

Hidden Socialist subtext in Aleksandrov's *Happy Guys*

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Happy Guys (1934), directed by Grigorii Aleksandrov, is not a typical Soviet Realist film. Lacking a clear-cut ideological backbone and the archetypal New Soviet Man male lead, the film appears to be a unique type of Stalinist musical romantic comedy – one that is not yet saturated with Soviet ideology. Compared to Aleksandrov's later body of work, whose grand High Stalinist style focused on the education of the masses about the greatness of the State and its leader (Salys, *Laughing Matters* 151), the main themes distinguishable through the plot and lyrics of this early film are more generalized human values, such as the beauty of life and love, achieving one's goals through honest means and the unifying power of music. The protagonist, Kostia Potekhin, stands out in comparison to the standard for male leads in Stalinist films through his potential for being inherently good, yet inability to function in a classically masculine way (Haynes 77). Similarly, the character of Aniuta - a maid who is good and gets rewarded in the end – is a “recurrent character in Soviet cinema of the time” (Taylor 103). It is through Potekhin's attempts at integration into two very different social groups, the bourgeoisie and Soviet society, that Aleksandrov is able to show, in a subtle and optimistic way, his disapproval of the character's unstable morality and ideology. Although restrained, the director's socialist subtext is still prominently visible through his portrayal of the bourgeoisie as false and superficial, the incorporation of animals in metaphorical ways, and his depiction of the process of the protagonist's eventual return to the collective.

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bourgeoisie as false and superficial, the incorporation of animals in metaphorical ways, and his depiction of the process of the protagonist's eventual return to the collective.

In the film, the bourgeoisie are portrayed as slow and poorly adjusted, with a theme of falsehood running throughout. Every action they perform is done slowly, be it speaking, walking or dancing. If one is to compare the two long shots in the film, such as the opening shot of Kostia walking through the village and Lena's shot walking on the beach, the contrast could not be more prominent. Kostia's energetic dancing and singing to happy music is juxtaposed with Lena's silent wobbling and posing to a slower jazzy tune. Kostia interacts with his environment in natural and inventive ways, using fences and jugs as instruments and greeting townsfolk with glee. He is surrounded by people as he walks, which indicates him being part of the collective. Lena, on the other hand, walks alone through a crowd in which she stands out like a white crow, in part because of her attire. Dressed in a bulky and long dress, Lena seems in no way suited for a beach walk. Where Kostia's clothing is practical and simple, hers is extravagant and uncomfortable for the situation. The scene of Lena walking on the beach is very interesting from a *mise-en-scene* point of view. As she walks, the camera follows her in the background, while also focusing the viewer's attention on the characters in the foreground, closer to the camera (Bordwell 149). The people at the beach intended for wealthy civilians serve as an excellent example of the theme of falsehood with which Aleksandrov infuses nearly every action of the bourgeoisie. The majority of them appear to stand still, in unnatural or romanticised poses. For instance, there is a little boy who stands in the pose of an ancient Greek statue while tanning, and a man being fed grapes to by a woman in a very suggestive manner. The imagery in this scene speaks of indulgence and wealth.

There are countless other instances in the film in which Aleksandrov accentuates the theme of falseness as relating to the bourgeoisie. From the very first shot in which the viewer is introduced to Lena and her mother, there is deception at play. The camera pans from the mother's legs upwards, showing a shapely body in a swimsuit, which the viewer expects to be hers. All this, only to reveal a second later that Lena's mother is merely standing behind a cardboard painting with a hole for the head. Another instance of viewer deception occurs in the Bolshoi Theatre scene, where a lady in the audience is shown crying during the concert. The viewer assumes that it is because the music is so touching and powerful, and so does her companion. He turns to her and says, "Emma, for these tears I love you even more" (Aleksandrov, *Jolly Fellows*) – implying that he appreciates her sensitive soul. The camera then zooms lower, showing that she is crying because her shoes are too tight. Evidently, appearances are shown to be more important than reality to these ladies.

The theme of falsehood is also reflected in the décor of the Black Swan resort building – everything is grandiose, infused with columns and statues. On closer inspection, however, the Venus statue says "replica" in large letters near the base. The taxidermy sheep in the bedroom is, again, a substitution for the real thing – so much, in fact, that Lena is unable to distinguish it from a live sheep. She still finds flaws in it, however, commenting that "They make better ones abroad" (Aleksandrov). Even the names of Lena's resort and Kostia's town are in contrast – the Clear Springs of the proletariat

sound bright, friendly and simple, whereas the Black Swan of the bourgeoisie sounds gloomy and pretentious. Aleksandrov makes it clear that, to the representatives of the bourgeoisie, cognition fully influences their perception of reality, which explains the phenomenon of their wavering affections. Ultimately, their affections are highly dependent on the social status of the recipient.

A scene that very aptly demonstrates the bourgeoisie's inability to adjust to novel situations is the scene of chaos created by Kostia's stampeding animals. The inaction of the upper class in a time of crisis is juxtaposed with Kostia and Aniuta's attempts to chase the animals out. The guests of the house seem to either to run around in complete panic, not doing anything to improve the situation, or to ignore the situation altogether and go on with their night as if nothing out of the ordinary is happening. Thus, when Lena's mother faints, nobody does anything about it but call Aniuta for help – and at the same time there are guests still eating and drinking at the tables. With this, Aleksandrov is implying that only the working class has the ability and the will to improve the world.

In general, Aleksandrov's use of animals in innovative ways throughout the film is highly effective in a metaphorical sense. He often portrays the animals as resembling humans or inanimate objects to illustrate a point, as well as compares them directly to certain characters in the film. The animals are first shown to resemble humans during Kostia's animal roll call, where the names of the cattle correspond ironically to the noises they make and their breeds – and thus positions. For example, Secretary, Bureaucrat, and Professor are goats, Englishwomen are pigs, and Swiss and Dutch ladies are cows. Through these symbolic names, Aleksandrov is mocking bureaucrats and foreigners, accordingly (Salys, *Laughing Matters* 80). There is further confusion which results from the names that Kostia has given his cattle - as whenever he speaks to Lena, his wordplay makes it seem that he is speaking of humans. This causes her jealousy and a formal invitation of the animals into the house, perhaps used as foreshadowing of the visit they later pay to the Black Swan.

Another interesting way that Aleksandrov uses animals is through portraying them as inanimate objects. The first occurrence of that in the film is when the birds on electric wires are used as notes, to aid the protagonist when he is practicing playing the violin. They move around a little, but not enough to interfere with his playing, as he is still a respected member of Socialist society at that point in time. Only when Kostia's ideology begins to falter do the animals begin disobeying him. When that happens, the disobedient animals continue to be compared to inanimate objects – for instance, the bull being used as a hat-stand and a mounted head-piece, as well as the live sheep standing in for a sheep statue.

The most prominent way in which Aleksandrov uses the animals, however, is by drawing parallels between them and the bourgeoisie. Just like the guests at the party, the animals eat decadent foods and drink alcohol. When the guests discover the animals in the house, the women squeal exactly the same way as the piglet that gets stabbed with a fork. The similarity is even more prominent due to the direct juxtaposition of the two sounds, one right after the other. There are also some very obvious examples of an animal representing a certain human in the house. For one, there is a clear parallel between a bull and two drunken guests at the party. When the first guest is about to enter the house, he

rings the doorbell and Aniuta lets him in. He mistakes the bull for a hat-stand and puts his hat on the bull, and that is when the curiosities begin. Along with the hat, the bull seems to inherit the knack for ringing the doorbell. As he does so throughout the chaos scene, Aniuta is conditioned to assume that it is him ringing the bell every time. When another drunken guest attempts to enter the house, she hits him on the head with a broomstick. Ironically enough, he is wearing the same hat as the bull. Aleksandrov also draws a parallel between a cow and Lena's mother. The cow spends time in the mother's room, getting into makeup and blowing face powder all over her snout. She is then put by Kostia into the mother's bed, where the woman is placed moments later right next to the cow.

In fact, Kostia himself is shown to become more animalistic when he is around the bourgeoisie. The main visual used to indicate his regression is his acquisition of a tail several times throughout the film. This is first noticeable when he is standing outside the house and talking to Lena. He is holding the whip behind his back, and it suspiciously resembles a long and thin tail. Another instance of such symbolism is when Kostia ties the cow by rope to his pants, and the rope also bears a tail-like appearance.

The director's opinion of the bourgeoisie is seen most blatantly, however, through a particular symbol - the goat with a tiger skin on its back. Although it can easily be mistaken for a device of comic relief, the goat is in fact a metaphor for the bourgeoisie as a whole. The goat is, like the bourgeoisie in the film, a simple and unsophisticated creature that is concealing its true nature behind the attire of a regal and cultured animal. Here, once more, the theme of falsehood is visible through the goat trying to appear something it is not.

The most subtle, yet effective, technique of promoting socialism used by Aleksandrov in the film is the glorification of the simple Soviet man. Although showing all the faults of the bourgeoisie promotes repulsion towards the upper classes, the process is incomplete without a follow-up depiction of how wonderful life can be if one is part of the collective. It is through the protagonist's mishaps as his ideology falters, followed by his disillusionment in the upper classes and acceptance back into the collective that the viewer is meant to realize how truly lucky he is to be living in the Soviet Union.

From the moment that Kostia meets Lena, there is a sense that he has stepped onto a path of destruction. His misadventures are shown to be triggered solely by his attempts to integrate into the bourgeoisie. The borrowing of fancy clothes, locking the cattle away insecurely and the consequent chaos caused by them, and tearing the photo from his passport all point to the incorrectness of the protagonist's choices. It is the tearing of the photo to give to Lena as a memento that is a really striking symbol, as it appears that by performing this action he is denouncing Soviet values and, in particular, his citizenship.

The next step in Kostia's trajectory to reconciliation is his disillusionment with both his love for Lena and his yearning for inclusion into her society. This step is marked by several symbolic gestures which are meant to signify moral cleansing. The first of these actions is the protagonist's rejection of capitalism, as demonstrated through his not accepting money from Lena's mother. As she tries to bribe

him to keep the information of what had occurred at the house that night secret, Kostia gives the money back to one of the guests, thus showing that money is worthless to him from now on.

When he is about to leave, Kostia picks up his top hat off the floor, and the viewer sees that it is filled with pieces of the broken statue - specifically the one which is used in the film to symbolize falsehood. He then proceeds to shake the pieces of the statue out of the hat, which is symbolic of his cleansing himself from all the capitalistic and bourgeois influences, especially the deceit and pretentiousness that he has been exhibiting since his first encounter with Lena. This double meaning in this action is highlighted through the expression of disappointment and repulsion on Kostia's face.

The final sign that Aleksandrov uses to show the character's disillusionment is a symbolic wardrobe change directly after the party. As Kostia approaches the oak tree, he is still wearing what would typically be considered Western attire, complete with a top hat. Moments later, in the next shot, he has already changed into a simple white shirt. This contrast between his clothing goes to only further accentuate the cultural gap between classes, and to focus the viewer's attention on the natural simplicity of a white shirt, which symbolizes Kostia's return to the values of Soviet society.

After the protagonist's rejection of the bourgeoisie comes his eventual acceptance back into the collective. This largely emotional event is shown by Aleksandrov in very plain and physical terms - the collective is, literally, a musical collective by the name of "Friendship." As Kostia is once again running from the authorities, without pants and once more in utter disappointment with the bourgeoisie, the musicians catch him as he jumps from a third-floor window. His integration into their socialist group is accompanied by the men speaking among themselves about how they could use such an inventive and eccentric fellow in their group. With the words, "What a fellow... he is awesome! We could use someone like him in our orchestra!" (Aleksandrov) they acknowledge his belonging in their society. The phrase laden with double meaning, "Hold him! We're holding, holding" (Aleksandrov) also implies, as they carry him off to safety, that from now on his ideology will no longer waver, that they will hold on to him tightly and keep him in their collective.

The portrayal of this musical collective is, indeed, representative of how Aleksandrov wants to depict good and honest Soviet society. Although the musicians have their flaws - aggression towards each other and stubbornness, just to name a few - they are smart, joyful, simple men, who are accepting and all have an equal say in how their music is to be played. They are shown to be inventive as they, against all odds, find a place to practice and get to the theatre on time. They are also shown to be perseverant, as they do not give up when their instruments do not work on stage, but instead keep trying to play music, even if with their voices only. This all goes to show the viewer how the working class is evidently inherently better than the bourgeoisie.

An example of a symbol for the demonstrative all-inclusiveness of Soviet society is when Aniuta is wandering the streets alone in the rain. The orchestra's vehicle almost runs her over, but as they stop and Kostia recognises her, the two have a very symbolic word exchange.

Kostia: *Where are you going?*

Aniuta: *Don't know.*

K: *Come with us?*

A: *I don't know...*

K: *Oh come on!*

It is not hard to tell that the direction they are talking about is more of an ideological than a literal direction. It appears that, to Aleksandrov, the orchestra's vehicle is a symbol for Communism, and the happy guys are offering to accept the girl with them into the happy future. The future, in this particular case, is represented by the Bolshoi Theatre. After unintentionally posing as a famous conductor twice in the span of the film, the protagonist finally ends up on stage through honest means. The story arc of Kostia's dream of becoming a musician is completed through him conducting an orchestra as himself. It seems that after passing all the tests and hardships Kostia is finally rewarded with being accepted by the people. This leap in social status is also indicative of Aleksandrov's belief that in the Soviet Union there is endless potential for social mobility, and dreams really can be achieved with hard work. As Haynes states, "the film represent[s] a testament to boundless opportunity to recreate both the world and the self in the Soviet Union" (74). In an earlier scene, where Kostia is being banished from the *Black Swan*, he is confronted by Lena's mother for being a mere cattle herder. To this, he replies, "Today a cattle herder, tomorrow a musician!" (Aleksandrov) This indicates that the protagonist, too, is optimistic about his future.

Even all the songs in the film are largely hopeful and optimistic, mainly about the beauty of life and love. It would seem that Aleksandrov did not insert any socialist subtext into the musical part of the film. However it becomes clear to the viewer that there is, in fact, something important in the fact that these songs are sung exclusively by the good, socialist characters. Whereas the singing of the bourgeoisie is limited to squealing and screeching without lyrics, members of the proletariat use song to express their emotions and "develop a genuine sense of community" (Haynes 75). Such is the case in the final scene, where the cinematography makes the on-screen audience of the Bolshoi and the viewer also feel like part of the community of Happy Guys. The moment when Kostia is conducting both the audience and the viewer in song is a symbol for unity of the Soviet people, and Aleksandrov's final gesture to show that the protagonist has fully embraced the Soviet ideology.

Ultimately, *Happy Guys* is still, above all things, a musical romantic comedy; its central focus is not yet propaganda. As Salys notes in *Strange Afterlife*, the film "set conventions of idealized plot and characterization, [the] privileging of song, dance and slapstick humor" (5). However, the director does incorporate some ideological subtext through his negative portrayal of the bourgeoisie, the incorporation of animals as metaphors for humans and the positive portrayal of the proletariat. Out of all of Aleksandrov's films to come, Kostia is the last male protagonist that, although he loses his way, is strong-willed and independent. He believes he can choose his own fate and does not have communism as his conscious and only goal. It is through the inclusiveness of the Soviet people, the endless potential

for personal growth with hard work, and the unifying power of music that Kostia finally finds his way and achieves incorporation into Soviet society.

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