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*Winnie-the-Pooh: Transmediation of A. A. Milne's Story in Anglophone and Post-Soviet Context*

### WINNIE-THE-POOH: TRANSMEDIATION OF A.A. MILNE'S STORY IN ANGLOPHONE AND POST-SOVIET CONTEXT

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#### **Abstract:**

The popularity of Winnie-the-Pooh in the English-speaking countries and post-Soviet Russia goes far beyond literature. The story has developed in the form of two separate media franchises, including the adaptation of the original plot for various platforms (in the form of famous animation adaptations by Disney and Soyuzmultfilm in particular) and its expansion both in the imagery linear plot space and in the real world. Despite this, Winnie-the-Pooh has not yet been studied in terms of its development across distinct media and environments. This paper will examine the phenomenon of the dual, parallel development of Winnie-the-Pooh as a transmedia project in the Anglophone context and post-Soviet Russia. It aims to outline the transmedia extensions of the original story and its Soviet adaptation in terms of the content, media platforms that are used for its broadcasting, and audience participation.

**Keywords:** transmedia project, Winnie-the-Pooh, Soyuzmultfilm, Disney, adaptation, Milne, Zakhoder

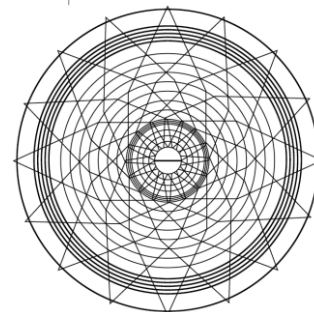
#### **Introduction**

Several generations of people in English-speaking countries and beyond grew up on the story about "the most famous and beloved bear in literature" (Connolly, 1995) — Winnie-the-Pooh, written by A. A. Milne. Despite the complexity of the book due to various

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metaphors, wordplay, and absurd humour, it has been translated into over fifty languages, adapting to specific cultural and social contexts. In USSR, the writer Boris Zakhoder, who skilfully reinterpreted the original source for the Soviet readers, has done the translation. This led to the fact that Winnie-the-Pooh became one of the most requested books in the Soviet and post-Soviet space (Smolyarova, 2008).

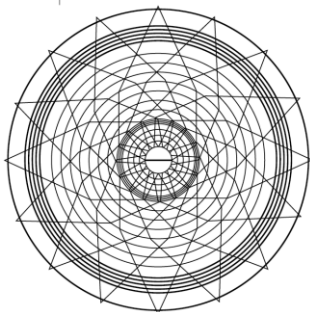
Nowadays, the popularity of Winnie-the-Pooh both in English- and Russian-speaking countries goes far beyond literature: in each country, the story has become a separate media franchise, which consists of the expansion of the plot in the imagery space (with sequels, prequels, and other non-linear storylines) and the real world (with amusement parks and merchandising), based on different media adaptations of the original story. The most popular of them are animation series made by Disney and Soyuzmultfilm: Disney's yellow bear can be found on the shelves of many toy stores all over the world, and various songs from Soyuzmultfilm's animation version of Zakhoder's book are still known by heart in Russian-speaking post-Soviet countries.

Despite the popularity of the original work and the franchises formed on its basis, Winnie-the-Pooh has not yet been studied in terms of its development as a product of the convergence culture and transmedia, or, in other words, in the context of its expressing across distinct media and environments (Dena, 2009).

This paper will examine the phenomenon of the dual, parallel development of Winnie-the-Pooh as a transmedia project in the USA, the USSR, and post-Soviet Russia. It aims to outline the differences and similarities in transmedia extensions of the original story and its Soviet adaptation in terms of the content (the way the plot was interpreted), media platforms used for its broadcasting, and audience participation, focusing on the two versions of a literary source, its animation adaptations, and the following products.

### **Transmediation of Winnie-the-Pooh in Anglophone Context: Disney and Beyond**

For the subsequent analysis of Winnie-the-Pooh as a transmedia project, it is necessary to emphasize the theoretical basis. Etymological decoding of the term transmedia is across media, meaning, "building experiences across and between the borders where multiple media platforms coalesce" (Freeman and Gambarato, 2018: 6). Projects based on this type of storytelling have emerged to meet the needs of evolving convergence culture, maintaining its, "flow of content across multiple media platforms, the cooperation between multiple media industries, and the migratory behaviour of media audiences who will go almost anywhere in search of the kinds of entertainment experiences they want" (Jenkins, 2006: 2). People began to not only consume content but to be the driving mechanisms of its development, which led to the adaptation of existing stories to modern reality, expanding the well-known plots and distributing it to various



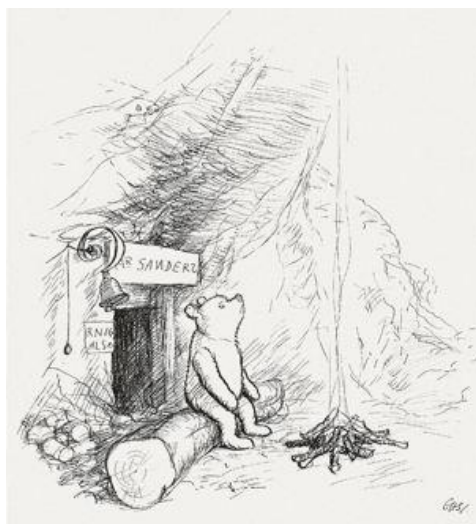
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media platforms, whereby the story “builds on historical precedents and benefits from digital technologies” (Harvey, 2015: 201), and continues to live in accordance with the modern world.

The story of Winnie-the-Pooh began to expand and broadly adapt through different media systems after the success of the monomedia version. Thus, the franchise can be considered a retroactive project (Davidson, 2010) since it was not originally conceived to be called transmedia. The original plot of Winnie-the-Pooh was presented in the form of a book written by A. A. Milne (published in print in 1926) and subsequently turned into a series of two stories and two collections of poems. Visual accompaniment for this edition was provided by E.H. Shepard (see figure 1), who is called the co-author of Milne, as his illustrations are related to the internal logic of the narrative and are of the enhancement type of word-picture relationships (Nikolajeva and Scott, 2001), expanding and complementing the meanings of the text, for example, in the case of the characters such as Heffalump, who have no verbal description in the story.



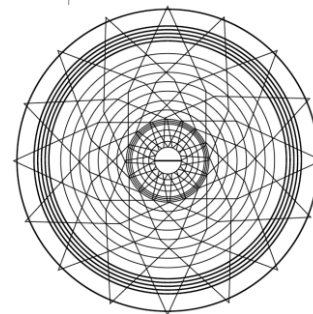
**Figure 1.** E. H. Shepard's illustration on Winnie-the-Pooh (1926)

The prototypes for characters both in the form of the text and illustrations were taken from the real world. Winnie was named after the bear from the Winnipeg Zoo; the animal characters were written and drawn from the real toys of the author's son, Christopher Robin, and Christopher Robin himself was a prototype for the character of the same name, both in the text and in the illustrations. Thus, from the very moment of its creation, Winnie-the-Pooh had certain references to the real world, and, accordingly, existed simultaneously in two worlds — the imaginary and the present, which was the first impetus to the formation of the universe of the story, and its' spreading. The text assumed the perception of the narrative through “three different scenes” (Smolyarova, 2008: 301-302; hereinafter — Our

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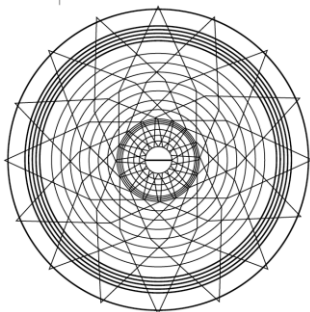
translation) — the play of Christopher Robin on a rug with toys, the life of the animals in the forest, shown through the eyes of different characters, and the story that the father tells the son about him and his bear cub. The latter may indicate the subjectivity of perception and the presence of different points of view on the narrative — one of the criteria of transmedia storytelling (Jenkins, 2011).

The story began developing actively as a multimedia project after A. A. Milne sold the rights to an American producer Stephen Slesinger, which led to the release of several adaptations in the 1930s-1950s, records and board games for instance. Winnie-the-Pooh turned into a media franchise after the resale of these rights to the Walt Disney Company in 1961, which began with the release of the animated featurette *Winnie the Pooh and the Honey Tree* in 1966. In addition to the rights to use Milne's text, Disney also bought out the rights to commercialize Shepard's drawings, which influenced the visual aesthetics of the further expansion of the project and its adaptation for different mediums — animation adaptations began to appear (e.g., the feature film *The Many Adventures of Winnie the Pooh* (1977), see figure 2), where the original story was altered to match the American market. An additional character Gopher was introduced, who is not represented in the original story. The prototype for this new character was an animal of the same name that lives only in North America.



**Figure 2.** Winnie-the-Pooh by Disney, *The Many Adventures of Winnie the Pooh* (1977)

After the success of animation adaptations, merchandising began to appear — board games, toys, food products, etc. Winnie the Pooh (in the American adaptation there is no dash in the spelling) became a brand and it was broadcast on a large number of different platforms both in the digital space (sites, computer games) and in the real world (amusement parks and festivals). The image of the yellow bear created by Shepard, which is now recognizable all over the world, began to be considered “the classic Winnie-the-Pooh”. According to Ann Thwaite, the author of A.A. Milne's biography, “Milne's animals have become part of the English language. It was taken for granted to know what was



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meant by 'Eeyore's donkey tone' or 'behave exactly like a Tigger'" (Smolyarova, 2008: 291).

The project could be characterized as a transmedia according to seven criteria proposed by H. Jenkins (2009a, 2009b):

- 1. Spreadability vs. Drillability** — *the public is actively involved in the distribution of the content that is "drawing viewers into the storyworlds and urging them to drill down to discover more".*

In the case of Winnie-the-Pooh, there are many ways for an audience to delve into the story — through reading books, watching cartoons, theatrical performances, and films, to name a few. The events of the animation series and the books do not completely repeat each other, extensions on other media platforms are the additions of the story with new details and facts, providing an extra disclosure of the characters' images, which allows the audience to piece together the plot, plunging deeper into the story and collecting it like a puzzle.

- 2. Continuity vs. Multiplicity** — *"coherence" and "plausibility" of the storyworld, and the possibility of its alternative versions.*

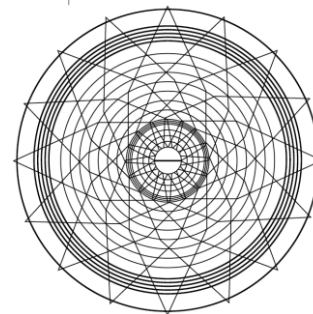
Even though the original work was written about a hundred years ago, the story is still developing. So, in 2009 *Return to the Hundred Acre Wood* — a sequel to the story by David Benedictus, was published and approved by the Pooh Properties Trust; the style of both Milne's writing and Shepard's illustrations were preserved in this book. In addition, new plot branches of the story were created, for example, in the sequel about the grown-up Christopher Robin — the *Christopher Robin* movie (2018). Through the development of the story on several platforms and in several temporal spaces (e.g. Christopher Robin as a child/Christopher Robin as an adult), it becomes possible to satisfy the need for "coherence" and "plausibility" of the storyworld for long-time fans of Winnie-the-Pooh through memory, which "plays a crucial role in determining the nature and extent of the storyworld's transmedial expansion" (Harvey, 2015: 183), and feeling of nostalgia in an adult audience that "grew up" with Christopher Robin. Also, such a widespread presence in the space-time continuum allows the project to attract a new audience that can connect to the story for the first time from any platform and at any time within the franchise, starting their acquaintance, for example, with the sequel, and if desired, delving into the earlier events in the universe of Winnie-the-Pooh.

- 3. Immersion vs. Extractability** — *a person can plunge into the world of a fictional story and take something out of it into the outside world.*

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A person can immerse himself or herself in the world of the story, for example, through an interactive experience in one of Disney's amusement parks. In addition, some elements of the story began to be broadcast into the real world — the game of Poohsticks became popular and every year the championship is held in Oxfordshire.

#### **4. Worldbuilding** — *the story involves the creation of a separate imaginary world.*

The action of the original story takes place simultaneously in three dimensions — the world of toys in Christopher Robin's room, the world of animals in the Hundred Acre Wood, and the world of characters in the stories a father tells his son. The Hundred Acre Wood becomes the main universe in which the characters are placed, growing as the story unfolds in different media.

#### **5. Seriality** — *the story as “a hyperbolic version of the serial, where the chunks of meaningful and engaging story information have been dispersed not simply across multiple segments within the same medium, but rather across multiple media systems”.*

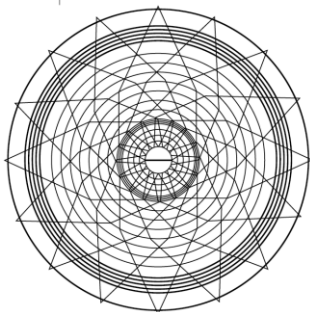
The original story was created in the form of a series of books, which already implies seriality. It was followed by the release of an animation series. Parts scattered across platforms allow one to connect the whole story together by switching between these platforms. So, from the animation film dedicated to Piglet (*Piglet's Big Movie*, 2003), his character is revealed in more detail than in the original plot from the book.

#### **6. Subjectivity** — *the opportunity to look at events through the eyes of different characters.*

In the narrative from the book, several points of view on the events are taking place. Through different interpretations, the characters are presented in different ways: for example, Winnie-the-Pooh “exists in several guises at once — a teddy bear presented to the real Christopher Milne on his first birthday, a little bear cub living in the Hundred Acre Wood, and an almost real bear that Winnie wants to seem from time to time” (Smolyarova, 2008: 302-303). In addition, in the media interpretations, there are pieces of the story presented on behalf of secondary characters, for example, in *The Tigger Movie* (2000), where Tigger is the main character, or in Disney's video game *Piglet's Big Game* (2003), where the action is performed on behalf of Piglet.

#### **7. Performance** — *active inclusion of the audience, and the presence of “cultural activators” for this inclusion.*

The audience has an influence on the expansion of the world through fanfiction, fan art, cosplay, widely represented on the Internet and at events such as ComicCon. The



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project erases cross-generational boundaries, as it is adapted both for a children's audience (as it is based on a children's fairy tale, which includes many "children's" elements — the invention of new words, a large number of songs, etc.), as well as for the adults through the awakening of feelings of nostalgia (if a person first gets acquainted with the plot in childhood and gets acquainted with its further development on different platforms as he grows older), and the use of various references, jokes, figures of speech (deconstructions of phraseological units and logical inversions) both in the original text and in its media adaptations.

The adult audience is also included through the creation of content that analyses the original work from many different perspectives. There are works where the author Benjamin Hoff explains the philosophy of Taoism — *The Tao of Pooh* (1982) and *The Te of Piglet* (1992) with the help of Milne's characters. Winnie-the-Pooh is analysed from the point of view of formalism and Freudianism in *The Pooh Perplex* by Frederick Crews (1963). Also in the scientific community, Winnie-the-Pooh has already been analysed in terms of the feminist discourse analysis (Stanger, 1987), as well as eating disorders (Borodina, 2019). This paper contains the analysis of Winnie-the-Pooh from the discourse of transmedia storytelling, and it can be considered one of the proofs of the involvement of the audience in the development of Winnie-the-Pooh as a transmedia project.

### **Winnie-the-Pooh in the Soviet and Post-Soviet Space: Zakhoder and Soyuzmultfilm**

There is a scenario where, due to the complexity of the original text (the presence of cultural references, metaphors, wordplay, and other means of artistic expression), the adaptation-translation becomes a full-fledged original work. Such an occurrence is not new in the context of literary translation into Russian: for example, it had happened with the adaptation of *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* (L. Frank Baum, 1900) by A. Volkov, who created on its basis *The Wizard of the Emerald City* (1939), where the plot underwent significant changes; the story was subsequently continued by its former translator without relying on the original source. Such adaptation can be called successful, on a basis of the interpretation of the "unsuccessful adaptation", which, according to Canadian academic Linda Hutcheon, can be thought of "not in terms of infidelity to a prior text, but in terms of a lack of the creativity and skill to make the text one's own and thus autonomous." (Hutcheon, 2013: 20-21).

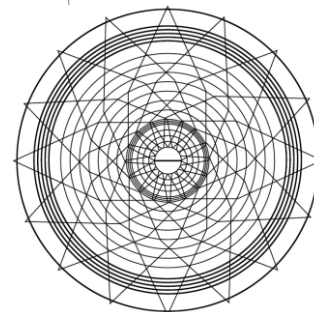
Boris Zakhoder was the first who made complete translation of Winnie-the-Pooh into Russian, and it can be considered a successful adaptation in terms of Hutcheon's theory. Zakhoder always emphasized that his book was not a translation, but a retelling, the result of Milne's co-creation and "re-creation" in accordance with Russian culture in an attempt to "first teach Winnie and his friends to speak Russian" (Zakhoder, 2002: 202). When translating, Zakhoder included in the original text several features that were characteristic



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exclusively for the USSR. Philologist and translator Natalia Smolyarova notes, “Zakhoder adapted Milne’s work not only for a child in general but for a Soviet child who was the first reader of his book. Some of the things in his retelling were designed specifically for the child of the era of scarcity” (Smolyarova, 2008: 306), meaning hidden jokes and allusions to the Communist regime. For example, “the song of praise” presented in the book is reminiscent of the appeal of the Soviet leaders to the people (Milne, 2014: 137; Our translation):

*Our friends! In that terrible hour  
Nobody, nobody would have saved us...  
Nobody would have helped us  
If not the Brave Piglet!*

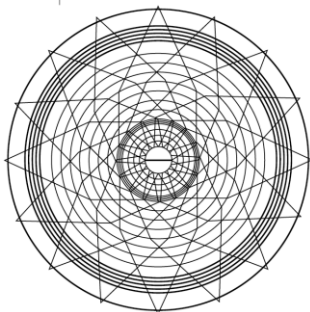
The image of the simple-minded Winnie-the-Pooh was initially quite close to Russian culture, in which “the beloved hero of all folk tales is called Ivanushka the Fool” (Zakhoder, 2002: 203); moreover, a brown bear is a famous character from Russian folk tales. The illustrator Alisa Poret (1960) in the first edition of Zakhoder’s translation emphasized it in her reinterpretation of the classical Shepard’s Winnie-the-Pooh (see figure 3).



**Figure 3.** Alisa Poret’s illustration on Winnie-the-Pooh (1960)

In subsequent editions, illustrators were also focused on the similar appearance of Winnie-the-Pooh, which is very different from the original Shepard’s version, thus creating their own, Soviet vision of the character. Remarkable in this regard are the illustrations by the Soviet artist Viktor Chizhikov, who is also the author of the image of the bear Misha,





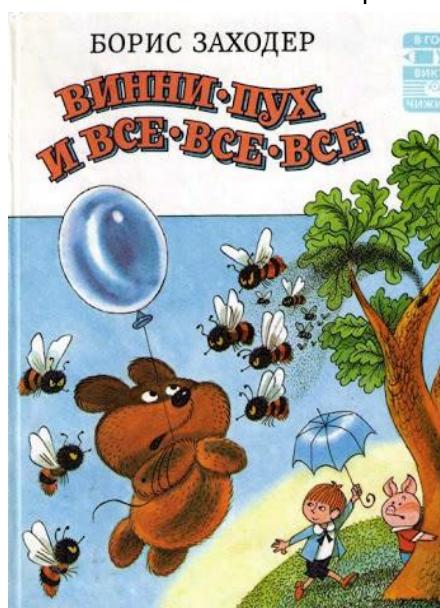
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the mascot of the 1980 Summer Olympics in Moscow of a similar appearance (see Figure 4, Figure 5).

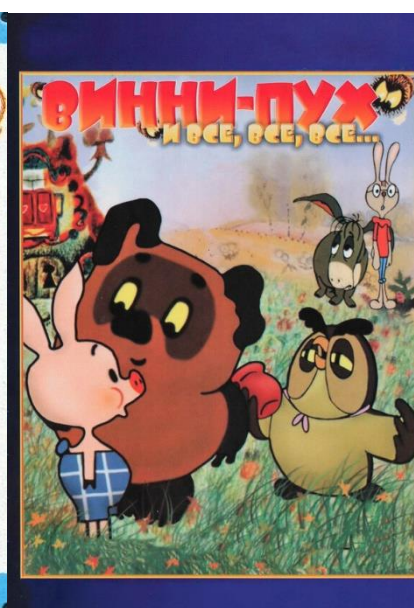
These illustrations reflect the image of Winnie-the-Pooh in an animation series adaptation created from 1969 to 1972 at the Soviet animation studio Soyuzmultfilm under the direction of Fyodor Khitruk (see Figure 6); the director in collaboration with Boris Zakhoder wrote the script for this series.



**Figure 4.** Viktor Chizhikov's illustration on Winnie-the-Pooh (1986)



**Figure 5.** Viktor Chizhikov's Misha, the mascot of the Summer Olympics in Moscow (1980)



**Figure 6.** Winnie-the-Pooh by Soyuzmultfilm: Winnie-the-Pooh (1969)

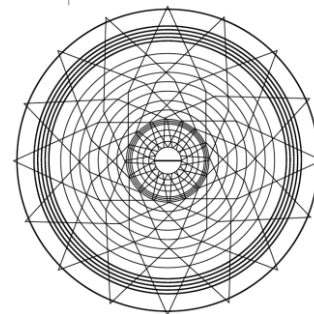
This series is a free interpretation of Milne's plot created without considering Disney's exclusive rights to film adaptation. Winnie-the-Pooh by Soyuzmultfilm "russifies" Milne's characters, changing the original storyline (which lacks some of the key characters of the book, for example, Christopher Robin), and the appearance of the characters "in a Soviet manner". For instance, in the Soyuzmultfilm's animation series, "the rabbit is an anecdotal image of the Soviet intellectual" (Leving, 2008: 332; hereinafter — our translation).

The adaptation of Winnie-the-Pooh by Soyuzmultfilm was the first multimedia expansion of the story in the Soviet Union and the most successful one: it marked the beginning of an entire transmedia franchise. This visual interpretation of Winnie-the-Pooh has become a separate brand in the USSR and post-Soviet Russia, due to its fame and audience acclaim. Various multimedia projects have been (and are still being) released on

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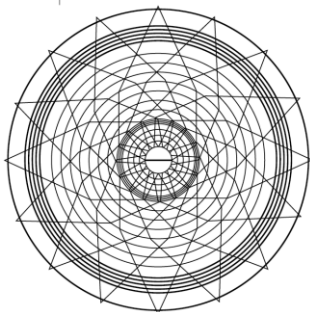
its basis, such as computer and board games, events, special sections in amusement parks, and a wide range of merchandise. Soyuzmultfilm managed to add to Winnie-the-Pooh “the unique position of a Russified toy in the mass consciousness and folk Ourth-making, the import origin of which is sometimes not even thought of” (Leving, 2008: 315).

Such popularity of Winnie-the-Pooh (both the original story in translation and subsequent expansions) on the territory of the Soviet Union and, accordingly, the post-Soviet space can be explained by the fact that it appeared in a difficult time when the country was in an unstable and stressful situation. This story, despite the presence of several allusions to the communist state, lacked any propaganda inherent to the works of that period: “the atmosphere of the fairy tale was very far from the ideas of class struggle and was generally devoid of any politicization whatsoever” (Smolyarova, 2008: 289), possessing a feeling permeated with safety and security. “For several generations of parents, the book about Pooh was one of the first that they rushed to read to their children and grandchildren. For them, the historical memory of the time is still alive, when the Hundred Acres Wood was a safe space, as a refuge from the ‘disturbing’ children’s literature of those years.” (Ibid: 292).

The universe of the Soviet Winnie-the-Pooh continues to develop outside of the franchise: the songs invented by Zakhoder became an element of oral folk tradition — they are taught by heart, sometimes the text is changing in a comic form. Moreover, Winnie-the-Pooh and Piglet have become popular characters for jokes in which phrases and plots from Hitruk’s animation series are parodied.

Talking about the current stage of the development of the Winnie-the-Pooh’s universe in Russia, in addition to its adaptation to different digital platforms (for example, in the form of new computer games), the inclusion of the audience continues in terms of the creation of memes, thus allowing the story to develop alternatively in the participatory culture of online communities. The memes about the drug addict bear Vonnie that appeared in 2012 can be considered an example of such an Internet-driven, alternative development of the original plot. These memes exploit the images of the characters of the Soviet animation adaptation of the story about Winnie-the-Pooh from Soyuzmultfilm: now they are presented as swearing drug addicts, who use highly distorted language with some letters missing in the words (see figure 7).

Our translation, excluding missing letters, is as follows: “Today I saw on TV how my favourite childhood film was vulgarized with drug addiction and alcoholism. The country is degrading.” Perhaps this can be considered an attempt at a nostalgic return to the images of the past, and their modern reinterpretation. The children who watched Winnie-the-Pooh in the Soviet Union era now grew up, trying to find a voice to express their dissatisfaction with modern realities through the creation of such memes. Despite the fact that the original



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message of the product of children's culture is distorted, it continues the life of the Winnie-the-Pooh story by representing "an engagement with the original text that makes us see that text in different ways" (Hutcheon, 2013: 16), which allows the project's universe to adapt to an ever-changing society, thus not ceasing to be up to date.



**Figure 7.** Vonnie: a meme based on the Russian image of Winnie-the-Pooh

### Conclusion

Winnie-the-Pooh is a work that gained popularity and grew into a separate transmedia franchise in both the Anglophone and Russian-speaking post-soviet space. Both projects are based on the adaptation of A.A. Milne's book (and, accordingly, its translation into Russian) in the form of animated series released by Disney and Soyuzmultfilm studios. In both contexts, there is a branding system around Winnie-the-Pooh, which includes the release of merchandise, different events, adaptations for various platforms (theatre, computer games), and the expansion of the story (sequels, fan art). Due to the neglect of copyright for the film adaptation in the USSR, it turned out to create a separate universe that has little overlap with Disney's version of the story, adapting to the Soviet and post-Soviet mentality and changing the images of characters and parts of the story. Milne's work entered the public domain in the United States on 1 Jan 2022. Perhaps this will lead to further development of Winnie-the-Pooh's universe through an additional transmedia offshoot.

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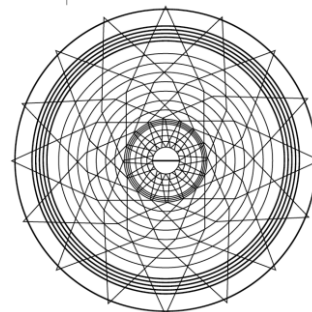
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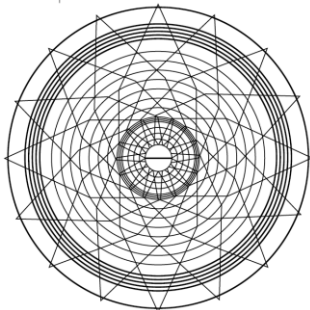
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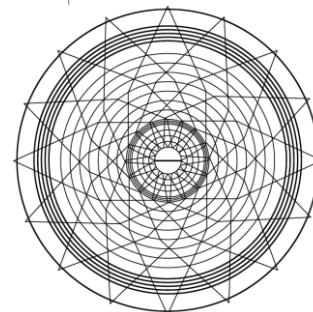
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# ВИННИ-ПУХ: ТРАНСМЕДИАЦИЯ ПРОИЗВЕДЕНИЯ А.А. МИЛНА В АНГЛОЯЗЫЧНОМ И ПОСТСОВЕТСКОМ ПРОСТРАНСТВЕ

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### **Аннотация:**

Популярность Винни Пуха в англоговорящих странах и в постсоветском русскоязычном пространстве распространена далеко за пределы литературы. В обоих странах история представляет собой отдельную медиа-франшизу, включающую в себя адаптацию оригинального сюжета под разные платформы (в частности, в качестве известных анимационных сериалов производства студий Дисней и Союзмультфильм), а также его расширение как внутри воображаемой вселенной, так и в реальном мире. Несмотря на широкую популярность трансмедийных расширений Винни Пуха, франшиза ещё не была рассмотрена научным сообществом с точки зрения её развития в медиасреде. Эта работа ставит перед собой задачу проследить этапы трансмедийного расширения истории о Винни Пухе в англоговорящих странах, СССР и постсоветской России с точки зрения контента, задействованных медиаплатформ и участия аудитории.

**Ключевые слова:** трансмедиа, Винни Пух, Союзмультфильм, Дисней, Милн, Заходер