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Do Gulag ao Conto de Fadas: Boris Sveschnikov como designer de livros soviéticos entre a arte não conformista e a literatura infantil

Autora: Svetlana Efimova
Ludwig Maximilian University of Munich,
Munique, Baviera, Alemanha
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From Gulag to Fairy Tales: Boris Sveshnikov as a Soviet Book Designer Between Nonconformist Art and Children's Literature

Svetlana Efimova*

Abstract: In the 1950s–1980s, working as children's book designers enabled many Soviet nonconformist artists to have a recognized role within the system. This article introduces an interdisciplinary and intermedial perspective on Soviet children's book illustration by focusing on the work of Boris Sveshnikov (1927–1998). The artist established his visual style while imprisoned in the Gulag. After his release and exoneration, he transferred this graphic aesthetics to the design of various volumes of fairy tales, both folk and literary ones, within the Soviet project of "world literature" for adults and children. The analysis traces Sveshnikov's engagement with fairytale worlds in image and text as a response to Gulag-wrought trauma and as an aesthetic counterpart to the loosening of socialist realism under conditions of political liberalization.

Resumo: Nas décadas de 1950 a 1980, o trabalho como designer de livros infantis permitiu que muitos artistas soviéticos inconformistas tivessem um papel reconhecido dentro do sistema. Este artigo apresenta uma perspectiva interdisciplinar e intermidiática sobre a ilustração de livros infantis soviéticos concentrando-se no trabalho de Boris Svechnikov (1927–1998). O artista estabeleceu seu estilo visual em seu período de cárcere no Gulag. Após sua libertação e exoneração, ele transferiu essa estética gráfica para o design de vários volumes de contos de fadas, tanto folclóricos quanto literários, dentro do projeto soviético de "literatura mundial" para adultos e crianças. A análise traça seu envolvimento com o universo dos contos de fadas em imagem e texto como resposta ao trauma causado pelo Gulag e como contrapartida estética ao enfraquecimento do Realismo Socialista sob condições de liberalização política.

Keywords: Boris Sveshnikov; Nonconformist art; Soviet book design; Fairy tale; E.T.A. Hoffmann; Maurice Maeterlinck
Palavras-chave: Boris Svechnikov; arte inconformista; Design de livros soviéticos; Conto de fadas; E. T. A. Hoffmann; Maurice Maeterlinck

* Assistant professor of Slavic literatures and media studies at the Ludwig Maximilian University of Munich. She holds a PhD (2016) in General and Comparative Literature from the Free University of Berlin. In 2024, she was elected to the Young Academy at the Bavarian Academy of Sciences and Humanities with her current research project on "The Aesthetics and Politics of Picturebooks in Contemporary Eastern European Children's Literature." In 2024, she was elected as co-chair of the international working group "Childhood in Eastern Europe, Eurasia, and Russia" (ChEEER). https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4838-6454; Svetlana.Efimova@slavistik.uni-muenchen.de

In the late Soviet Union, children's literature and its illustration were among those cultural niches that did not lend themselves to a strict division into official vs. underground art (Morse, 2024, p. 236–239). Such niches were populated by "in-betweeners," that is, "figures who actively contributed to both official and unofficial forms of [cultural] production" (Morse, 2024, p. 29) Among in-betweeners were many Soviet nonconformist artists who, in the 1950s–1980s, found it possible to have a recognized role within the system by working as children's book illustrators (Eskina, 2012, p. 103–15). For example, the history of Moscow conceptualism is inextricably linked to the books printed by the *Detskaia literatura* (Children's Literature) publishing house, as well as to the children's magazines *Murzilka* and *Veselye kartinki* (*Funny Pictures*), both designed by Viktor Pivovarov and Ilya Kabakov.

It might at first be thought that for nonconformist artists, book design was only a means of making a living, as their true inspiration lay in producing original works that could not be shown to the general public. However, many such illustrators made visuals for young audiences that were "largely in line with their unacknowledged adult paintings and drawings," thus finding an opportunity for creative experimentation in children's culture (Morse, 2024, p. 238).[1] Illustration as such is considered to be an interpretation of literary text, translating

1Yuri Gerchuk also questions the accuracy of statements by artists (such as Ilya Kabakov) who speak of their illustrations only as a source of income (Gerchuk, 2014, p. 463).

it into images (Oitinnen, 2000, p. 106). Soviet children's book illustration was therefore involved in a productive dialogue between several cultural discourses: nonconformist art, children's literature, book publishing, and book design. My article argues that this entanglement requires an interdisciplinary and intermedial[2] analysis—one that would go beyond art history to focus on the creative exchange between art, literature, and book culture.

The following case study offers a new intermedial perspective on the intersection of Soviet nonconformist art and children's literature by focusing on one significant book designer: Boris Sveshnikov (1927–1998), "the most important Russian artist among the [G]ulag survivors" (Etkind, 2013, p. 89). Sveshnikov was arrested in 1946, when he was a nineteen-year-old student at the Moscow Institute of Applied and Decorative Arts. During his incarceration in the Gulag, the artist found his own visual style and created a cycle of camp drawings in ink and pen that he would continue after his release in 1954.[3] Upon his official exoneration in 1956, Sveshnikov returned to Moscow and became an influential figure in Soviet book design, working on illustrations and book covers for *Khudozhestvennaia literatura*, the country's main publishing house for works of fiction. In the 1970s, he was recognized as a prominent representative of Soviet nonconformist art, after his drawings and paintings attracted the attention of audiences in the West.

As an illustrator, Sveshnikov mainly worked on books by foreign authors, with a particular focus on children's literature. In the early part of his career in Soviet book design, much of his activity was in the illustration of Russian translations of foreign fairy tales, both folk and literary ones. There were

2Intermedial studies analyze "translations and transformations that exist not between languages but between different media types," such as image and text (Bruhn; Schirrmacher, 2022, p. 6).

3Sveshnikov's drawings are available to the public on the website http://www.svoykrug.com/Artists/sveshnikov.html, in the collection of Rutgers University's Zimmerli Art Museum and on the website thereof https://zimmerli.emuseum.com/search/Sveshnikov/objects, and in two albums: SVESHNIKOV, Boris. *Lagernye risunki / The Camp Drawings*. Moscow: Zvenia, 2000; KRONIK, Aleksandr. *Svoi krug. Khudozhniki-nonkonformisty v sobranii Aleksandra Kronika*. Moscow: Iskusstvo–XXI vek, 2010.

volumes of *Romanian Fairy Tales* (1960) and *Norwegian Fairy Tales* (1962), and two collections by the Uruguayan writer Horacio Quiroga (*Jungle Tales* and *Anaconda*, 1956[4] and 1960), as well as *Fairy Tales and Legends* by the German author Johann Musäus (1960). Researchers familiar with Sveshnikov's original "grownup" art are struck by how seamlessly his illustrations of fairy tales continue the graphic aesthetics of his camp drawings: "In his illustrations, frozen woods and Gothic castles look like improved versions of his aestheticized camp" (Etkind, 2013, p. 103). This unexpected similarity gives rise to the questions I will focus on here: what connects Sveshnikov's camp drawings and fairy tales, his original art and book design? What kind of (children's) books did he illustrate over the course of his career, and how did his visual art interact with literature? The following analysis will trace Sveshnikov's engagement with fantastic worlds in image and text as a response to the trauma of the Gulag and to socialist realism.

Literature and Visuality During the Thaw

The generation of young "in-between" artists referred to above began their creative work in the late 1950s–early 1960s (Eskina, 2012, p. 103), that is, during the Thaw, which was characterized by several significant trends in Soviet book publishing. First and foremost, the innovators of the 1960s saw the book programmatically, as a coherent structure in which textual and visual components organically interacted: "Illustration was transformed into the art of interpreting literature" (Gerchuk, 2014, p. 457). Second, sophisticated book design was an integral part of the Soviet project of translating and publishing "world literature."[5] A publishing house of that name—*Vsemirnaia literatura*—had first been established by Maksim Gorky in 1919. But it was only in the 1960s–1970s

4A new edition of Quiroga's *Jungle Tales* appeared in 1957 with a slightly modified cover, also designed by Sveshnikov.

5On the Soviet "world literature" project, see: Galin Tihanov; Anne Lounsbery; Rossen Djagalov (eds.). *World Literature in the Soviet Union*. Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2023.

that this project came into its own, when *Khudozhestvennaia literatura* brought out its 200-volume series *Library of World Literature* (*Biblioteka vsemirnoi literatury*). Each volume perfectly exemplified Soviet book design and showed the significance of Soviet editions of foreign classics for the interaction between literature and the visual arts. Three of the *Library of World Literature* volumes were illustrated by Boris Sveshnikov; his design of translated children's books for *Khudozhestvennaia literatura* (called *Goslitizdat* until 1963) represented part of the same literary-visual trend. Soviet publishers sought to acquaint not only adults, but also children with foreign classics from all over the world, among them the Norwegian, Romanian, and Uruguayan fairy tales illustrated by Sveshnikov.

After his release from the Gulag, Sveshnikov had joined the circle around the poet and artist Arkady Steinberg, who much later, after his translation of Milton's *Paradise Lost* appeared in the *Library of World Literature* in 1976, would come to be recognized as a distinguished translator. To cite another of Sveshnikov's engagements with literature: according to Sveshnikov's friend, the art historian Igor Golomstock, the artist liked to sum up his camp drawings with reference to a famous line of Shakespeare that had particular meaning for him: "We are such stuff as dreams are made of, and our little life is rounded with a sleep" (*The Tempest*) (Golomstock, 2000, p. 10). As these considerations attest, literature and visual art complemented one another in Sveshnikov's creative development; for him, illustrating books was not just about having a source of income.

Sveshnikov's Aesthetics of Camp Drawings

Boris Sveshnikov's creative path was determined by his imprisonment in the Gulag. Having spent two and a half years in a maximum security camp (*lager' strogogo rezhima*), the exhausted artist was hospitalized and ultimately transferred to another camp. Working there as a night watchman, he spent

his nights drawing, relying on his parents to send him the requisite art supplies, and sometimes also borrowing items from the camp's poster studio. These drawings were preserved by the camp worker and ex-prisoner Ludwig Seya, who, having a certain freedom of movement outside the camp, managed to send them to Sveshnikov's parents. In 1977, Mihail Chemiakin's famous Paris-based almanac *Apollo 77* would introduce Sveshnikov's camp drawings to a broad (Western) audience.

Apollo 77 brought together works of the most prominent representatives of the Soviet creative underground—both literary texts and reproductions of works of visual art. One of the sections was, as it were, coauthored; this consisted of reproductions of Sveshnikov's fourteen drawings along with an essay by the dissident writer Andrei Siniavsky, who at the time was already living in Paris and who on this particular occasion opted to use his real name alongside the pen-name he had previously published under—Abram Tertz. His essay "The White Epic" ("Belyi epos") starts off as a discussion of Sveshnikov's camp drawings, and then gradually moves away from them, with Siniavsky's prose becoming an independent text, created under the influence of the images. It is highly symbolic and, as will be shown, hardly coincidental that Sveshnikov's drawings were presented to the public by a *writer*, in the form of a dialogue between image and text.

For Siniavsky, Sveshnikov's drawings are an example of how one's firsthand experiences become art. Despite containing certain details of camp life, many of these works do not immediately evoke associations with imprisonment. The artist found his way to freedom through his art. This was not just about escaping a depressing reality, but about acquiring a new perspective on it—being able to recognize, in a given moment, a condensed expression of the extended historical timeline and, ultimately, of eternity. This is why Siniavsky calls Sveshnikov's drawings "dreams of eternity" (Sinyavsky, 1977, p. 282).

Sveshnikov's artistic style does not lend itself to a simple definition. It combines elements of romanticism, symbolism, and surrealism (Florkovskaia, 2017, p. 185; Golomstock, 2000, p. 11), and is often referred to as "fantastic realism" (Baigell, 1995, p. 90; Karelin,1984, p. 43). Many elements of his drawings lead the viewer away from the terrain of straightforward realism and from the everyday life of a camp. Frequently represented are extended natural spaces: forests, valleys, rivers, the sky. The fenced-off settlement is juxtaposed with a space that leads the viewer's gaze further away and deeper inside, into a different dimension of existence. In this parallel space appear visions out of the past—minuet dancers[6] or minstrels[7]—as well as unequivocally fantastic creatures. With his inner eye, the artist sees a person riding a fish floating in the sky,[8] and a human face among clouds.[9] Another drawing shows a woman with a baby nesting in a tall tree among birds.[10]

Letters sent by Sveshnikov to his parents from the camp describing his creative work and mental state have survived. One of the key motifs in these messages is his simultaneous existence in two dimensions, in prison and in the world of his imagination: "I am full of images I have lived through in past worlds" (March 1, 1948); "All I can do is dream and resurrect the worlds of my fantasy on paper" (July 15, 1949) (Sveshnikov, 2000, p. 24-90). This duality is reminiscent of the art of romanticism, and the camp artist felt an inner kinship with the

6 Cf. the cycle "Minuet" among Sveshnikov's camp drawings (Sveshnikov, 2000, p. 17–25).

7 Cf. the drawing "Vetlosian" (1952), #D21554, Zimmerli Art Museum, https://zimmerli.emuseum.com/objects/41022/vetlosian?ctx=84bcfd006ae01d1d110aafb4589da064773d91d6&idx=86.

8 Cf. the untitled drawing (late 1950s) #391 from Alexander Kronik's private collection, http://www.svoykrug.com/Artists/sveshnikov.html.

9 Cf. the untitled drawing (1950) from the series "Labor Camp Vetlosian," #2003.0596, Zimmerli Art Museum, https://zimmerli.emuseum.com/objects/46399/untitled-from-the-series-labor-camp-vetlosian?ctx=0963f3d4f3bb934bb349bd4d4d9f35ebe5f07552&idx=78.

10 Cf. the drawing "Camp Vetlosian" (1957) from the series "Labor Camp Vetlosian," #2003.0603, Zimmerli Art Museum, https://zimmerli.emuseum.com/objects/46406/camp-vetlosian-from-the-series-labor-camp-vetlosian?ctx=0963f3d4f3bb934bb349bd4d4d9f35ebe5f07552&idx=73.

romantic works of Francisco Goya, whose paintings are imbued with a somber mystique. On October 8, 1948 he wrote to his parents: "Please send me some engravings by Goya. He is the artist I love most." (Sveshnikov, 2000, p. 150)[11]

Sveshnikov also asked his parents to send him "the works of Edgar Poe" (Sveshnikov, 2000, p. 82). In another letter (November 1, 1948) he compares himself to E.T.A. Hoffmann: "People are ghostly visions, mannequins. It is as if I've climbed up onto the throne of Hoffmann" (Sveshnikov, 2000, p. 76). Both Poe and Hoffmann represent so-called dark romanticism, with its demonic nightmares, to which Goya's art also belongs;[12] that the young artist trapped in the Gulag should feel a spiritual affinity for these figures is not surprising. It is thus evident that Sveshnikov's interest in romantic literature and fantastic literary worlds had arisen long before he took up book design. His visual style was established in the Gulag under the influence of both artistic and literary romanticism.

Sveshnikov's Design of Collections of Fairy Tales

Among the books Sveshnikov illustrated after his return to Moscow, of particular importance was a large body of texts in which the world as we know it intertwines with a fantastic reality, namely, fairy tales—in romanticism and symbolism, a characteristic genre. Sveshnikov's art is thus marked by a definite continuity, from the fantastic elements in his camp drawings to his illustrations of fantastic literary worlds. The abovementioned five volumes of fairy tales he designed between 1956 and 1962 share the graphic aesthetics of his black and white camp drawings—the same fine lines and strokes, down to specific similarities in the outlines of trees, buildings, and landscapes. In his illustrations, fairytale characters from various cultures populate the same visual world of extended

11 Goya's print series "The Caprices" (1797–1798) and "The Disasters of War" (1810–1820) are models of black and white graphics translating traumatic experiences into visual images.

12 Cf. Krämer, 2012.

natural spaces, which could be described with the metaphor Siniavsky found for Sveshnikov's camp drawings: "dreams of eternity" transcending particular time and place.

The covers Sveshnikov designed for these volumes feature a consistent pattern of image and word: a drawing is accompanied by handwriting-like lettering. The lines of the lettering resemble the lines of the drawing, and share its graphic style; this is particularly evident in two editions (1956, 1957) of Horacio Quiroga's *Jungle Tales* (*Cuentos de la selva*).[13] Sveshnikov's visual style is rooted in his camp experience and at the same time refers to the broader context of Thaw-era book culture. Yuri Gerchuk has identified two interrelated trends in Soviet book design of the 1960s: the flourishing of graphic illustration, and experimentation with hand lettering for covers and title pages. The "energy of free handwriting" that brought together graphics and lettering now came to the fore: "The font on the cover and title page was written with the same hand and the same pen, at the same pace as the fluid [*podvizhnye*] illustrations" (Gerchuk, 2014, p. 433). This aesthetics of "free handwriting" emerged alongside the process of political liberalization in the country.

The correlation between political liberalization and book graphics reminds us that Sveshnikov acquired inner freedom in the Gulag through drawing. Siniavsky interpreted the style of his camp drawings as being akin to handwriting: in both cases, art emerges from dark lines on a white background (Sinyavsky, 1977, p. 281–2). The creation of lines on paper as a symbol of freedom inextricably connects Sveshnikov's art with literature and with Thaw-era book culture. In his design of collections of fairy tales, the liberating power of fantasy, inscribed in fantastic worlds, found its visual counterpart in the free movement of graphic lines.

13 This sort of exchange between image and text can also be found on covers that Sveshnikov designed for books for adults, in particular, in the case of romantic works like Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables* in two volumes (1960) and Adelbert von Chamisso's *Selected Works* (1974).

Sveshnikov's Dialogue with Hoffmann

In the 1960s, Sveshnikov was engaged in another important project that involved a preoccupation with alternative reality: illustrations to the works of E.T.A. Hoffmann, a classic of German romanticism.[14] In 1962, Sveshnikov designed the inside front covers of a three-volume *Goslitizdat* edition of Hoffmann's selected writings, including such famous fairy tales as "The Nutcracker and the Mouse King," "The Sandman," and "The Golden Pot." Much later, the writer and critic Alexander Genis would be struck by the similarities between Sveshnikov's inside front covers for this well-known Soviet edition (print run: 100,000 copies) and his camp drawings, which Genis saw in a publication in the US: "Small figures, intricate graphics, anachronism, the grotesque, a view from above, or rather, from nowhere" (Genis, 2014, p. 160). The 1962 illustrations feature white lines on a black background, evoking the darkness of night and depicting scenes from the life of a European town in Hoffmann's time. People in the streets are strolling, relaxing, or arguing with one another; in the background can be seen the surrounding countryside, with hills and distant structures. Fine white lines create an ephemeral sense of space, interrupted in some places and almost vanishing into the black background. In several spots, splashes of bright orange suddenly appear, hinting at the mysterious forces lurking within the everyday world.

Five years later, in 1967, Sveshnikov designed the Hoffmann volume *The Life and Opinions of the Tomcat Murr*: *Tales and Stories* for the *Library of World Literature* series. The illustrations are pen drawings that were then colored, apparently with watercolors. Here, too, Sveshnikov retained some central graphic features of his camp drawings: his characteristic fine line and stroke, as well as the opposition of light and shadow. Trees turn into ornaments, partly intertwined with the outlines of the surrounding landscape and human figures. The

14 In subsequent years, Sveshnikov continued to illustrate works by other German romantics: Heinrich von Kleist's *Dramas. Novellas* (1969), Adelbert von Chamisso's *Selected Works* (1974), and the two-volume *Selected Prose of the German Romantics* (1979).

numerous graphic details create a sense of mystery, a riddle to be "solved" by an attentive viewer. Background silhouettes and shadows give the impression of depth and distance. This visual environment corresponds both to Hoffmann's fictional world and to the world of Sveshnikov's camp cycle. In each, we are confronted with a reality whose doors lead into another—a *mystical*—dimension.

Of particular interest is also the choice of Hoffmann's portrait to accompany this volume. Being not only a writer, but also an artist, the German author created several self-portraits. The editors of the *Library of World Literature* chose a black and white graphic in which Hoffmann depicted himself drawing on a sheet of paper. Thus, the volume opens with an image that erases the boundary between *artist* and *writer*, it seems natural to let this symbolic link between graphic art and literature guide us, too, in our appreciation of Sveshnikov's illustrations. In an interview with the artist published in 1995, Renee Baigell asked him about his "philosophy of art." Sveshnikov's response highlights not only his reception of romanticism, but also the inextricable link between visual art and literature in his work: "I am fascinated by romanticism and have studied its art and Russian translations of its literature and poetry. I've illustrated editions of German romantic prose and poetry—Goethe,[15] Heinrich von Kleist, E.T.A. Hoffmann" (Baigell, 1995, p. 93).

Sveshnikov's self-identification with the romantic tradition, expressed in this 1995 interview, began as early as in his quoted letter from the Gulag in November 1948: "It is as if I've climbed up onto the throne of Hoffmann" (Sveshnikov, 2000, p. 76). A significant feature of (German) romanticism is its engagement with the genre of literary fairy tale and such collections of folk tales as *Children's and Household Tales* (1812–1858) by the Brothers Grimm. Hoffmann's literary tales are also rooted in folklore, drawing as they do on "the tried and tested fairy tales and legends of mermaids and gnomes, of monsters and salamanders, of underworld journeys and devil's pacts" (Brittnacher, [s.d.]).

15 It should be noted, however, that from a literary-historical standpoint, Goethe cannot be unequivocally classified as a romantic.

Moreover, several parallels can be drawn between Sveshnikov and Hoffmann. The latter illustrated and designed his own books; the publications he produced during his lifetime thus evince a "particular relationship of book illustrations, cover drawings, and vignettes to text and book(page)" (Brandl-Risi, 2015, p. 356). Sveshnikov and Hoffmann also shared an interest in the engravings of Jacques Callot (seventeenth century), a master of etching-strokes, grotesque elements, and depictions of the atrocities of war.[16] Sveshnikov's camp cycle evokes associations with Callot's drawings (Golomstock, 2000, p. 11; Sinyavsky, 1977, p. 283), while Hoffmann made his literary debut with the book *Fantasy Pieces in the Manner of Callot* (1814–1815), which included the first version of his famous fairy tale "The Golden Pot" (reworked in 1819).

The relationship between Sveshnikov's camp cycle and his illustrations of Hoffmann's works, then, is a complex one. On the one hand, Sveshnikov's book design of the 1960s continued the aesthetics of his camp drawings. On the other, his graphic world was originally inspired by Hoffmann, and it was only natural, in the signature Thaw-era editions thereof, for him to translate the author's texts into this visual style. Finally, Hoffmann's literary works were themselves deeply rooted in visual art, and shared this artistic background with Sveshnikov's drawings.

Sveshnikov's Pointillism and the Child's View of the World

There is an inherent connection not only between Sveshnikov's drawings and literary romanticism, with its interest in fairy tales, but also between his later paintings and literary symbolism. Sveshnikov's art is not limited to drawings; an important part of it includes oil paintings on canvas. In the 1970s, the technique of pointillism began to play a central role in his aesthetics, with images composed of numerous "mosaic" fragments with different shades of color. Art historians

16 Callot's cycle "The Great Miseries of War" (1633) also influenced Goya's print series "The Disasters of War" (1810–1820).

associate this phase of Sveshnikov's work with the tradition of symbolism in Russian art of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, particularly the paintings of Mikhail Vrubel (Florkovskaia, 2017, p. 184; Kennedy, 1995, p. 274).

The elements of Symbolist aesthetics in Sveshnikov's original works find an echo in his illustrations of Symbolist literature. The same technique of pointillism, combining dots of color, is evident in his illustrations to the 1972 edition of Maurice Maeterlinck's plays. Volume 142 of the *Library of World Literature*, dedicated to Belgian literature, contains seven plays by Maeterlinck, as well as poetry and the drama *The Dawn* by Émile Verhaeren. Notably, Sveshnikov made as many as three illustrations for *The Blue Bird* (1908)—more than for any of Maeterlinck's other plays. *The Blue Bird*, featuring two child protagonists and the good fairy Bérylune, is known for its fairytale setting and has been variously adapted in children's culture worldwide. In this parable about the search for happiness, children are able to perceive hidden dimensions of existence, such as the living souls of inanimate objects. The siblings Tyltyl and Mytyl encounter a mystical world, which Sveshnikov depicts through a mosaic of dots: in his illustrations, shades of lilac and blue with patches of yellowish and white light shimmer through tree branches or window curtains. This visual style resembles Sveshnikov's oil paintings, whose effect on viewers is described in Ilya Kabakov's memoirs: "Boris's post-camp paintings [...] are filled with a special kind of colored *pointillé* that forms a strange phosphorescent glow in different parts of the painting. [...] These clouds of glow [*sgustki svecheniia*] accumulate in different corners and spots" (Kabakov, 1999, p. 195).

Sveshnikov's illustrations for Maeterlinck's plays *The Blue Bird* and *The Blind* are reminiscent of his painting *Autumn Evening* (1977).[17] Most of this work's space goes to depict a mysterious reality that is manifest via the interplay of colorful dots and splashes of light and shadow; in this, human figures are minimized. The viewer's attention is drawn to the

17 Zimmerli Art Museum, #D21599, https://zimmerli.emuseum.com/objects/37638/autumn-evening?ctx=5b73eabdca62ca28e8954f3bac7d9231bd5fd0fc&idx=98.

shimmers and transitions between colors: beige, lilac, blue, and green. The people in the picture are small-scale, seemingly incapable of comprehending the enigmatic world that looms around them. This corresponds to the spirit of Maeterlinck's play *The Blind* (1890)—a philosophical parable about the existential predicament of human beings. Sveshnikov's illustration for this play[18] shows the faces of blind people in the bottom half of the picture, while the upper half represents the mystical world they cannot see. His images for *The Blue Bird* share this visual world of shimmering colors and "clouds of glow," which realm, however, is now accessible to children and reveals itself to their discerning eyes. In two of Sveshnikov's illustrations, the viewer/reader's attention goes to the curious, wide-open eyes of the siblings Tyltyl and Mytyl.[19] The artist depicts children as subjects capable of perceiving another dimension of reality; it is thus not surprising that his interest in fantastic worlds should have led him to illustrate literature for or about children.

In the 1970s and 1980s, Sveshnikov continued illustrating fairy tales. His cover image for *Romanian Folk Tales* (1972) resembles the never-abandoned graphic style of his drawings and book illustrations from the 1960s. Particularly interesting in this regard is his visual design of *Khudozhestvennaia literatura*'s 1983 edition of Hans Christian Andersen's *Fairy Tales*, which combines the two main stylistic directions in his art and book design: colorful pointillist images with mysterious "clouds of glow"; and black and white drawings with fine lines and strokes. This combination represents the inner consistency of Sveshnikov's visual world and the continuity of his creative path, grounded in his constant interest in fairy tales, from the 1940s to 1980s.

18 This illustration is located on the insert between pages 352 and 353 in: Maurice Maeterlinck; Émile Verhaeren. *[Verhaeren's] Stikhotvoreniia. Zori. [Maeterlink's] P□esy* (Biblioteka vsemirnoi literatury, 142). Moscow: Khudozhestvennaia literatura, 1972.

19 See the two illustrations on the inserts located between pages 448 and 449, as well as between pages 480 and 481 in: Maeterlinck and Verhaeren, 1972.

Conclusion

Boris Sveshnikov's illustrations of fairy tales are rooted in three intertwined contexts: 1) his nonconformist art (camp drawings and later pointillism); 2) his deep engagement with literature; and 3) Thaw-era book design, which sought to visualize literature and had a particular keenness for graphic illustration and hand lettering. Sveshnikov's book design takes on a symbolic significance, beyond either literature or visual art in and of themselves. The artist's original works and illustrations are nourished by his reception of romanticism and symbolism in both visual art and literature. Moreover, his art provokes reflection on the shared foundations of *writing lines* and *drawing them* on paper, that is, of verbal and visual expression.

At the meeting point between text and image, Sveshnikov established his fantastic realism, positing a mystical, atemporal dimension in the fabric of habitual reality. Among the books he illustrated, of particular significance were texts that integrated the real and the fantastic, especially fairy tales, from folk tales to sophisticated literary ones. Sveshnikov was part of the Soviet project of "world literature," and so texts from foreign cultures and earlier epochs afforded him an escape from everyday life and an opportunity for artistic self-expression. Illustrating literature for and about children allowed him to engage with fantasy and multiple perspectives on reality. Both the fantastic world of fairy tales and the visual world of Sveshnikov's illustrations to them provided an alternative to socialist realism, and thus constituted an aesthetic counterpart of political liberalization.

In 1957, twenty years before his article on Sveshnikov's camp drawings, Andrei Siniavsky wrote the essay "On Socialist Realism" ("Chto takoe sotsialisticheskii realizm"), published in French (1959) and English (1960) under the pseudonym Abram Tertz. This essay's conclusion proposes a literary program capable of overcoming the doctrine of socialist realism: "Right now I put my hope in a phantasmagoric art [...], an art in

which the grotesque will replace realistic descriptions of ordinary life. Such an art would correspond best to the spirit of our time. May the fantastic imagery of Hoffmann and Dostoevski, of Goya, Chagall, and Mayakovsky [...] teach us how to be truthful with the aid of the absurd and the fantastic" (Tertz, 1960, p. 94–95). It seems highly significant that Siniavsky's list includes both writers and artists, among them, the two mentioned by Sveshnikov in letters from the Gulag as his source of inspiration: Hoffmann and Goya.[20] "On Socialist Realism," moreover, was written and published in the same period when Sveshnikov was engaged in the design of five collections of foreign fairy tales (1956–1962). Thus, we see that Sveshnikov's artistic activity was both deeply individual and embedded in the broader cultural context of the Thaw.

While Sveshnikov's art responded to fairytale literature, another opportunity for nonconformist artists to evade the dictates of socialist realism was provided by the *Znanie* (*Knowledge*) publishing house, where such Soviet surrealists as Ülo Sooster found a haven illustrating popular science literature and science fiction (Gerchuk, 2014, p. 437–8). In general, the imagery of children's books constituted a space for experimentation, allowing "[a]daptations of pre-revolutionary, avant-garde, and Western aesthetics" (Morse, 2024, p. 238). With his design of Andersen's *Fairy Tales* in 1983, Sveshnikov joined the broader Soviet-era artistic trend of "channel[ing] nontraditional stylistics" via the illustration of editions of Andersen (Leving, 2020, p. 348). Moreover, the playful nature of children's culture as such served as a significant source of inspiration for both the Russian avant-garde and late Soviet underground—in the latter case, particularly for unofficial poets.[21]

At the same time, Sveshnikov's engagement with fantastic worlds and children's literature was a creative way of coping with his Gulag trauma. Such an artistic response to traumatic

20 Abram Tertz's literary work bears the clear influence of Hoffmann; in 1963, a collection of Tertz's fiction was published in New York with the telling title *Fantastic Stories*.

21 Cf. Weld, 2014; Morse, 2021.

experience connects him with the English writer and artist Mervyn Peake, who began his career as a painter and served in the British Army in 1940–1942. Peake's drawings, produced during and after the Second World War, are comparable to Sveshnikov's camp cycle. During his military service, Peake began work on his fantasy *Gormenghast* series (1946–1959), creating a fantastic world in handwritten text, accompanied by his own graphic illustrations. In his manuscripts, one can see the "organic exchange between hand-written text and hand-drawn images" (Coggins, 2013, p. 16) —a connection reminiscent of a key feature of book design during the Thaw, which, significantly, emerged consequent to the horrors of Stalinist repressions and the Second World War. After the war, Peake, too, began to illustrate fantasy and fairy tales, performing, for instance, the visual design of Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland* and the Grimms' *Household Tales*, both in 1946.

Boris Sveshnikov's significant case of contesting socialist realism and overcoming trauma through fairy tales, then, is part of both Soviet and international cultural contexts that deserve further investigation. Overall, this case study has demonstrated that the field of Soviet children's book illustration requires an interdisciplinary and intermedial analysis, combining perspectives of art history and book studies with literary and cultural scholarship.

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