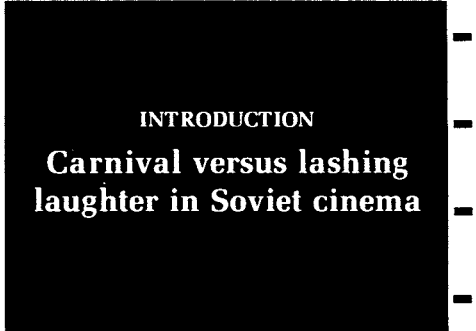


Cambridge University Press

0521021073 - Inside Soviet Film Satire: Laughter with a Lash

Edited by Andrew Horton

Excerpt

[More information](#)

I adhere to the tradition of laughing while the lash swishes. Mine is a laughter of destruction.

Sergei Eisenstein

Satire is a sort of glass, wherein beholders do generally discover everybody's face but their own.

Jonathan Swift

Headed for the promised sky

We never had a good civilization, but we always had a good culture.

Viktor Yerofeyev (Shapiro, "Ablest Soviets Flee for Better Lives")

It's a dark, snowy, cold Russian night, and a large group of the Moscow homeless have been surrounded by police and soldiers and commanded to leave their shantytown so that an American–Soviet joint venture hotel and condom factory can be built on the spot where the poor have been living. "This is our land and we are not going to leave it," calls out the president, the leader of the homeless who acts like a not-so-distorted copy of Gorbachev and looks remarkably like Albert Einstein. But the official forces will not listen. They move in with tanks and riot troops, crushing all in their path. The poor gather on an old steam locomotive, which looks a lot like the old "revolutionary" trains of seventy years ago, and to everyone's surprise, the locomotive starts up and heads on down the track with the military in hot pursuit.

Then a miracle happens. As soldiers and tanks fire at the train, the locomotive takes off into the winter sky, headed for "the promised land" followed by a pack of wild homeless dogs howling after it. And though the tanks fire away, the train is heaven bound with the homeless and the president and his ex-wife and friends all aboard.

A Soviet parody of Spielberg's *E.T.* or De Sica's farewell to neorealism, *Miracle in Milan* (1951), in which all the homeless of Milan take off through the Italian heavens? Both. And more.

Carnival versus lashing laughter in Soviet cinema

2



“The president” of Moscow’s homeless folk in Eldar Ryazanov’s *The Promised Sky* (1991) balancing between hope and hopelessness, reality and fantasy, and tears and topical satiric laughter.

The scene described is the conclusion to Eldar Ryazanov’s 1991 social comic satire, *The Promised Sky* (*Nebesa obetovannye*), one of the very few popular Russian/ex-Soviet films of 1991. It is appropriate to begin our study of Soviet film satire with this recent film for several reasons. First, Ryazanov has been the undisputed master of Soviet comic satire for almost three decades, and as Greta Slobin’s essay suggests, his *Forgotten Melody for a Flute* (*Zabytaya melodiya diya fleity*, 1987) was the first full-bodied *glasnost* film. Thus, *The Promised Sky* brings us full circle: Clearly after the August “revolution” of 1991, we have entered a post-Soviet and, in a real sense, a post-perestroika phase. Our collection ends, therefore, at this borderline but traces back to the origins of Soviet satire

Carnival versus lashing laughter in Soviet cinema

3



Yefim, the poor Jewish tinker (Roland Bykov), whose good humor and satiric wit help humanize the coldly Communist female commissar in *Commissar* (1967).

in Russian and world literature and culture. These essays bring us as far as the end of the Soviet Union: What happens next in the world of satire and culture is yet to be written and filmed.

We should add that Ryazanov's fantasy triumph with its wink to the audience suggesting both Spielberg and De Sica suggests from the beginning a prime characteristic of satire: its double-edged ambiguity. Nothing is inherently funny, satiric, tragic, or absurd (Horton, *Comedy/Cinema/Theory*, p. 1). Context and perspective are all. (E.g., think how much of British humor is lost on American audiences.) *Commissar* (1967), a serious film about Jews in the Soviet Union, has its moments of true humor and wit. Ryazanov's comic triumph is, therefore, as Eisenstein would say (and we shall explain), "laughter with a lash," for it is only a triumph within the film narrative. Our laughter is coupled with the realization that, in real life, locomotives don't fly to heaven and the homeless do get shoved away to build hotels and factories. (It is a fascinating irony that at the same time that *The Promised Sky* was playing to large crowds in the

Cambridge University Press

0521021073 - Inside Soviet Film Satire: Laughter with a Lash

Edited by Andrew Horton

Excerpt

[More information](#)**Carnival versus lashing laughter in Soviet cinema****4**

Soviet Union, Americans were lining up to see Robin Williams and Jeff Bridges in *The Fisher King*, which tackles the same themes and same amount of “magic realism” using New York City as a landscape.)

It is this territory between laughter, irony, ambiguity, reality, and comic triumph that we will explore as we focus on the intersection of satire and Soviet cinema up to and including 1991. This collection of original essays is dedicated to the fact that even during the darkest hours under Stalin, Soviets always laughed. If the comic can represent the purest form of laughter, then satire, our object of desire in this anthology, is by general consensus a form of *purposeful* laughter. Voltaire ends his satiric novel *Zadig* with the words “Yes, but . . .” In a real sense, any satirist, Soviet or otherwise, works within such a double awareness of the need to suggest a “but,” an alternative vision/perspective/reality. But as these essays testify, satire is perhaps the slipperiest of genres, the one most misunderstood, abused, and in danger of falling into something else, be it pathos, bathos, self-pity, farce, or pure propaganda.

Most of these essays grew out of an international conference on Soviet film satire held at Loyola University, New Orleans, in October 1990. Besides the film critics and cinema scholars attending from the Soviet Union, Canada, and the United States, a special guest satiric filmmaker, Yuri Mamin, was present to delight and trouble us with his own particular form of purposeful laughter. (See Chapter XVI, “One Should Begin with Zero: A Discussion with Satiric Filmmaker Yuri Mamin.”) The book is thus dedicated to Mamin and to all Soviet and, what we should now perhaps call “post-Soviet,” satirists who, for various purposes, have made generations of viewers laugh and think; for as Mamin himself has said, “If satire becomes unnecessary, it would mean that all favorable processes in our society have come to a halt” (New Orleans, October 1990). And, we might add, as was noted at the time of the conference, New Orleans was not perhaps an accidental tourist to the spirit of satire, for the “city that care forgot,” as New Orleans is often called, not only produced jazz (which itself is often a form of satire on more rigid forms of music), but also can claim to be the center of the *carnavalesque* in the United States, a spirit that definitely embraces satire and parody at its purest.

The scope of this book is wide but not exhaustive, suggestive rather than complete. The collection divides into three sections, Part One of which addresses the specifics of the nature of satire combined with a broad view of the functioning of satire within Soviet culture. Part Two consists of essays on specific films (by Petric, Turovskaya, and Ratchford) and on cultural/political/satiric implications, plus three essays that expand our understanding of specific topics within Soviet satire: Vida Johnson’s essay on satire in Tarkovsky’s films, Julie Christensen’s study of Georgian comic satire as reflected in the films of Eldar Shengelaya, and Olga Reizen’s piece on black humor and Soviet culture/film. Finally, Part

Carnival versus lashing laughter in Soviet cinema

5

Three considers the degree and kind of purposeful laughter that has emerged since the demise of the Communist/Socialist system in the Soviet Union and, indeed, since the collapse of the Soviet Union itself.

The topography of Soviet satire

Beginning with the present, we can note that the comic/satiric films emerging from the Soviet Union under *glasnost* call attention to a long and distinguished tradition of Russian laughter in literature (see Horton and Brashinsky, *The Zero Hour*). Much of that tradition has been influenced by Western models (Horace, *commedia dell'arte*, Shakespeare, Moliere, Addison, etc.), especially in the spirit of the eighteenth century and the Enlightenment. More specifically, Russian writers of the past learned the techniques of satire of individuals (Plautus, Terence) and of a more universal kind, *comédie de caractère* as practiced by Ben Jonson, Moliere, and others in which it is the “humor” or vice itself, rather than the person, that comes under the focus of mockery. Thus, from Gogol to Chekhov or A. N. Ostrovsky, satire and humor have generally been aimed at a “serious” purpose. Eisenstein, as well shall see, also followed in this tradition as he states in the egraph: “Mine is a laughter of destruction” (*Notes of a Film Director*, p. 108).

A review of Soviet cinema suggests how important comic and satiric strategies have been, even if approached ambivalently, since the beginning of the Soviet state, as Denise Youngblood’s clearly stated study of Soviet cinematic laughter of the 1920s demonstrates (see Chapter III). In fact, Boris Shumyatsky, writing during 1935 in his book *A Cinema for the Millions* (*Kinematografiya millionov*) just before the worst Stalinist years, defended the importance of laughter-provoking films under communism with these words:

Tsarist and capitalist Russia were not acquainted with happy joyful laughter in their best works. The laughter in Gogol, Shchedrin and Chekhov is accusing laughter, laughter derived from bitterness and hatred. . . . We believe that, if Gogol, Shchedrin and Chekhov were alive today, their actual laughter would in the Soviet Union acquire *joie de vivre*, optimism and cheerfulness. (Taylor, *The Film Factory*, p. 368)

Shumyatsky was defending Alexandrov’s film *Happy Guys* (*Veselye reb-yata*), from attacks of being the “apotheosis of vulgarity.” His emphasis is on the sense of good clean fun that such films offered a Soviet society with a promising future under communism. Just how ludicrous a simple concept of *joie de vivre* turned out to be during Stalin’s era is detailed by Maya Turovskaya in her revealing essay on the filmming of Alexandrov’s smash hit *Volga, Volga*.

Carnival versus lashing laughter in Soviet cinema**6**

Viewed from today's perspective, however, as seen in a film such as *A Forgotten Melody for a Flute*, the Soviet realm of comedy and satire has tilted back to the "accusing laughter" of the Enlightenment in Europe and in Russian drama and literature as well. *Glasnost* has provided the opportunity to use a light touch (farcical) and heavy touch (black humor as Olga Reizen and Svetlana Boym point out) to point out the shortcomings, contradictions, and failures of more than seventy years of Soviet socialism. Let us consider five characteristics of satire in a Soviet context.

First, irony and accusing laughter are, in fact, a potent form of survival, an alternative world view as well as a means of offense. Irina Ratushinskaya in her searing account of her years in a women's political prison for human rights activities under Brezhnev's term, *Grey Is the Color of Hope*, frequently suggests how often the darkest events – such as the planting of a KGB stooge within their zone – brought on *deep laughter* rather than pure anger. "It was all we could do not to collapse on the grass in helpless fits of laughter. On the whole, though, the situation might be far from funny" (p. 88), she writes, suggesting how intimately laughter becomes, under oppression, a way of distancing oneself from the oppressors and of celebrating one's own sense of self, values, dignity.

These remarks suggest what we should acknowledge but what is beyond the scope of this book, a second observation on Soviet satire: that the satiric impulse as demonstrated in jokes, ironic comments, and such is a necessary ingredient of daily life for citizens within a totalitarian or authoritarian state if they are to maintain their own sense of worth, individuality, and self-esteem. Satire in such a context within a totalitarian framework thus is both offense – an attack on the system – and defense – survival itself, psychologically, spiritually, and even physically.

Luis Buñuel used to say that his mission as a satiric/surrealist filmmaker was to make even the most comfortable member of the viewing audience feel that he or she was not living in the best of all possible worlds. As these essays proclaim, the best of the Soviet satires have held a similar position.

A third observation is provided by the metahistorian Hayden White, building on the work of Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault, who suggests that the ironic/satiric stance forces the "normal" culture either to change or to formulate better its own perspective. According to White, the ironic/satiric/absurdist perspective forces us (and historians in particular) to ask: "On what grounds can we assert that the insane, the criminal, and the barbarian are wrong? . . . And why should critics criticize with words while those who possess real power criticize with weapons?" (*Tropics of Discourse*, p. 282).

Our fourth distinction, which builds on the others and provides us with the title of our introduction, is that between carnivalesque satire and laughter, and lashing satire, has existed satire which served the State.

Carnival versus lashing laughter in Soviet cinema

7



Satire and parody at its most carnivalesque in Alla Surikova's popular spoof on Westerns and everything else including cinema itself, *The Man from Capuchins Boulevard* (1987).

Mikhail Bakhtin explains in his essay entitled "Epic and Novel" how the novel developed out of popular satiric traditions of laughter at the expense of the formalized genre codes of the epic. Carnavalesque satire and laughter is a popular, folk laughter of the people, by the people, for the people, and is, in the spirit of carnival, a sanctioned, liberating attack on all authority. As Bakhtin writes: "Laughter is a vital factor in laying down that prerequisite for fearlessness without which it would be impossible to approach the world realistically. . . . Familiarization of the world through laughter and popular speech is an extremely important and indispensable step in making possible free, scientifically knowable and artistically realistic creativity in European civilization" (*The Dialogic Imagination*, p. 23). Laughter serving the State, however, serves the opposite purpose: the control of behavior that might challenge authority, as we shall discuss.

Finally, I would add that satire not only appears in the daily life of the people, but it shows up throughout many films that would not be judged "satires" per se. *Little Vera*, for instance, is permeated with satiric irony, often very funny, but more often dramatic and even tragic – there is "little

Cambridge University Press
 0521021073 - Inside Soviet Film Satire: Laughter with a Lash
 Edited by Andrew Horton
 Excerpt
[More information](#)

Carnival versus lashing laughter in Soviet cinema

8



Sergei Soloviev's "hyper-eccentric realism" as viewed in *Assa* (1988). Stanislav Govorukhin (right), a director of such important films as *We Cannot Live This Way* (*Tak zhit' nel'zya*, 1990), plays a Soviet Mafia figure in this collage rock and roll antinarrative.

hope" for little Vera in the industrial wasteland of her home city. Yet the film itself would not be called a "satire." Such would be the case with much of cinema made since the advent of *glasnost*, particularly postmodernist works such as Rashid Nugmanov's *The Needle* (*Igla*, 1988), Valery Ogorodnikov's *Prishvin's Paper Eyes* (*Bumazhnye glaza Prishvina*, 1989) and Sergei Soloviev's *Assa* (1988).

We need to briefly review the development of Russian/Soviet satire, but it may be helpful first to suggest an international context from which to view our subject. The dominant form of comedy in the world is, of course, the Hollywood version, a genre that year after year dominates the box office in terms of popularity (Horton, "A Laughing Matter," p. 30). In 1988, for instance, six of the top ten money-making films were comedies, led at the top by *Who Framed Roger Rabbit*. A definite contrast in styles and directions of comedy arises, therefore, between the predominant Soviet and

Carnival versus lashing laughter in Soviet cinema**9**

American laughter of the late 1980s. Much of American comedy has been steadily losing the “democratic” or populist flavor that characterized it in the past in favor of a “Reaganite” cynical neoconservatism that ignores many contemporary issues such as racial strife, drugs, women’s rights, and AIDS. Such comedy ultimately endorses the status quo rather than offering any true critique of it. (It should also be pointed out that much of this comedy is xenophobic: In *Ghostbusters II*, the evil threat to New York comes from “Carpathia” in Eastern Europe and is spearheaded by a certain Janosz Pha, looking suspiciously like Sergei Eisenstein himself as interpreted by Peter MacNicol.)

In contrast, much Soviet satire in literature, film, and music in recent years has become an important voice in the critical reevaluation of Soviet values. In this sense, even though much Soviet comedy has changed from the toothless laughter in the past to a brand with an accusing tone, that tone can be read as more optimistic than the smug cynicism of many recent American comedies; for in criticism there is the hope of awareness and thus of change.

Dostoevsky claimed that Gogol’s short story “The Overcoat” is the starting point of all Russian prose. But Gogol was following in the satiric Russian tradition of reforming humankind through laughter, “laughter through tears,” as he defined his purpose in creating *The Inspector General*. To understand how Gogol’s center of levity is anchored in a blend of realism and the supernatural (fantasy and the grotesque) alongside a kind of Christian sense of compassion for the insignificant and downtrodden (and to recognize how much this spirit runs throughout Russian and Soviet literature and cinema, as Valentin Tolstykh explains in Chapter I of this volume) is to see how radically different such satire is from the American “Reaganite comedy” of self-absorption and conservatism of the late 1980s. In Chapter II, Kevin Moss goes a long way toward explaining how “Aesopian” (thus, very clearly how purposeful) much of Soviet satire has become. In Chapter VIII, Moira Ratchford’s study of Alexandrov’s *Circus* explains the degree to which politically “correct” satire can have a backlash effect.

But carnivalesque or joyful laughter in a satiric vein has existed as well. Looking to the 1920s, for instance, we see that farce, satire, what we would call “vaudeville,” and *commedia dell’arte*, and American “silent comedies” – especially those of Chaplin, Keaton, and Harold Lloyd – made a strong impression on the young Soviet pioneering filmmakers. One of Lev Kuleshov’s earliest and most interesting films is the light-hearted spoof, *The Extraordinary Adventures of Mr. West in the Land of the Bolsheviks* (*Neobychainye prikliucheniia mistera Vesta v strane bol’shevikov*, 1924), with actor P. Podobed appearing as a Harold Lloyd lookalike, complete with the dark-rimmed glasses, in his characterization of the American, Mr. West, who is taken in by Soviet con men through

Carnival versus lashing laughter in Soviet cinema**10**

vranyo (blarney) and pokarukha (deception), two national sports that have not been dulled by seventy years of socialism. The satire of capitalism is definitely light and the humor joyful and thus in the spirit of and a tribute to that “anything goes” flavor of American silent comedy. Finally, Vlada Petric (Chapter VI), in his contribution on the film, has noted that the “film’s subtext addresses the viewer’s intimate world, touching upon ideas and judgments antithetical to the Bolshevik view of history and society.”

Dziga Vertov’s *Man with a Movie Camera* (*Chelovek s kinoapparatom*, 1929) owes much of its energy and high spirits to the large number of gags and visual jokes, employing a playful use of film language, subtle and obvious, that run throughout the film, many of them with underlying suggestions of a healthy sense of sexuality. Again, the emphasis is much more on joyful and playful laughter than on satire and biting dark humor, in the spirit of Shumyatsky’s description of *Happy Guys*. Finally, Alexander Medvedkin best represents an early Soviet director who comes closest to embodying a sense of what Mikhail Bakhtin would call “carnival laughter.” His *Happiness* (*Schastye*, 1935) is a surrealist comic/satiric romp that spoofs farm life in both the tsarist and Soviet times. His innovative use of camera tricks, outrageous absurdity, and slapstick (a soldier rubbing a horse’s rear end, a man sitting on the throne in an outhouse, a father and son hitting each other with spoons, etc.) still evoke uproarious laughter as evidenced by a special 1988 tribute to Medvedkin held to a full house in Dom Kino, the Filmmaker’s Center, at which the eighty-eight-year-old master of Soviet satire appeared in person. Laughter with a dangerous lash, Medvedkin’s film is not.

And Eisenstein himself writes in his autobiography, *Immoral Memories* (1946), that the figure he admires most is the clown. Also, in the essay “A Few Thoughts About Soviet Comedy” he goes further to describe Socialist laughter. American laughter is for the pure pleasure of laughter, he notes, and even Chaplin wins us over as a “grownup behaving like a child” (*Notes of a Film Director*, p. 110). For the Soviet Union, however, comedy must be satiric: “The time has not yet come for us to indulge in carefree laughter: socialism has not yet been built. So there is no call for light heartedness. Laughter is a new kind of weapon” (*Notes of a Film Director*, p. 111).

None of his films is a comedy or pure satire per se, except for the short piece he shot as an insert for the well-known staged production of *Even a Wise Man Stumbles*. But traces of both are found particularly in his first feature, *Strike* (*Stachka*, 1924), which shows Meyerhold’s strong comic/improvisational influence in the surrealist circuslike construction, cartoonlike caricature (especially of the fat, ugly capitalists), and heavily ironic use of montage in the film. Yet in Eisenstein’s hands, the satire is more pointed, more accusing, and more dialectic than in the films previously mentioned. For all of the comic touches, Eisenstein’s climax is