless, atmospheric landscape, using it as a space of uncertainty and introspection that aligned with architectural concepts of permeability and depth.

In many examples, natural beauty and natural heritage were depicted as exterior spaces. For example, Deněk Miller's Little Mole series reimagines pastoral landscapes as utopian refugees of innocence and freedom. In Jiří Trnka's The Hand (1965), the puppet's enclosed room transformed into a surveillance and existential interior, contributing to the development of puppet animation spaces. Similarly, Béla Ternovszky's Cat City (1986) reflected the alienation of modernity by reconstructing the urban fabric as a dystopian network of neon-lit corridors and mechanized perspectives. In the Baltic republics, filmmakers like Priit Pärn and Rein Raamat created "cultural memory spaces" through deformation, abstraction, and mythological topographies, opting for grotesque and darker imagery. In Central Asia, studios like Uzbekfilm and Kazakhfilm localized animation through nomadic symbols and regional cosmologies. For example, Rauf Adaletov's Once Upon a Time in the Desert (1986) depicted the desert not as a geographical void but as a transformative, liminal space between identity and memory. At the same time, he designed spaces like town squares and markets within a traditional understanding. Consequently, in Eastern Bloc animation, space transcends its decorative function and becomes an active vehicle of meaning, presenting an ideological, aesthetic, and phenomenological structure that reveals how architectural thought evolved into a cinematic practice that imagined the world in a regional and extraordinary way,

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Eastern Bloc animation not only achieved regional prominence but also left a legacy in world cinema. Its freedom from commercial imperatives and state-sponsored experimentation allowed animators to explore form, rhythm, and narrative with a unique sense of visual poetry. The result was a body of work that not only reflected Cold War cultural policies but also anticipated the aesthetics of postmodern animation. Today, many of these films are considered masterpieces of both animation and visual art. From Tallinn to Tashkent, the echoes of regional voices are clear in the global animation landscape. Eastern Bloc animation also played a significant role in the development of techniques such as puppet animation and stop motion. The table below provides a comparative classification of the countries within the Eastern Bloc, based on the shared and divergent characteristics observed in the cultural and spatial dimensions of their animation art productions.

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Table 1. The Eastern Bloc's comperative classification about cultural and spatial dimensions

Location	Cultural Dimensions	Spatial Dimensions
Soviet Union	Cultural hub, poetic and ideological works. humor, competition, classic slapstick style, friendship, poetic atmospheres, folklore adaptations, socialist morality, subtle allegories.	City Centre, communal courtyard, housing estate, residential interior, public park, factory building, subway station, city boulevard, children's playground, theater stage, workers' club, apartment block, rural landscape, village house, forest road, classroom, workshop, construction site, parade ground, rooftop, marketplace, kitchen area, stairwell, balcony, open space, memorial square, bus stop, studio space, cinema hall, train station, corridor, window, facade, passage, bridge, skyline.
Poland & Czechoslovakia	Avant-garde and surrealist traditions, metaphorical critiques, universal humor, nonverbal expression, child-centered perspective, critique of artistic freedom, absurdity, stop motion, puppet animation, virtues such as loyalty and justice, experimental cutting, surrealism, stop motion mastery, puppet animation, surrealist traditions, children's tales	Urban courtyard, socialist housing block, narrow street, foggy alley, factory interior, shadowy apartment, kitchen window, train platform, industrial landscape, workers' settlement, grey facade, stairwell, rain-soaked pavement, attic room, domestic silence, market square, tram line, railway bridge, empty playground, melancholic cityscape.
Hungary & Yugoslavia	Humor, modernist approach, mythological experimental storytelling, science fiction, family relations, dark humor, survival, espionage parody, psychedelic visuals, folklore-mythology fusion, socialist everyday life, minimalist, modernist design, irony, avant-garde.	Modern apartment block, brutalist housing estate, metro tunnel, factory corridor, office interior, television room, radio tower, seaside promenade, surreal domestic space, dystopian playground, espionage headquarters, political office, smoky tavern, mythic village, mountain tunnel, hidden archive, post-industrial wasteland, futuristic skyline, urban courtyard, absurd living room.
Romania, Bulgaria, East Germany	More educational and folkloric, educational short films, simple drawing style, puppet animation, socialist pedagogy, fairy tale adaptations with ideological subtexts, distinct national aesthetics,	School, classroom, village square, rural courtyard, wooden house interior, community hall, folk stage, open meadow, mountain village, classroom blackboard, children's playground, craft workshop, orchard path, traditional kitchen, storytelling corner, riverside mill, communal garden, puppet stage, folk museum, village road, cultural center.

Central Asia	More educational and folkloric, contains distinctive national aesthetics, storytelling, pastoral scenes, cultural motifs	Desert plain, mountain valley, nomad tent, village courtyard, oasis garden, riverside camp, open steppe, traditional yurt, market square, caravan route, shepherd's field, folk festival area, handicraft workshop, sacred tree, storytelling circle, ancient castle, temple courtyard, village paths, sunset ridge.
Baltic States	Surrealist, grotesque, individualist, expressionist, gothic humor, folklore, critical view of urban life, black humor	Foggy street, crooked house, narrow attic, crooked town square, dim corridor, carnival tent, broken bridge, shadowy alley, puppet attic, crooked tower, abandoned theatre, cracked pavement, surreal apartment building, night fair, gothic courtyard, reflective window, lonely attic, dreamy forest edge, rotten facade, symbolic interior.

3.3 ANIMATION IN IN POST-SOVIET INDEPENDENCE-ERA EURASIA

3.3.1 Historical Transition (1991-2000s)

The greatest challenge faced by the collapse of the USSR in 1999 was the decline in government subsidies and the diversion of the state budget to vital planning. This led to artists struggling to produce without financial support. The production of animated works became dependent on private or foreign investment. This created marketing problems. Financing and marketing problems, in turn, led to a brain drain, with many animators relocating, particularly to Western Europe and the United States. The centrally located, leading institution, Soyuzmultfilm, was closed, leaving this trendsetting institution without a place to stand. Despite these challenges, a new wave of nationalist animation emerged, balancing heritage and local folklore with global animation trends.

3.3.2 Original Design Concepts (2000s-)

The post-Soviet era marked a profound transformation in the cultural and ideological functions of animation across Eurasia. Once a central artistic identity in Soviet cultural policy, animation evolved into a pluralistic arena characterized by national self-expression, creative experimentation, and increased interaction with global media networks. This shift reflected a broader shift from a state-sponsored art form to a hybrid cultural industry influenced by both local identity reconstruction and international market dynamics (Pilkington, 2002; Bendazzi, 2016). During this period, animation became a crucial medium through which post-Soviet nations constructed new cultural narratives, reinterpreted folkloric works, redefined spatial imaginations, and negotiated their position within global visual culture. Furthermore, it served as a strategic tool of public diplomacy, projecting soft power and national branding by visualizing modernity, heritage, and diversity to international audiences (Nye, 2004; Norris, 2019). Thus, the post-Soviet animation landscape can be understood both as a mirror of socio-political transformation and as a dynamic site of cultural negotiation that reconnects regional artistic traditions with contemporary global discourse.

Notable developments from this period include the resurgence of folklore-based animation (the Three Heroes series), the rise of commercial children's TV animations like Masha and the Bear (2009), which achieved global distribution through YouTube and Netflix, and the continued development of experimental and auteur animation through directors like Aleksandr Petrov, known for his paint-on-glass animations (1999's The Old Man and the Sea, which won an Academy Award).

CGI motion graphics were often used in co-productions with Western and/or Asian countries. In Kazakhstan, studios turned to serialized children's content as a fundraising tool. In the 2000s and 2010s, studio themes during this period included Folklore and the Construction of National Identity, Auteur and Festival Animation, Children's Television and Commercialization, and Digital Transition. During this period, animation became a way to revitalize local myths, languages, and traditions. Countries with limited domestic markets (such as the Baltic States and the Caucasus) produced short, experimental works aimed at international film festivals.

Masha and the Bear (Маша и Медведь) is a significant example of the Post-Soviet era's transformation into a pluralistic arena for global creative participation. This production, which gained a global market as a television series, not only has an educational quality, teaching children’s universal moral values and the importance of friendship but also draws influences from traditional culture. First and foremost, the bear has been one of Russia's unofficial national symbols since 16th-century cartoons. Masha's costume evokes local identity, and her physiological characteristics harmonize with the region. Masha's clothing, including her headscarf and apron, is reminiscent of the traditional attire of peasant girls in rural Russia, but without the handiwork used in the original garments.

The animated series showcases an adaptation of spatial and cultural elements rooted in Russian vernacular architecture and folklore. The built environment reflects the dense taiga landscape dominated by pine, fir, and birch trees, reinforcing the setting's geographical authenticity. The Bear's house, with its log walls, handmade textiles, samovar, and wood-burning stove, embodies the characteristics of a traditional izbas, a rustic wooden hut typical of rural Russia, evoking the warmth and simplicity of village life. The interior features folkloric motifs such as matryoshka dolls, Khokhloma-style patterns, and a vibrant color palette of red, yellow, and green, reflecting the aesthetic principles of Russian folk art. In addition to visual details, the series also incorporates symbols of hospitality and domesticity, such as samovars and honey jars, emphasizing harmony with nature and cultural continuity. Overall, Masha and the Bear combine traditional Russian spatial and cultural imagery with a contemporary narrative structure, combining national heritage with global appeal through visual storytelling.

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Pic.1 Masha and the Bear, a scene from the movie

Another example of globalization is Cheburashka. A key feature of this series is that the character still appears. Cheburashka continued to be used in children's programming, advertising, and cultural diplomacy during the whole period. Cheburashka first appeared as a fictional character in a 1966 children's book by Soviet Russian children's writer and poet Eduard Uspensky. The story introduces Cheburashka as a small, furry creature of unknown species who accidentally arrives with a crate of oranges. His name is derived from the Russian verb "cheburakhnutsya" (to fall or fall to the ground), describing the character's clumsy movements (Prokhorov, 2010). This stop-motion puppet animation was developed by Soyuzmultfilm, Moscow's leading state animation studio, between 1969 and 1983. Director Roman Kaçanov adapted Uspensky's character into his films. The first film is named as Gena (Крокодил Гена, 1969).

Pic.2-3 Makoto Nakamura's Cheburashka, Original Cheburashka

In this production, the stories focus on Cheburashka's friendship with Gena the Crocodile, emphasizing moral themes such as kindness, loyalty, and cooperation. Cheburashka has gained immense popularity, particularly in Japan, where his films have been released and have inspired new adaptations (Tornquist, 2014). Recent adaptations include a 2022 Japanese feature film by director Makoto Nakamura, which has enduring cross-cultural appeal.

In Russia, a modernized version of the character served as the Olympic mascot: Orange Cheburashka at the 2004 Athens Summer Olympics, Blue Cheburashka at the 2006 Turin Winter Olympics, and Red Cheburashka at the 2008 Beijing Summer Olympics. He has gained acceptance in the design and art worlds, becoming a global favorite and a symbol of soft power.

Another example of globalization in animation is Cheburashka and Gena the Crocodile. Cheburashka continued to be used in children's programs, advertisements, and cultural diplomacy throughout both periods. A significant feature of this series is the character's continued visibility.

Spatially and visually, Cheburashka and Gena the Crocodile inhabit a distinctly Soviet urban environment, blending post-war architectural modesty with symbolic warmth. This is further supported by the warm colors used throughout the production's locations. Meanwhile, the surrounding urban landscape, with its utilitarian design and green common areas, places the characters within a distinctly socialist-modernist environment. Consequently, the narrative and spatial composition reflect an idealized image of Soviet everyday life, where moral virtues and collective well-being are reinforced by architectural familiarity and spatial symbolism. Spatial arrangements such as modest apartment blocks, public parks, playgrounds, and schools reflect the everyday life of the late Soviet era, emphasizing collective identity and social cohesion. The interiors are carefully constructed to reflect moral simplicity and accessibility: Gena's small apartment, with its patterned wallpaper, wooden furniture, and piano, embodies the aesthetics of domestic intimacy and cultural refinement typical of the Soviet intelligentsia. Furniture may be described as a set of elements or systems intended to fulfill human physical requirements safely and comfortably, taking into account the social and cultural dimensions of everyday life (Kalay, 2017)

Another example Once Upon a Time in the Desert (Odnazhdy v pustyne) is a 1986 short film, running 8 minutes and 1 second, produced by Uzbekfilm. Uzbekfilm produced feature-length, documentary, and animated films in the Uzbek USSR and later in independent Uzbekistan. The story "Little Donkey and the Master" evokes the format of a classic morality tale. Many Uzbek animations use fables and simple narratives to convey messages of loyalty, justice, gratitude, or social harmony. Hand-drawn/flood animation, which is more cost-effective than techniques like stop-motion or optical effects, given its visual style, year of production, and studio, incorporates spatial typologies, spatial decorative motifs, and stylizations that reference Uzbek/Central Asian artistic traditions.

4.CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The region, a valuable center for producing high-quality artistic products from its traditional past to present, has been a notable center for producing artistic and cultural works that combine heritage with modernity. In both the Soviet and post-Soviet eras, animation developed not only as a visual storytelling practice but also as a spatially situated art form, a discipline in which architecture, the environment, and cultural memory are constantly reinterpreted. Spatial compositions in animated films often reflect the social, ideological, and aesthetic transformations of the period.

During the USSR era, animation studios like Soyuzmultfilm and Belarusfilm became laboratories of visual culture, translating ideological order into spatial design. Cities, industrial landscapes, and communal interiors were not neutral backdrops but symbolic structures of collective life. The spatial organization of Eastern Bloc animation reflected realism's principles of geometric harmony, monumental composition, and public order, while also incorporating folkloric motifs and mythical rural settings that connected industrial modernity to pre-Soviet tradition. Through such combinations, the field of animation functioned as an allegorical space where ideology met cultural continuity.

In contrast, animation in Russia, Central Asia, and the Baltic countries in the post-Soviet period began to utilize space as a means of individual, national, and emotional expression. In Russia, works such as Cheburashka and, later, Masha and the Bear, reconfigured familiar domestic interiors and urban environments as symbolic microcosms of national identity.

Dwellings filled with handmade textures, wooden toys, or nostalgic household items represented both continuity and adaptation. With the transformation of everyday material culture into a globally recognized aesthetic, animation became a form of soft power, combining spatial nostalgia with international design and media strategies.

In Central Asia, particularly Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan, spatial design in animation offers an alternative path. Architectural and environmental settings often depict courtyards, caravanserais, minarets, tiled domes, and desert landscapes, creating a distinct visual grammar rooted in Islamic and Turkic heritage. Here, animation functions as a cultural cartography that reconstructs collective memory through symbolic landscapes and reimagined built environments. The shift from hand-drawn to computer-based (2D and early 3D) techniques in the 2000s allowed these regional studios to visualize traditional architecture within modern technological frameworks. The result is a hybrid aesthetic in which the geometry of historical monuments integrates with the built environment and intersects with contemporary visual codes, producing a layered narrative of spatial belonging.

In contrast, Baltic animation, particularly from Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, approached spatiality from a more introspective and critical perspective. Influenced by surrealism, expressionism, and grotesque humor, Baltic animators employed distorted architecture, abstract interiors, and psychological landscapes to comment on alienation, urban isolation, and post-totalitarian existence. While Soviet animation emphasized collective and monumental spatial harmony, Baltic works disrupted this order, transforming the built environment into a metaphor for existential fragmentation and personal imagination.

In these contexts, animation has functioned as a dialogue between built space and cultural identity. Whether it's the poetic pastoralism of Central Asia, the ideological geometry of Soviet urban space, or the surreal domestic displacement of the Baltic states, each regional tradition transforms architectural form into a narrative tool. Thus, the medium of animation becomes an arena of cultural negotiation, a place where national heritage, memory, and identity are enacted and debated through visual design.

Despite significant achievements, the animation industry still faces structural challenges: limited budgets, inadequate educational infrastructures, and limited access to archives. These issues hinder comprehensive spatial and aesthetic analyses of animated works. The following recommendations are offered to address these gaps and strengthen future scholarships:

Archive Access: Many film archives remain partially inaccessible. Systematic archival digitization—including background design sketches, set drawings, and architectural concept art—would enable comparative studies of spatial representation across regions.

Animator/Director Identification: Documenting key figures and cataloguing their works can reveal the evolution of spatial language in animation. A shared digital archive for Soviet and post-Soviet animators would preserve this interdisciplinary design heritage.

Screenings and Festivals: International retrospectives and festival screenings can provide platforms for reevaluating the spatial and cultural dimensions of historical animations. Institutional support is essential for emerging animators to reinterpret these legacies.

Comparative Analysis: A comparative digital atlas of animation could map stylistic, narrative, and spatial transformations across the Soviet, Central Asian, and Baltic regions—highlighting how built environments and cultural symbolism interact in different geopolitical contexts.

Oral Histories and Interviews: Collecting testimonies from animators, designers, and studio architects can illuminate how spatial imagination was formed within specific production environments.

Language and Accessibility: Translating regional studies and production documents into multiple languages will allow broader engagement with the spatial-cultural heritage of animation. To mitigate potential challenges for future researchers, the most frequently encountered techniques, directors, studios, and animation works are presented as keywords in the table below.

Table 2. Table of Keywords

Soviet Union	Soyuzmultfilm, Three from Prostokvashino Cheburashka, Krokodil Gena Umka, Nu, Pogodi! The Mystery of the Third Planet
Central Asia	Once Upon a Time in the Desert Rauf Adaletov, Nazim Tulyakhodzhayev The Magic Jug, Bakhyt Doszhanov, Er Tostik, Samat Aldiyarov The Legend of the Snow Leopard Annaseid Annayev, The Camel and the Lion
Baltic States	Priit Pärn,<Riga Film Studio (Rīgas Kinostudija) Lietuvos Kinas (Vilnius), Valentas Aškinis, Roze Stiebra
Poland & Czechoslovakia	Jiří Trnka, Zdeněk Miler, Krtek, A Midsummer Night's Dream Bolek i Lolek, Pat a Mat, Reksio, Professor Balthazar, Studio Miniatur Filmowych, Krátký Film
Hungary & Yugoslavia	Pannonia Film Studio, Zagreb School of Animation The Mézga Family,Vuk, Fehérlófia
Romania, Bulgaria, East Germany	Mihaela, Tretiyat priyatel Sandmännchen, Pittiplatsch und Schnatterinchen

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