

Digital Storytelling Project Report
Russian 250: Russian Culture through Cinema
Instructor: Anna Aydinyan
12/16/2019

As the project proposal suggested the students in Russian 250 explored Russian film and its cultural context assuming three different roles: the viewer, the critic and the filmmaker. They posted questions on the Moodle forum and discussed their ideas as viewers, wrote film reviews and made presentations as film critics, and created their own films as filmmakers.

The Digital Storytelling Project went according to the initial plan and the attached calendar. During week 3 of the course, the students watched and discussed the feature film "Mirror" (1975) and the animated film "Tale of Tales" (1979) that belonged to the "poetic" style of cinema and animation. They used these films as a point of departure for their creative projects. Both films attempt to capture and communicate childhood memories through visual representation of the childhood house and garden, the surrounding nature, furniture, household utensils and food.

As intermediary project # 1 that prepared the students for their final work, they translated episodes from either "Mirror" or "Tale of Tales" into a poem (one student included parts of both films). The purpose of this assignment was to explore differences between visual and verbal expression. The students read their poems in class and received feedback from their classmates as well as the instructor. They had time to reflect on this assignment and to discuss their reflections with each other. The students thought that writing their poems made them analyze visual aspects of the films, noticing the "not so obvious ones," which gave them a deeper understanding of the cinematic elements. One student viewed this exercise as a creative mode of analyzing the films. Others appreciated that it made them think about the difference between a non-linear poetic and a linear narrative-based representation either in writing or in film.

As intermediary project # 2, the students chose a poem and translated it into a 1-minute film (one student created a 1-minute animation). Digital Media Instructional Technologist, Ashley Butler, visited our class to help the students with their projects. The students thought that it was very helpful. As with the other projects, they had an opportunity to receive feedback from their peers and to reflect on the process and outcome of their work. They enjoyed seeing "a direct creative connection" between the films that they were watching and their own films. The assignment gave them a better understanding of the filmmaking process, making them reflect on how to turn words into images, and how to make the audience see something the way they saw it. The students also mentioned that this assignment made them compare and contrast realistic representation with poetic symbolism, and appreciate the latter in the Russian films they watched during the semester. As an improvement for further projects, one of the students suggested that the prompt should encourage each student to choose 2 or 3 particular cinematic techniques and apply them to their films.

As their final creative project # 3, the students made a 3-minute film (one student created a 3-minute animation instead), in which they shared their childhood memories through visual representation of household objects (the prompt suggested to choose 3 objects but the number of actual objects varied). Three students payed homage to “Mirror,” the others came up with their own style that expressed their unique experiences. These final projects benefitted from the students previous exposure to Digital Storytelling while working on the intermediate project # 2. In spite of following the same prompt, they were very diverse in form and content. One student explored through animation his childhood memories of playing video games while also including images that reminded him of his parents’ country Barbados. Another outstanding project included home videos of the student’s childhood toy train and carousel rides, alternated with landscapes shot from a window of a moving train and scenes of birthday celebrations, conveying the metaphor of life as a journey. In this film, childhood wonder, and at the same time the security of travelling on the known (circular) path surrounded by family, was opposed to the linear path into the unknown that lied ahead of her. The students screened their films in class and received feedback from each other. While working on the project they completed a reflective writing exercise that put their work in the broader context of the course. As one of the students wrote, this final project allowed them to revisit the films they saw and use “multiple pieces to create a whole.”

Overall, the project achieved the learning objectives outlined in the proposal.

1. The students had to study the Russian filmmakers’ ideas, techniques and imagery in-depth in order to work on their projects, whether or not they eventually decided to emulate them.
2. They explored the complex interrelations between memories and their artistic representation.
3. They found ways of representing historical time through personal memories.
4. Working on their projects, the students considered the relationship between the past and its cinematic representation. They extrapolated this experience to consider the overarching question of the course - is it possible to objectively represent the history of a country, its cultural past through its cinema?

In addition to these expected outcomes, the students’ reflections contain revelations that are more personal. One of the students shared that making a film about his childhood memories made him think about the meaning of life. Another student admitted that he used to hate poetry before taking this class, but admiring and emulating Russian poetic cinema made him also appreciate verbal poetic compositions.

5 out of 6 students suggested that I keep this project as a permanent feature of Russian 250.

I am very grateful for the opportunity to include the Digital Storytelling Project in my course this year and for the help I received from the Center for Innovative Pedagogy while planning and implementing it. I am planning to include it in Russian 250 in the future.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

Anna Aydinyan