



The Brumberg Sisters

Zinaida Brumberg

Also Known As:

Zinaida Semyonovna Brumberg

Lived:

August 2, 1900 - February 9, 1983

Worked as:

animator, artistic council member, co-director, director, editor, screenwriter

Worked In:

Russia, Soviet Union

Valentina Brumberg

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by Maya Balakirsky Katz

Born exactly a year apart, sisters Valentina and Zinaida Brumberg worked together their entire careers in the Soviet animation industry, becoming known as the “grandmothers of Russian animation” for their work in the fairytale genre (Katz 2016, 248n1). The Brumberg sisters are notable in Russian animation because they were among the first generation of animators in the country during the Revolutionary years, a unique environment that allowed women—even Jewish women—to make their way to the top of the industry. Perhaps their presence is more notable in the international arena as animation was dominated by men in the early decades and Valentina and Zinaida were among the first women in world animation, alongside anatomized pockets of

female artists, such as [Lotte Reiniger](#) in Germany, [Helena Smith Dayton](#) in America, and Hermína Týrlová in Czechoslovakia. The Brumberg sisters were also at the forefront of many technical and aesthetic innovations, such as the projection of animated segments on theatrical stages, the use of paper cut-outs, the integration of folk styles for the stylization of indigenous tales, and the introduction of sound to Soviet animation.

The sisters initially aspired for the fine arts, enrolling in the cutting-edge VKhUTEMAS (the Higher Artistic-Technical Workshops) in 1918, which soon merged with the more traditional Moscow Institute of Painting, Sculpture, and Architecture, from where they graduated in 1925. In a short but lucid essay on her career, Zinaida recalled that “we went into animation in the 1920s when Soviet art was boiling, transforming, ventilating, going up and down. Everything was bubbling...” (1979, 4). Indeed, the 1920s were charged with experimentation and the sisters’ teachers were the avant-gardists Ilya Mashkov, Pyotr Konchalovsky, Abram Arkhipov, Robert Falk, and Aleksandr Rodchenko. Zinaida also credited the theatrical director Vsevolod Meyerhold and the young Sergei Eisenstein as the primary influences on their student work (4).

It is a testament to VKhUTEMAS’ pedagogical focus on investigating the unique attributes of artistic form that, even before graduating in painting, the sisters began to work in animation. The Brumbergs joined forces with other young avant-gardists who migrated to animation, such as Leonid Alekseevich Amal’rik, Aleksandr Bushkin, Ivan Ivanov-Vano, the sibling team Nikolai and Olga Khodataev, Yuri Merkulov, and Zenon Komissarenko.

The new medium of animation, especially in the silent era, was well-suited for the many ethnic nationalities that found themselves absorbed into the Soviet Union. In one of their first films, *Kitai v ognе/China Aflame* (1925), the Brumberg sisters integrated Chinese landscape and topography with paper cutouts and an avant-garde constructivist style. At a running time of over fifty minutes and a length of 1,000 meters of film, *China Aflame* was one of the first feature films in world animation. The film is an unprecedented amalgam of various techniques, with the use of paper cut-outs alongside classical animation while folk-art styles were used to satirize the caricatured bourgeoisie.

The year 1927 was a busy one for the Brumberg sisters. Out of the twenty or so animated films produced in the Soviet Union that year, they made three: *Samoedskii malchik/Eskimo Boy/The Samoyed Boy*, *Odna iz mnogikh/One of Many*, and the now lost *Daesh’ khoroshii lavkom!/Give Us a Good Store!* All three films were made under the auspices of the workshop All-Union National Institute of Cinema (GTK, later VGIK). In its formative years, GTK sought to produce silent animated films that highlighted the new medium’s potential to create a progressive culture.

Together with the Khodataev siblings, Valentina and Zinaida directed *The Samoyed Boy*, the first Soviet animated film for children (Margolina and Lozinskaia 2016, 28-33). The film follows the story of a young Eskimo named Chu in the Tundra Nenets language. Chu heroically conquers a bear, skins it, and hangs the hide in his family home. In the meantime, the village Shaman claims the bear for himself and sets Chu to work a mechanical device to animate a statue that the villagers worship. Still bitter from the loss of his bear hide, Chu retaliates against the Shaman’s

exploitation of the people by exposing the machinery he uses to evoke the illusion of lifelike movement in a statue. Chu's act of rebellion picked up on the much-maligned concept of *animism*, a Marxist term referring to the magic endowment of life to inanimate objects or beings, which, in the 1920s, became a buzzword in the attack on the primitivism of folklore for its inculcation of children to the idea and experience of enchantment (Katz 79). Chu's exposure of the priest's animism makes Chu a harbinger of enlightened atheism within the film's narrative arc. At the same time, the scene makes a clear distinction between the false animism that backward priests preach and the transparent scientific approach that *animation* brings to the subject of folklore. After the ruined Shaman lures Chu into the sea, a modern Soviet ship rescues the boy and takes him to Leningrad, where a title card states, "Our Samoyed Boy is no fool / He went to the Workers' School." Here, again, the directors mount a defense of folklore by referencing an actual school in Leningrad that catered to "Northern Peoples" by teaching them how to use their artisan skills in the industrialization efforts of the country. The film also makes a more subtle case for the continuum between old and new by rendering the carefree character of Chu in hand-drawn paper cut-outs and then naturalizing this Old World Chu in the village scenes through the adoption of a style reminiscent of the Samoyed art of scrimshaw carvings. The directors then contrasted the elaborate and terrifying beauty of the village scenes with the simplified and measured architectural draftsmanship of Mstislav Dobuzhinsky for the Leningrad scenes (Bagrov 2013, 130).

Alongside the politically-driven content of *The Samoyed Boy*, the Brumbergs created more lightweight entertainment with *One of Many*, which was advertised as a satire ridiculing the popular fascination with American movie stars, but betrayed a real understanding of American films and the star culture of Hollywood. As film scholar Sergei Kapkov observed, *One of Many* "should probably be viewed as a supplement to [the Soviet film] *The Kiss of Mary Pickford* (1927), an 'acted' comedy about the excesses of fandom and admiration for Hollywood" (2004, 10). In fact, Valentina and Zinaida used the same documentary footage of [Mary Pickford](#) and Douglas Fairbanks' 1926 visit to the Soviet Union that was used in *The Kiss*. They featured it in the live-action sequence of *One of Many* alongside animated versions of Pickford and Fairbanks. In *One of Many*, the heroine dreams of going to Hollywood. Her wish comes true, and she arrives to meet Pickford and Fairbanks, as well as other silent stars (who had recently visited Moscow in real life), such as D.W. Griffith and Charlie Chaplin and the Danish comic actors Carl Schenstrøm and Harald Madsen. The film ends, however, with a terrifying sequence where Fairbanks leaves the dreamer to be attacked by lions that descend from the Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer logo. In horror, the heroine wakes up, having lost all interest in Hollywood.

The Brumbergs also animated the Khodataev siblings' hand-drawn film *Groznyi vavila i Tetka Arina/Terrible Vavila and Aunti Arina* (1928), the first animated film in the Soviet Union to directly address women's rights. In the film, the arrival of Women's Day on March 8 stops the daily grind for two rural women as their pails of water force them to take the day off and reclaim their rights. One woman's husband complains that he wants supper, but despite his dog-like face contorting in anger and shock and his hanging on to his wife's apron strings, the two women head off to the collective. All the women from the village fill the school building, discuss the issues that

matter to them, and sing national anthems to celebrate the day while the husband and another aggrieved chum are schooled—and beaten up by—implements of labor, the sickle and cane.

Besides their contributions to the GTK workshop films in 1927-8, the Brumbergs and the Khodataevs created animated clips for the theater in collaboration with Natal'ia Sats, the founder of the first children's theater in the world. Projecting film clips—especially documentary footage—onto the theatrical set was a hallmark of Soviet theater in the 1920s, a practice Sats criticized as devaluing theater, “which has its own truth, for all its conventionality” (1985, 111). Sats felt differently about the projection of animation onto the theater set and she was the first, several years ahead of Erwin Friedrich Piscator in Germany, to specifically incorporate animation into the theatrical action on stage for her 1927 children's pantomime ballet “Negritenok i obez'iana” (The Little Negro Boy and the Monkey). The performance focused on the friendship of an African boy named Nagua and a monkey in their native land, which the Brumbergs animated as a primitive but idyllic world. The production was an unparalleled hit, and the Moscow Children's Theater reportedly performed it one thousand times in its first six years and other Eastern European theaters soon incorporated into their repertoires (Sats 112). The multimedia performance, which would become the signature performative mode of the Moscow Children's Theater, brought Sats and the Brumberg sisters wide recognition in both the Soviet and foreign press as the sort of creative artists that Soviet socialism produced.

The animated segments for “The Little Negro Boy and the Monkey” do not seem to have survived, but they were described in some detail by both Zinaida and Sats, as well as in the script, contemporary theatrical reviews, and stage-set photographs (Rozanov and Sats 1930, 30-34, 37). In her memoir, Zinaida described the setup of the stage as containing the actors in the foreground and a big screen in the background, behind which “the actors hid themselves from time to time. The lights went off and drawings and images of those same actors appeared on the lighted screen” (14). The Soviet press singled out silent animation in the achievement of a “synthetic production” that combined dance, pantomime, animation, and music (Water 2019, 133). “Animated cartoons are close to children's pictures,” wrote Sats in her autobiography *Sketches from My Life*, “they have the virtue of dispensing with unnecessary detail and conveying the essentials in the most dynamic manner” (112). Sats was especially taken with the theatrical dramatization inherent in the medium of animation and its solution to the sticky problem of “dramatic time,” writing that the animated films made for her theater “would extend the possibilities of theatre without interfering with the overall artistic design, they would help to show rapid sequences of scenes of nature and adventure” (112).

After the initial success of using animation, Sats commissioned stage-specific animations from the Brumberg sisters and the Khodataev siblings for the 1928 children's play “Pro Dzyubu” (About Dzyuba). The play tells the story of Vasya, a young boy who identifies himself as “Dzyuba” from the fairytale land of Pashukania. No one but a young girl named Nina believes his tales, and she defends him against accusations of lies with the help of animated segments featuring creatures collaged from a variety of different animal bodies. Sats integrated the animated segments “in conjunction with stage action” to support the theme of “the child's right to creative fantasy” (Sats

117). She projected one animated segment upside down for the scene of Upsidetown, with the roots of the trees in the sky and the houses standing precariously on their roofs, while, for the scene of Backtofrontown, the animation was projected in reverse (Sats 117). Ivan Ivanov-Vano, who would become the official face of Soviet animation for the next fifty years, later observed that years before the advent of sound cinema, the production's live musical performance kept time with the movements in the film sequences, which "amazed [even] the animators that even before the invention of sound cinema [this] could have such a great emotional impact" on the production (Ivanov-Vano 1980, 45). "This was," he continued, "in effect, the first experiment in combining synchronized music and cartoon action, though, at that stage, this was only achieved in the theatre rather than the cinema." Ivanov-Vano concluded his exuberant review by turning to his own contribution to the development of sound: "We realized for the first time what great opportunities lay in the synthesis of music and visual imagery."

Despite the praise that Ivanov-Vano would later shower onto Sats' avant-garde use of animation, the Brumbergs forged their directorial identities in reaction to him. While Ivanov-Vano's group, known as IVVOSTON, an acronym of the surnames of the male directors Aleksandr Ivanov, Nikolai Voinov, and Panteleimon Sazonov, was pushing for technological breakthroughs in synchronized sound, the Brumbergs were producing non-synchronized animated films at a rather astounding rate. Unfortunately, many of these films are now considered lost. For example, in 1930, the Brumbergs made *Vesennii Sev'/Spring Sowing*, which called for a sowing campaign. The following year, the Brumbergs made agit-prop films like the hand-drawn animation short promoting the activities of "Avtodor," a motor improvement society in operation between 1927-1935. They also made artistic films, such as *Blokha/Flea* (1931), a non-synchronized short animating M.P. Mussorgsky's song "Pesniu o blokhe" (The Song of the Flea). The following year, Zinaida, working alone, made *Parovoz, leti vpered/Train, Go Forward* (1932), an agit-prop animated short protesting drunkenness and idleness.

While the invention of sound technology inspired Ivanov-Vano's IVVOSTON group to develop the technical side of sound, the Brumbergs took the opportunity to make a more practical case for a reconceptualization of employees working on a film as a cohesive group. In a 1935 article, Valentina turned to Disney's *Silly Symphonies* series (1929-39) to expound on Walt Disney's successful implementation of stable project teams as a useable model for Soviet animation (4). Although some animators resisted the use of sound, seeing it as a disruption of their creative autonomy and distribution (because the majority of theaters were not yet equipped for sound), Valentina celebrated the end of silent film if only because the adoption of sound required more crew members and the formation of stable "groups." In shaping the Brumberg group on the pretext of introducing sound to animation, the sisters transformed themselves and their employees into members of a new professional circle. In her memoir, Zinaida wrote that "in the beginning of our career, we did a lot ourselves. We were at once scriptwriters and artists and directors," but consistent innovation came about "only through the group" (20).

In 1936, the sisters were among the founding employees of Stalin's Soyuzmultfilm, where they achieved official director status as state employees. At Soyuzmultfilm, Valentina and Zinaida

sheltered and nurtured underemployed artists from Moscow's avant-garde milieu, including those who had lost traction after the silent era, such as Boris Barnet and Zenaida Naryshkin. Their experience in the silent era was critical to their creation of animated political shorts during World War II, which were, for all intents and purposes, produced as silent films even if music and a soundtrack were later added. This need to return to silent filmmaking was both because of the haste in which wartime shorts needed to be produced and because of the need for national communication that would reach the wide range of ethnic populations in the country. The sisters went on to co-direct more than forty animated films over their long careers until they were pushed out by the studio head, Mikhail Valkov, in the mid-1970s as part of a staff turnover engineered to wrest control from directors. "Older directors were not given scripts," recalled art director Lana Azarkh, "and if they found them on their own, there was no place in the studio for them to shoot them...The cruel and crude manner in which the directors were treated made it clear to them that it was necessary to retire" (Azarkh, part II 165).

Because they worked in the Soviet Union, everything that was published about Valentina and Zinaida during their lifetimes appeared in state-sponsored publications, such as biographical profiles in state newspapers and reports on their films in official film journals. After the opening up of state archives in the 1990s, the Soyuzmultfilm archive became available, which includes a vast number of materials directly relevant to the Brumberg sisters, such as their story meeting notes, the notes of the Artistic Council that discussed their films and other films for which they served as peer-reviewers, their original scripts and multiple versions of the scripts as they went through production, and the contracts they doled out to freelance artists and writers to work on their films. Furthermore, despite the political overturns of the twentieth century, Russia's film archive, Gosfilmofond, has preserved many animated Soviet films from the silent era, including those of the Brumberg sisters.

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Archival Paper Collections:

Personnel file for Valentina Brumberg. Fund 2469, inventory list 6. [Russian State Archive of Literature and Arts](#).

Personal VKhUTEMAS student file for Valentina Brumberg. Fund 677, inventory list 1. [Russian State Archive of Literature and Arts](#).

Personnel file for Zinaida Brumberg. Fund 2469, inventory list 6. [Russian State Archive of Literature and Arts](#).

Personal VKhUTEMAS student file for Zinaida Brumberg. Fund 677, inventory list 1. [Russian State Archive of Literature and Arts](#).

Filmography

A. Archival Filmography: Extant Film Titles:

1. Valentina and Zinaida Brumberg as Co-Directors, Co-Screenwriters, and Co-Animators

Samoedskii malchik/Eskimo Boy/The Samoyed Boy. Dir./sc./anim.: Valentina and Zinaida Brumberg, Ol'ga Khodataeva and Nikolai Khodataev (Sovkino 3rd Factory USSR 1928) si, b&w, 1,259.84 ft. (original length). Archive: [Gosfilmofond of Russia \[RUR\]](#) (Film-document no. 16295) [Note: Only a later sound version survives; sound was added in 1931 by Nikolay Bravko, composer L. Polovinkin, and sound engineer N. Timartsev; print length is 1,282.81 ft.].

2. Valentina and Zinaida Brumberg as Co-Animators

Kitai v ogne/China Aflame. Anim.: Valentina and Zinaida Brumberg (GTK Kino-Moscow USSR 1925) si, b&w, 3 reels, 38 min. Archive: [Gosfilmofond of Russia \[RUR\]](#) (Film-document no. 16283).

Odna iz mnogikh/One of Many. Anim.: Valentina and Zinaida Brumberg, Ol'ga Khodataeva and Nikolai Khodataev (Mezhabpom-Rus USSR 1927), si, b&w, 35mm, 1,456.69 ft. Archive: [Gosfilmofond of Russia \[RUR\]](#) (Film-document no. 16290).

Groznyi vavila i Tetka Arina/Terrible Vavila and Aunti Arina. Anim.: Valentina and Zinaida Brumberg, Ol'ga Khodataeva and Nikolai Khodataev (Mezhrabpom-Rus' Tsentrosoiuz USSR 1928), si, b&w. Archive: [Gosfilmofond of Russia \[RUR\]](#) (Film-document no. 16293).

B. Filmography: Non-Extant Film Titles:

1. Valentina and Zinaida Brumberg as Co-Directors, Co-Screenwriters, and Co-Animators

Start, 1925; *Daesh' khoroshii lavkom!/Give Us a Good Store!*, 1927; *Vesennii Sev'/Spring Sowing*, 1930; *Autodorets/Carrier*, 1931; *Blokha/Flea*, 1931; *Veselaia zhizn'/Fun Life*, 1932.

2. Valentina and Zinaida Brumberg as Co-Animators for films projected on the theater stage (for Moscow's Children Theater)

Animated motion pictures for theatrical productions “Negritenok i obez'iana,” 1927; “Pro Dzyubu,” 1928.

3. Zinaida Brumberg as Director and Animator

Parovoz, leti vpered/Train, Go Forward, 1932.

C. DVD Sources:

Der Neue Mensch: Aufbruch und Alltag im revolutionären Russland. DVD. (absolut MEDIEN GmbH Germany 2017) - contains *The Samoyed Boy* (1928) and *Terrible Vavila and Aunti Arina* (1928)

In 1992, the American company Films by Jove signed a deal with the faltering Soyuzmultfilm studio to acquire rights to 547 of the most popular studio films for a period of ten years (outside the borders of the former Soviet Union). In that period, Films by Jove restored and released many of the films on television, VHS, and DVD (with English subtitles). A selection of their DVDs is listed below:

Soviet Animated Propaganda. VHS/DVD. (Films by Jove US 1997). Two-cassette VHS set featuring 11 Soyuzmultfilm films, including the Brumbergs' *The Samoyed Boy* (1928). When re-released on DVD, it was a four-disk box set featuring 41 Soyuzmultfilm animated films, including the Brumberg sisters' wartime film *What Hitler Wants* (1941).

Stories from My Childhood. DVD/VHS. (Films by Jove US 1998), a PBS television series narrated by Mikhail Baryshnikov, which dubbed Soviet animated classics with American actors and included the Brumbergs' films.

D. Streamed Media:

[*Groznyi vavila i Tetka Arina/Terrible Vavila and Aunti Arina* \(1928\)](#)

Kitai v ogne/China Aflame (1925)

Odna iz mnogikh/One of Many (1927)

Samoedskii malchik/Eskimo Boy/The Samoyed Boy (1928)

Korifei rossiiskoi animatsii: Valentina and Zinaida Brumberg, portret khudozhnikov na fone epokhe/Masters of Russian Animation: Valentina and Zinaida Brumberg, A Portrait against the Background of their Times (2013)

E. Unfinished Work:

Because of the nature of the studio, there are many films that the Brumbergs proposed that were rejected, that they began that were never produced, and that went through so many phases of editing that it is difficult to trace where one work ends and another begins. However, much of this is researchable at the Soyuzmultfilm studio archive at the Russian State Archive of Literature and Arts (RGALI).

Credit Report

The website animator.ru lists the Brumberg sisters' film credits, but does not list reel details. The archives at Gosfilmofond provide reel specifications. IMDb has an incomplete list of the Brumbergs' various roles in the industry.

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