

Contact

VLADIMIR TARASOV

1978



Vladimir Tarasov is widely known for his Soviet-era sci-fi animation. 'Contact' follows an artist's encounter with a shapeshifting alien. Yet the artist's vision of extra-terrestrial life is full of abstract transitions and bright colours, making it difficult to distinguish fantasy from reality.

The main character, a painter with a stunning 70s moustache, in a bright yellow straw hat and pipe, strolls through the countryside in search of inspiration, humming a song to himself. Lying down by a lake he is unaware that an alien spaceship lands nearby. The alien is a slug-like blob of colour and movement with big constantly moving triangular eyes who can shape-shift into anything it encounters from shoes to a butterfly. Terrified by the sight of the alien and convinced it intends to abduct him, the artist flees, leaving behind his boots, hat, paintbox, and pipe, which the bewildered alien attempts to return to him. When the creature eventually catches up with the painter, it attempts to repeat the melody it had heard him humming earlier, and the man realizes he has nothing to fear. At last, the painter and the alien end up humming the melody together and walking off as friends.

'Contact' is beautiful yet bizarre; it is widely remembered by young people in their mid to late 20s in Russia as being played every morning on TV during the 90s. As they say, it always terrified them, yet they also enjoyed the melody and the visuals. Indeed, the animation presents some unexpected and often eerie imagery: when the painter first lays his eyes on the alien he imagines men locked in cages as the alien dances around them. However, the film combines this eeriness with such cheerful tunes and animation, it is impossible to look away. The art director Nikolay Koshkin takes clear inspiration from George Dunning's *Yellow Submarine* (1968) in the bright and dynamic mixture of animation styles. *Contact* won awards at the International Film Festival of Science Fiction Films in Trieste and the International Festival of Short and Documentary Films in Lille.

Interestingly, the tune the painter and alien hum throughout the film was the first time Soviet viewers encountered Nino Rota's song "Parla Più Piano," known in the US and UK as "Speak Softly,

Love", eventually used as the love theme for 1973's 'The Godfather'. Before the Hollywood film appeared on the Soviet screen, in 1978 the song became the hallmark of Vladimir Tarasov's cartoon 'Contact'. Tarasov explained in an interview, that The Soviet Union had not yet undertaken the obligation to pay for music rights, so filmmakers were free to use whatever they wanted. When 'The Godfather' finally came out in Soviet cinemas, Soviet viewers thought foreigners had stolen music from a good old cartoon!

Tarasov himself is a fascinating character. He started at Soyuzmultfilm at 16 in 1956 and worked his way up to directing his own animations. Tarasov often talked about the glory days of Soviet animation and the 'industrial espionage' that started it all. In 1936, a year after the first Moscow International Film Festival, when Soviet viewers saw a Disney film for the first time, Stalin had famously said: "I want a Soviet Mickey Mouse!". That's how Soyuzdetmultfilm was born. Its first director was Viktor Smirnov, who travelled to the States to copy the principles of Disney's work, and later studied Disney cartoons day and night frame by frame in his studio.

After releasing his beautiful animations like 'Contact' (1978), 'Shooting Range' (1979), and 'The Pass' (1988) at Soyuzmultfilm, Tarasov went on to teach animation in India and Iran. In the 90s when Soyuzmultfilm lost most of its budget, Tarasov was approached by an Indian entrepreneur and millionaire, to work on the organization of an animation studio at the Institute of Creative Arts "ZIKA". He worked in India for 5 years following 5 years building an animation studio in Iran. Now Tarasov teaches animation at the Moscow State Institute of Culture.

'Contact' was released at the time when the global interest in alien life was at a peak. Although many classic alien films released at the time were not widely available for the Soviet viewer, the questions of how communication with an extra-terrestrial intelligent life might occur was very much present in Soviet sci-fi literature and film of the 70s and 80s. Perhaps 'Contact' represented something Soviet viewers and artists longed for: meeting 'the other' and realising this whole time you had been humming the same song, the theme from 'The Godfather'.