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## Merry Pictures of the Little Folk: The Cartoon Magazine *Veselye kartinki*, or What's Left of the Socialist "Children's World"

**Abstract:** My paper deals with *Veselye kartinki* (Merry Pictures), a monthly children's cartoon magazine launched by the Komsomol in 1956 and dedicated to the youngest generations of the "new socialists" (age 4–8). In its heydays in the early 1980s the magazine reached a circulation of 9,5 million, which indicates that *Merry Pictures* had become an essential part of post-Stalinist childhood. Generations of small readers found it attractive for several reasons. The journal was indeed comparatively "merry" and funny – not least because it was exempt from censorship, and so it was the only publication of that kind in the Soviet Union. Moreover, among its illustrators were a number of artists who are today well known for their participation in the nonconformist art scene (for example Ilya Kabakov and Victor Pivovarov), which gave the merry pictures their specific visual quality. The magazine proved to be an "image machine" even after the end of the Soviet Union. It survived the Soviet childhood by a good two decades and granted its characters, the *little folks*, an afterlife in the mass culture of the new Russia. However, this is not only the story of the magazine and its attempt to visually shape a newly created concept, arising with the Thaw, of a merry childhood that entered the currently emerging canon of visual socialism. Rather, there are two other, contradictory understandings of *Merry Pictures* and its *Merry Folks' Club* that can be found currently. According to one, the *Merry Folks* are considered the first Soviet comic heroes, who were correspondingly free of politics and harmless for their readership. The other regards them as socialist "pathos formulas" in a format for children that populate the art of Moscow Conceptualists as thoroughly ideological Soviet symbols. This paper attempts to augment these two selective "remnants" with the primary history of *Merry Pictures* and demonstrate a productive arsenal of images and figures was developed over a half-century, precisely in the tension between everyday free spaces and political stipulations.

**Keywords:** cartoon magazine, post-Stalinist childhood, illustrations, *Merry Pictures*

## 0. INTRODUCTION

A good quarter century has passed since the Soviet Union broke apart and with it, the Soviet children's world has ceased to exist. And although visual representations of this children's world still circulated for some time, by now the "merry pictures" of this childhood have become a generally collective screen memory even for the last generation "born in the USSR." *Merry Pictures*, the children's magazine that will be our focus here, made a significant contribution to the production of images that dominated the visual cosmos of Soviet childhood in the second half of the century. In retrospect, especially the little folks that appeared in cartoons became symbols for the socialist past. The so-called *Merry Folks' Club* was the miniature issue from the magazine's editorial board or a kind of children's Central Committee that generated, occupied and ruled the happy world of stories presented as sketches or photo collages.

This article asks what is still left of the visual cosmos for the little ones and in particular their small heroes, after the disappearance of the Socialist world. On the search for the remnants of the magazine, images, and figures undertaken here, we encounter practices of reception and application that attribute an additional, later signification. These practices will be introduced in the following. Two contradictory tendencies can be recognized in this process: one that depoliticizes the merry childhood and declares it a harmless realm of children's "funny pages," and one that submerges it completely in its ideological contamination. In the process, the actual story of the happy images is almost completely pushed out of focus. This motivates me to trace the story, at least roughly and demonstrate how the magazine developed a productive arsenal of images and characters. Particularly in the tense relationship between children's everyday life, presented as merry and entertaining, and their political exploitation to ideologically educate the children, the magazine and its images have had a potential that reached far beyond the Soviet children's world and even the end of the Soviet Union.

1. *MERRY PICTURES* – MAGAZINE OF A NEW "FUNNY" CHILDHOOD

The magazine *Merry Pictures* is a child of the post-Stalin Thaw. At the start of the mid-1950s, the *Central Committee of the All-Union Lenin Komsomol* initiated changes in the magazine landscape for children and youth.<sup>1</sup> Correspon-

<sup>1</sup> For the year 1974 the *Bolshaia Sovetskaia enciklopedia* (BSE 1978) lists twenty-five monthly Pioneer journals, in addition to ten journals for Little Octobrists and preschoolers throughout the Soviet Union. Their total circulation was more than 17.5 million. Besides *Merry Pictures* there was one more magazine for preschoolers, *Maliatko*, which had been published in Ukrainian since 1960. Beginning with the mid-1950s

dingly, a new children's magazine commenced only a few months after Khrushchev's secret speech. For the first time in Soviet history, the youngest readers that did not yet belong to the *Little Octobrists* would become a target audience. However, the goal was not, as one might assume, the expansion of ideological control into children's rooms, but rather a re-coding of childhood from the very beginning in order to open up a new space for a new generation: away from the "happy childhood" of Stalinism and towards the "merriness" of the Thaw.



Fig. 1. Merry kids from all over the world. *Merry Pictures* (Cover 1957, July, ill. Boris Fridkin). Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin/C.G.

The magazine's title alone seizes on the shift in the attribution of childhood in this era: in this project the children's happiness ordered by Stalin („Thank You, Comrade Stalin for Our Happy Childhood!“<sup>2</sup>) was replaced by a newly discovered childhood trait – a merriment not owing to the system but rather inherent in children's "biological nature." The analysts of the Soviet 1960s, Vail and Genis, put it this way: "As the birds sing, so the children of October also sing" (Vail/Genis 2001, 114).

Under the leadership of Ivan Semenov, who up to that point had been an illustrator for the Soviet satire magazine *Crocodile*, the first issue appeared at the beginning of the school year in September 1956. The initial limitation to

and on behalf of the initiative of the Central Committee of Komsomol magazines for school kids and pioneers were established all over the Soviet Union in the various national languages.

<sup>2</sup> See also Kelly (2005, 199): "[...] as the Stalin cult became established over the course of the 1930s, [...] the leader was also shown as being directly responsible for the lives and fates of children. Children were encouraged to treat Stalin as a role model [...], an all-powerful paternal figure to whom demands might not be made, but who might be beseeched for favors and thanked."

30,000 subscriptions made the magazine something sold under the counter and the subscription vouchers became a valuable medium of barter for other scarce items. For example, one of the original editors, Feliks Shapiro, recalled how he exchanged three or four of the highly sought-after subscriptions for a kayak (Shapiro 2011). Sales figures exploded following the repeal of the printing limitations in the course of the 1960s. They were already 5.6 million in 1971 (BSE), later 9 million, and in the 1980s even 9.5 million. Circulation figures sank during the period of transformation and then collapsed during the financial crisis of 1998. In 1999 the circulation was only 140,000, the publisher most recently listed 118,000 copies. However, at its height *Merry Pictures* was considered the most widely-circulated Soviet children's magazine.

On its pages, a number of young Russian-speaking Soviet citizens made their first acquaintance with the visual appearance of their future idols, the heroes of booklets, books, animated films, hand puppets, children's musicals, and further children's products. But the *Merry Pictures* also played a role for Soviet children in other republics and for children in the states of the Warsaw Pact in the context of Russian language instruction and translation. The little folks were a sort of brand of the post-Stalinist Soviet childhood for several generations.



Fig. 2. The Merry Folks' Club, *Merry Pictures* (Cover 1971, July).  
Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin/C.G

However, these characters that made up the club were everything but clear role models. The leader of the folks was the artist Karandash. Invented by Semenov, he was able to create a wonderful world with his pencil nose. This typical "lirik," a representative of the creative intelligentsia, was clearly in command of the magazine. After a couple issues, he was joined by a figure also created especially for the magazine. Made up of bolts and a battery, Samo-

delkin (a DIY robot) represented the intelligentsia's other wing, the "fiziki" or scientists and engineers. In this way, two characters dictated the tone with which the adult *Shestidesiatniki* (sixties' generation) modeled their cultural environment. The other *folks* came from Russian or international children's literature and found a secondary use in the magazine. Against the backdrop of the exemplary, emotive "hero children" around the central identification figure of "Stalin" that had exclusively populated the worlds of children just a few years before, these new, merry figures had something unusually non-conformist. They were more or less clear variants of the Russian auto-stereotype Ivan the Fool with emphasized defiant, non-conformist, even ostentatious characteristics, critical of the system even in their original contexts. In addition to *Petrushka*, the simpleton from the realm of Russian puppetry, there was a Soviet Pinocchio, *Buratino* from the land of idiots, the little Czechoslovakian smart-aleck *Gurvinek* (the children's equivalent in the marionette duo *Papa Spejbl* and his son *Hurvínek*), the Italian miniature revolutionary *Chipollino* from a children's story by Gianni Rodari, and *Neznaika*, cheeky, confident and beloved by all, who was originally created by Nikolai Nosov in the Russian-Ukrainian children's magazines *Barvinok*.

Only after a few issues was it noticed that the club was made up exclusively by men – and then was augmented by a token woman, sometimes Andersen's *Diumovotchka* (*Thumblina*), sometimes the flower girl *Sineglazka* (*Blue Eyes*) from Nosov's *Neznaika* fairy tale. The pale girl had no appreciated task in the club – either to be comforted, water the flowers, or call the gang of boys to order. In addition to the members of the club, there were many more representatives of national and international children's worlds scattered across the pages of the magazine. Not only figures from the past such as *Munchausen*, characters from Grimm's tales, or *Gulliver*, but everyone and everything that appeared on the stage of children's literature or film in the Soviet Union sooner or later also made an appearance in one of the magazine's picture stories.

This new, monthly magazine containing cartoons and illustrated stories, rhymes, riddles, crafts and drawing exercises for pre-school children is generally considered extraordinary. It was, as the only printed material in the USSR, completely exempt from censorship by Glavlit (General Directorate for the Protection of State Secrets in the Press). Permission to print was issued exclusively by the Editor in Chief (A. V. 2001). It is frequently asserted that the magazine was "free of politics" because in wise anticipation, no obituary of political leaders appeared under the headline of *Merry Pictures*.

However, even the merry poems and funny images did not help in the end. No magazine, not even *Merry Pictures*, could have been placed completely outside the contemporary societal discourse. Shapiro put it in the handy formula: "even for *Merry Pictures*, life in society and therefore being free of the society is a thing of impossibility" (Shapiro 2011). Even the mystique of an emphasized

“freedom from ideology” already formed a significant example of the culture of the period of the Thaw and therefore was entangled in the processes of contemporary politics.

However, the dominant selection criteria of “funny” or “not funny” (*smeshno – ne smeshno*; Shapiro 2011) that reminded the editors of the central question of their “topical rounds” (Shapiro 2012, Sergeev 2005), could be upheld for an impressively long time. The first decade was in fact almost completely without paying tribute to Soviet celebrations, days of remembrance, the Red Army, or Soviet patriotism on the covers. And ideological topics remained marginal in the booklets. Nevertheless, Shapiro still reported reoccurring debates with superiors about the necessary realism of the little flowers and bunnies. Every single so-called “humorist,” who also drew satires for *Crocodile*, knew where the borderline of the permissible was (Chizhikov 2010a). Among the editors, a “responsible secretary” delegated by the Central Committee of Comsomol ensured the party line was upheld. According to Viktor Chizhikov (2010b), fortunately Nina Ivanovna Ivanova, who held the post, “had a good sense of humor.”

But the appearance of *Merry Pictures* changed significantly, even before Ivanova followed Semenov as Editor-in-Chief after one and a half decades in 1972. One of the reasons was a declaration by the Central Committee of the CPSU in 1969 regarding the “measures towards the continued development of children’s literature” (*O merach po dalneishchemu razvitiu sovetskoi detskoj literatury*). This prescription ordered a rise of the “ideological-artistic” standards. From then on the media directed towards children should once again train the smallest readers in “devotion to communistic ideals,” “love of country,” “high moral and ethical characteristics,” and “the sense for proletarian internationalism,” as well as enthusiasm for “learning and work” (BSE). An additional reason was the accumulating celebrations of state self-assurance that characterized the following decades. The conceptual artist Vitaly Komar, who was particularly sensitive to the symbolic household of Soviet ideology, would recall the time as follows: “1967 – that was drums, exhibitions, decorated streets, slogans; 1968 – 50 years of the Soviet army, and this continued without interruption till 1972, the 50th anniversary of the pioneer organization [...] it seems to me as if the spirit of the seventies were already determined by these drumming anniversary years...” (Komar 2010, 140).

A dominant red color and the necessary attribute of Soviet celebrations then appeared on the covers of *Merry Pictures* with pleasant regularity: red flags, insignia, weapons – and above all, fireworks. Yet even when the folks mutated into miniature versions of Chapaev, Petia and the machine-gunner Anka, for example, the “humorists” were still able to outwit the state regulations. The relevant memoirs report the efforts undertaken to outflank the rules (Shapiro 2012). For example, in commemoration of Vladimir Illich’s hundredth birthday, a board game was developed in which each player had to make their way

around Petersburg to Smolnyi as Lenin by rolling the dice and of course had to hope that all the other Lenins would fall victim to the lurking dangers and never arrive.

In 1977 the appearance of the magazine changed once again due to a different reason. With the new Editor in Chief, Ruben Varshamov, who came from the sphere of nonconformist Moscow art, Semenov's concept of "above all, funny" came to an end. The "humorists" employing a thematic approach were gradually replaced by illustrators referred to within the masthead as "formalists," among them names such as Ilya Kabakov, Eduard Gorokhovski or Viktor Pivovarov. Well into the 1980s, the magazine *Merry Pictures*, which had clearly been brought into line ideologically, now fulfilled its educational mission and commemorated Soviet Army Day, Lenin's birthday, the victory celebrations, or at least the 1<sup>st</sup> of May, the Great October Socialist Revolution, and so on, with title images and small stories. The ratio of "pieces of a political nature" was hardly different than in other children's magazines that were under the rule of censorship, which was demonstrated in a comparative study with *Murzilka* for the years 1980–82 (Monsurov 1986). However, many of the humoristic pieces from the previous years were simply repeated, making a part of the issues still funny and harmless. And there were experiments – this was new – in a fantastic and often surreal way with words, type, the medium of books, and the drafting of fantastic worlds – a small imitation of what was being attempted in the circles of informal art.

However, these renewals were also viewed skeptically within the masthead, which did not consider these free games by the "formalists" fit for children (Sergeev 2005, Pivovarov 2001). It was no coincidence that these kinds of illustration were linked to the textual and book art of the taboo Russian Avant-garde. The "humorists" could not recognize their vision of little bird children singing and eternally spreading a merry Soviet children's realm in illustrations in which the abyss of the absurd could become visible, even if only partially, and challenge the children's appetite for interpretation. Despite all the fun, since the mid-1960s this merry world also delivered pre-determined templates with a starkly outlined educational mission into which the children should grow. This program was vividly illustrated in one of the first "political" pieces: the merry folks were once photographed through the still visible, much too large deletions of a wall of photos, with the heroes of the Red Army painted in as a kind of anticipation of their heroic future.

One of the last Soviet issues, from February 1990, articulated the next ideological paradigm shift. For the first time, the editor addressed the adults, rather than the children, with a justification. Several consecutive issues had already offered the small readers biblical themes as merry pictures. This was explained as follows: "I believe in our children. I believe that they will be better than us, better-natured, more honest, better educated." Yet even this belief can only be achieved by an assertive educational program – as was further

explained: “So let us help them to become this way. Let us inoculate the children from the beginning. [...] they absolutely have to learn the biblical stories” (Bartenev 1990).

Now in a tailspin, the magazine, by then with Inna Antipenko at its helm, had difficulty maintaining its readership in the 1990s. From the cover images of those years that oscillated between sadism, tastelessness and lasciviousness, with Buratino’s and Karandash’s wooden noses providing an ideal setup, it is hard not to get the impression that the fight for sales led to losing focus on children. There were attempts made with “unobtrusive product placement” in the cartoons and merchandising, for example for a *Veselye Kartinki* chocolate (A. V. 2001). Despite decreasing circulation, the magazine recently celebrated its 55th anniversary and the Editor-in-Chief was even presented a plaque of achievement by the government of the Russian Federation for journalistic commitment. However, around 2014 *Merry Pictures* was forced to close down, largely unnoticed and unconfirmed to date. The living remnant of Soviet childhood or, more precisely, its most influential visual representation had – with some delay – finally come to an end.

In the meantime, what is happening with the other vestiges of the *merry folks*? In which contexts do the merry pictures still appear and which interpretations are they subjected to? Embarking on a search for the traces of the *merry folks* and the canonization and museification processes encountered by the cosmos of images from Soviet childhood, one comes across practices of reuse and interpretation for which the magazine and its evolution through thirty-five years of Soviet history only played an indirect role.



Fig. 3. Growing politicization and a dominant “red design.” *Merry Pictures* (Cover 1970, February). Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin/C.G.



A) REMNANT ONE: *MERRY PICTURES* – “FUNNY PAGES” FREE OF POLITICS

Although the children’s magazine that influenced the visual appearance of the Soviet pantheon of children’s heroes over the decades is as good as forgotten today, it had promoted and spread its ideas for years when the real Soviet childhood had long become a “discrete historic past.”<sup>3</sup> A publishing house, founded in 1991 and named after the magazine, produced games, books, and children’s articles in the following years with the images of the little folks, which in the meantime also included *The Wolf and the Hare* (*Volk i Zaiats*), *Crocodile Gena*, *Cheburashka*, *Karlson*, and so on (Kukulin et al. 2008). In this way, the visual representations of a *Soviet* childhood were reproduced in yet another new context. Until recently, the *folks* “occupied” new children’s films, serialized children’s literature, merchandizing, urban folklore, nostalgia-branding, but also new Russian symbols. The former Soviet Mickey Mouse variant *Cheburashka* comes to mind, which was the mascot of the Russian National Team at the Olympic Games in 2004. In this way, the *merry folks* were kept alive in the new mass culture of Russia as representatives of a childhood romanticized as well as instrumentalized by the market economy far beyond individual memories of former Soviet children. However, within this new application, the *little folks* were first stripped of their primary semantics and original narrative (Lipovetskii 2001). Their original socialist mission had no meaning for the post-



Fig. 4. Ambivalent image politics: Chapayev and Co in children’s format. *Merry Pictures* (Cover 1971, February). Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin/C.G.

<sup>3</sup> It is precisely in the insularity of the Soviet household of symbols that Nancy Condee sees an explanation for the cult character of its representations in post-socialist pop culture despite its trans-historic dynamic (Condee 1995, vii).

-Soviet consumer culture (Gözl 2005). Yet by now they have disappeared even from there and other iconic images have stepped into their place. Here the visual representations of a global children's culture are juxtaposed with new heroes of their own. For the youngest children they are called *Smeshariki* (funny little balls), "Vova Superstar" (Putin) for the older ones.

Recently there has been the more work taking place on nostalgia internet platforms and in generational projects (generation *Veselye kartinki*, *Murzilka*, of the 80s and so forth) on the meaning and canonization of the finally fixed world of images from Soviet childhood, beyond the debates of historical and cultural studies. Within this context, the magazine and its little heroes are evidence of a merry, largely apolitical childhood, a vision that is also gladly utilized by the book market with various "retro-mania" approaches. For example, the publishing house *Veselye kartinki* started with a reprint project in 2013, shortly before the segment collapsed. In the meantime, the first ten years of *Merry Pictures* have been published in a volume for aficionados, although it is unlikely that further volumes will follow.

In particular, the *Merry Pictures* assume the role of the first (and more or less only) Soviet comic strip, by which "first" also means the only encounter with the genre in the course of a Soviet socialization. In light of the few Soviet examples in the genre, a history in comics or comic studies, new in Russia, cannot be undertaken without mentioning the comic magazine (Alaniz 2010: 65–6; Aleksandrov 2010). However, this mention usually remains brief, due to the lack of corresponding material, if the picture books or the satire magazine *Crocodile*, with which *Merry Pictures* share at least as much, are not to also be subsumed under "comic strips." This is despite the fact that the cartoons of *Merry Pictures* are regarded as childish and harmless because they were printed in an ostensibly "apolitical" pre-school magazine. Even the Tretyakov State Gallery, as a museum crucial for the processes of canonization, has recently joined in this trend toward the comics. Their "nostalgic exposition" of the early 55th anniversary of the magazine at the end of 2010 carried the title "Merry Pictures – the First Russian Comic Strip."

To give historians of the comic their due: the merry pre-school magazine did in fact start with a real comic strip next to other, conventionally drawn picture stories. In the first four issues, the little traveler Petia Ryzhik and his dog friends Mika and Muka are able to experience their adventures in panels and with speech bubbles. The comic story – which is not coincidentally reminiscent of Hergé's *Tintin* – was illustrated personally by the head editor Ivan Semenov. However, already by the second installment, which appeared the following year, the text was pushed below the pictures and presented by an authorial narrator. The book version of the travel adventure that followed seven years later was a regular picture book with narrative text and one particularly large illustration per page (Semenov/Postnikov 1964). When Semenov's comic was reprinted from the first issue in commemoration of the 25<sup>th</sup>

anniversary of the magazine, it did not seem antiquated in the visual context of the time, but rather like a message from another world, the utopia of the Thaw. Only at the end of the 80s and shortly before Walt Disney flooded the post-Soviet children's world did true comics reappear on the pages of the magazine and told, surely not without coincidence, of breaking out of old routines: the folks reconstruct the closed loop of their toy train into a west-bound railroad track.

My accentuation of speech bubbles may seem like sophistry, but this makes clear where the line between the merry childhood and its freedoms was drawn and how the designation of "free of censorship and politics" should be relativized. One problem for speech bubble comics in the USSR was that they had to serve as an example for the corruption and unenlightened state of capitalist culture. They were considered one of the reasons why "Jonny reads so little" and promptly becomes delinquent (Lapitskii 1958). A further problem is clearly connected with the freedom that the Soviet system granted the merry children. The speech bubble comic, the plot of which was generated by the sequential interplay between word and text was, into the 1980s, considered a genre that gave the young readers large spaces for interpretations without being controlled by a (extra-diegetic) narrator (Monsurov 1986). Therefore, it was not the children that deduced the world in merry pictures but here, too, despite all censor-free pre-school, an authorial voice for the interpretation.

This makes the sporadic exceptions all the more astounding that were granted to the speech bubble comics on the pages of the *Merry Pictures* despite the cultural cold war and the socialist conception of humanity. This was particularly the case in 1957 and 1980, when the world was a guest in the magazine on the occasions of the *World Festival of Youth and Students* and the *Olympic Games*, respectively. Through these events, Mickey Mouse also came to visit, and was celebrated within the former and competed against in the latter.

In addition to the labels of "comic strip" and of being "harmless because of the absence of censorship and politics," there is frequently also the reference to a "refuge of neo-avant-garde text and word artists," when *Merry Pictures* is discussed. And this is precisely where a contradiction can be found. The official Soviet editorial department, due to its supposed distance from politics, was deeply ingrained in the biographies of informal "underground" artists as something not corrupting anyone. But *Merry Pictures* was more than a putatively innocent source of earning. It was precisely the magazine and its illustrations that delivered the visual material that came to indicate the "Soviet" as an ideological sign-system in these artists' unofficial works of art. The cultural icons of Soviet childhood, flowers, bunnies, merry folks, and company, all served the artists' analytical work of deconstructing the ideological interweaving of the Soviet trove of images and the discourses influenced by it.



Fig. 5a–5b. Comic strips with speech-bubbles in the first issues of *Merry Pictures*. *Merry Pictures* (1956, September, ill. Ivan Semyonov). Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin/C.G.

B) REMNANT TWO: MERRY FOLKS – DECONSTRUCTED

For this second variant of the “postmortem” canonization it is no less true that the visual world that emerged from *Merry Pictures* has finally become “cold.” The illustrated heroes of Soviet childhood have not only lost their relevance in popular and consumer culture, by now their afterlife in artistic work also appears to have come to an end. Pavel Pepperstein and his cycle entitled *Holy Politics* (2013)

might suffice here as an example,<sup>4</sup> though Pepperstein, member of the *Inspection Medhermeneutics* group, which was extremely active in the deconstruction of Soviet childhood as an ideological discourse, also made an effort to achieve a visual “childlike language” in *Holy Politics* (Harrison 2014). But the symbols of the world developed there already originate from a global social “Imaginary” (Castoriadis) from which the Soviet *little folks* are completely absent.

Since the 1960s and during the time when *Merry Pictures* became a true mass phenomenon, artists began to utilize “unartistic” and “childish” approaches in the context of Unofficial Soviet Art. But they also exploited “Soviet childhood” as a “discourse mask” that they might pull over themselves or their work. It’s not surprising that they also quote the *Merry Pictures*. Their little heroes were employed as representatives of *homo sovieticus* or as signal that evoked schizophrenic Soviet everyday life in the work and artistic projects of SozArt and Moscow Conceptualism.

Of course, first and foremost, those artists, belonging to the “drugaya kul’tura” (the other/different culture), played a role in the re-using and re-coding, as they earned their money from the illustration of the official merry little pictures. Ilya Kabakov’s technique of “marginal drawing,” for example, is regarded by scholarship as being directly connected with his work as illustrator for children’s printed materials (Gerasimenko 2013). In his unofficial corpus of works, the main representative of the “Romantic” school of Moscow Conceptualism uses visual childhood elements as confounding factors. These elements pull new levels into the flat drawing and challenge established image formulas with their seemingly unmotivated appearance (Kabakov 2001, 145–6).

Beginning in the 1970s, the involuntary leitmotifs of *Merry Pictures*, countless bunnies and carrots, started to appear on the surfaces of Kabakov’s sketched worlds, irritating their given order. However, Kabakov also utilized them to help him settle a score with his lucrative but despised bread-and-butter job as an illustrator, and with the Soviet system as a whole. In a later piece entitled *Table XXIX: Rabbits and Carrots* (1994) he transposes the composition, reminiscent of a bunny-carrot-cartoon from the very first issue of *Merry Pictures* as a hypocritical costume onto a stenciled lettering that is on the second level or rather the bottom layer of the flat image space. The obscene “Fuck off!” (POSHEL NA KHUI!) can be deciphered behind the rabbits and carrots. “The almost natural everyday object” here is no longer “touching and educative,” according to the artist, but is exposed as a strategy of deception. As with the Potemkin villages, the childhood motifs are only cute facades which are (ideologically) demarking and delimiting: “like old broken plywood planks that cover some crook fences, so generals don’t see holes, or so children don’t get away” (Gerasimenko 2013).

Not all artists distanced themselves so radically from the image worlds of *Merry Pictures* – on the contrary: the most consistent “Romanticist” among the

<sup>4</sup> The cycle awarded the highly prestigious Russian Kandinsky Prize in 2014.

Conceptualists, Viktor Pivovarov, also identified himself as an artist with the children's cosmos of the *Merry Pictures*.<sup>5</sup> In contrast to Kabakov and his ironic deconstruction, Pivovarov retained the visual language of his children's illustrations even after his resettlement to Prague in the mid-1980s. In Pivovarov's drawings, the visual reflexes of Soviet childhood, as developed in the *Merry Pictures* after the humoristic phase under Semenov, still influence his work today, a "partially merry, partially serious game with the dimensions of childlike." In this game the images serve "as levels of reflections of human existence and the actual artistic work" (Bienert 2001, 18).



Fig. 6. New logo by Victor Pivovarov: the Merry folk's ABC. *Merry Pictures* (typical cover-header in 1981). C.G.

The next stage of reflection, in which the visual childhood cosmos of the late Soviet Union is deconstructed in theoretical and fictional writing, as well as in visual and spatial work, took place beginning in the 1990s with the younger generation of Conceptualists. This included Pavel Pepperstein, introduced as one of the central figures at the outset of this section as the son of Pivovarov. At this stage, the Soviet discourse about childhood and its visual representation was integrated into the self-canonizing work of Moscow Conceptualism, for example as entries of the *Terminology Dictionary of the Moscow School of Conceptualism* (Monastyrskii 1999). Pivovarov sees a direct, conceptualizing reaction to his own work in these artistic reflections, and with them, to the visual world of *Merry Pictures* (Pivovarov 2001: 222).

An even more direct identification with the *Club* and simultaneously its radical ironic deconstruction can be found in Juri Albert's work. Albert appropriated the title figure from *Merry Pictures*, the artist *Karandash*, for pieces created in the 1980s. The children's figure served as an artistic persona ("perso-nazh") in self-portraits and in other drawings as a usurper who forces himself

<sup>5</sup> Some consider Pivovarov to be the unofficial head illustrator of *Merry Pictures* (Vasileva 2008, n.p.) for the time around 1980. Among other things, he created the famous logo that rendered the *merry folks* as letter characters that gave the magazine cover its "formalist" look until the end.

into foreign, equally borrowed visual spaces. Albert frequently also copies simple cartoons from the back issues of *Merry Pictures* which he then transfers to the format of a large canvas and into a “serious” painting style. In the gesture of this “foolish” appropriation, Albert the copyist ironizes the role of the artist in Soviet society that was highly ideologically charged. At the same time, with the citation of a “drawn illustrator,” he refers to the inter-systemic irreducibility of the role of the artist, which also applies to himself (Groys 1991, 240).

Even in the cultural space after the end of the Soviet Union, the *little folks* pressed forward. Konstantin Zvezdochetov, for example, an artist of the more recent generation of Conceptualists, used the remnants of *Merry Pictures* in a post-socialist perspective. In the “pseudo-folklore” piece *Chippoliutsiia* (2000) he makes the now-adult Chipollino mutate into a plump “new Russian” and grins down from an imitation tapestry decorated with ornaments of fertility (Zvezdochetov 2001).

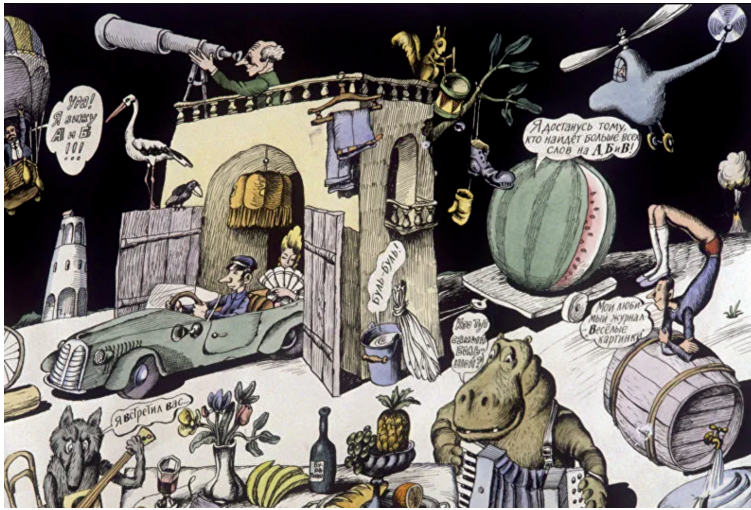


Fig. 7. ABC (first part), *Merry Pictures* (1981, January, ill. Victor Pivovarov). Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin/C.G.

The deconstructivist treatment of Soviet childhood heroes in works of art, demonstrated here on the basis of a few examples, updates the visual history of the *folks* in the new contexts of exhibitions, catalogues, and oeuvres, and places the rest of *Merry Pictures* in a completely different, thoroughly global reception context. There it is above all the secondary or even tertiary semiotization of the socialist representations of childhood. On the one hand, the *little folks* receive a clear reappreciation, even overrating.<sup>6</sup> On the other hand, they are

<sup>6</sup> Within the two-volume novel project by Sergey Anufriev and Pepperstein entitled *Mifogennaia liubov kast* (Mythogenic Love of Casts), in which the nearly-godlike Merry Folks Club populates the psychedelic imagined Soviet myths (Gözl 2007/8), it is said that “God-Artist turned in dance with the queen of the flowers. God-Russian-Boy wiggled in dance with the God-Robot [...]” (Pepperstein 2002: 354).

utilized like flat adhesive pictures that simply stand for socialist “pathos formulas” without difference and beyond their primary history.

## 2. ENOUGH OF THE FUNNY BUSINESS

This article intended to demonstrate that the Soviet childhood has, by now, finally become history, even in its perhaps last representation as the hardy magazine project of *Merry Pictures*. But other kinds of “post-historical” reception should also be mentioned. They generate new meanings and contexts for the pictures and in the meantime, as the “first Russian comic” and “discourse mask of Moscow Conceptualism,” have become a part of the canon of the visual imagery cosmos of Socialism in its Soviet or, more precisely, Russian Soviet, variant. In that way, to a certain degree they provide contrary identifications of *Merry Pictures* as a comic strip free of ideology and as a figuration of socialist “pathos formulas” contaminated by ideology. But they are not the only remnants left from this formerly so dominant world of imagery from Soviet childhoods. Over more than thirty years it can be seen how the magazine used its latitude for shaping a multifaceted childhood despite increasing limitations. However, what remains left out here for reasons of space are the practices with which the actual recipients, the Soviet children of the late 1950s, 60s, 70s, 80s and early 90s, dealt with *Merry Pictures* and the merry childhood presented there.

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