Room and a Half, or a Sentimental Journey to the Homeland
[Poltory komna, ili Sentimental'noe puteshestvie na rodinu]

Russia, 2008
Color/black and white, 130 minutes
Director: Andrei Khrzhanovskii
Screenplay: Andrei Khrzhanovskii, Iurii Arabov
Cinematography: Vladimir Bryliakov
Editors: Igor’ Malachov, Vladimir Grigorenko
Sound: Petr Malafiev
Production Designer: Marina Azizian
Costume Designers: Natalia Baranova, Marina Nikolaeva
Cast: Grigorii Ditiatkovskii (Brodskii), Alisa Freindlikh, Sergei Iurskii, Evgenii Ogadzhanian (Brodskii as a child), Artem Smola (young Brodskii), Aleksandr Bargman, Sergei Barkovskii, Aleksei Devotchenko, Sergei Dreiden
Producers: Artem Vasil’ev, Andrei Khrzhanovskii
Production: Shar Studio

The first feature film by acclaimed animator Andrei Khrzhanovskii, Room and a Half is a mockumentary presenting the fictional return of the Nobel Prize winning poet, Iosif Brodskii, to present-day Russia. The film plays with the fact that when asked whether he ever intended to return to his Motherland, Brodsky replied that “Such a journey could only take place anonymously…” Room and a Half imagines such an anonymous journey. The film interprets several of Brodskii’s essays and incorporates his poetry and drawings.

This imaginary journey serves as a frame for the poet’s recollections of his past life starting with his early childhood and ending with the final return to the motherland. The film begins with Brodskii’s phone call to his parents’ communal Petersburg apartment; no one answers and he decides to return to Petersburg. His journey across the Atlantic enables his recollections since, according to Brodskii, “water predisposes one to reminiscences.”

The film starts in Brodskii’s early childhood with recollections of experiences of the war and his father’s return from China. After the war, the Brodskiis represent an ideal family, with mother (Alisa Freindlikh), father (Sergei Iurskii), and their son Evgenii Ogadzhanian. The film then proceeds through Brodskii’s turbulent youth, his famous encounter with Soviet authorities that result in the accusation of parasitism, exile, and final immigration. The film ends with Brodskii’s arrival in present-day Russia, which coincides with his death. The choice of and connections between these reminiscences are largely guided by associations dictated by Brodskii’s poetry and Khrzhanovskii’s artistic decisions.

Significantly, Brodskii never visited the Soviet Union or Russia after his immigration to the U.S in the 1970s. Dying in 1996, Brodskii was unable to fulfill his poetic promise of returning one day to Petersburg. The film reconnects the fractured Soviet past by incorporating the experience of immigrants into fictional Soviet history. Starting with Perestroika, the works of immigrant writers were published in Soviet Union, and stories of immigrants’ lives were remembered in Soviet publications. In its retrospective recounting of Brodskii’s life, the film continues this tradition. Brodskii’s life in immigration appears insignificant and incomplete by comparison with his radiant childhood and exciting youth. Brodskii’s calls home emphasize the loss, and present-day Russia is associated with death.
Nostalgia is the dominant feeling and uniting theme of the film. The nostalgic recovery of the past works on several levels: as the nostalgia of an immigrant poet for his lost homeland and audience, nostalgia for the lost Soviet era, and nostalgia for lost youth and even life. At the end of the film we realize that Brodskii and his parents are already dead, even though Brodskii is surprised at this discovery. This feeling is reinforced by the presentation of childhood in a near perfect family and in a city “where the air was of the color of frozen vodka.”

Brodskii’s recollections of the Soviet past acquire a certain typicality. Communal apartments, the Book of Tasty and Healthy Eating, and lessons at a Soviet school—all these experiences are representative of both Brodskii’s and Khrzhanovskii’s generations. In this respect, Brodskii’s recollections represent those generations, whose past has been lost with the disappearance of the Soviet Union. The film switches to black-and-white to reproduce the Soviet past.

Due to this nostalgic presentation of the past, even Joseph Stalin appears as a harmless cook. Ironically, Stalin’s prediction about the future demise of good Soviet sausage comes true, while his threat to send the boy on a Journey never materializes. While nostalgia can often be overly sentimental, the film is partially saved from this by Khrzhanovskii’s extensive use of animation. The cartoons of a cat, flying instruments, and crows add humor and poetic fantasy to the film.

The episode of the flying instruments is connected to Soviet Jewish history. When, as a boy, Iosif witnesses the sale of the family piano—and his family’s preparations for being deported to the Far East—he imagines all the musical instruments of the city floating high above and forming an orchestra in the sky. The flying instruments symbolically represent the period in Soviet history when Stalin devised a plan of sending Soviet Jews to Birobidzhan, created by the government as the new Jewish autonomous republic. Due to the fact that many Soviet Jews were musicians, Stalin’s decree would actually have represented the removal of musical instruments from Soviet metropoles. Fortunately, this plan never came to reality, due to the death of Stalin. Through this symbolic use of musical instruments, even this grim episode in Soviet history appears humorous.

The cat comes from Brodskii’s drawings; he is a character in its own right, possessing artistic and romantic aspirations that foil those of Brodskii. The crows represent Brodskii’s dead parents and appear near his New York courtyard after his parents’ death. Thus, the film combines a variety of media: real and fictional footage, recordings of Brodskii’s poetry readings, and animation. It is this eclecticism of styles that makes Khrzhanovskii’s film innovative and enjoyable.

Andrei Khrzhanovskii (1939- ):
In 1962, Khrzhanovskii graduated from the State Institute for Filmmaking (VGIK), where he studied with Lev Kuleshov. That same year he began working at Soiuzmul'tfil'm Studio. In addition to being an acclaimed animator, he is also a professor at VGIK and the chair of the Animation Department. In 2003, he received the Nika Prize for his animation Cat and a Half. In 2009, Room and a Half received the Nika Prize for Best Film, Best Director, and Best Scriptwriter.

Filmography:
2009 Room and a Half, or a Sentimental Journey to the Homeland

Selected Animation Filmography:
2003 Cat and a Half
1985 The King’s Sandwich
1982 Autumn
1980 And I am Again with You
1977 I Fly to You by Recollection
1976 The House that Jack Built
1972 Butterfly
1968 The Glass Harmonica
1966 Once Lived Kozyavin

Irina Anisimova