

# If You Can't *Byt* 'em, Join 'em: Early Soviet Film Comedy in the Context of *Byt*

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When one thinks of the Soviet Union one does not imagine laughter. Communists are not generally known for their comedic wit. Humor was particularly hampered under the reign of the notorious Joseph Stalin, as comedic films were heavily censored to remove any sort of “agitational” material. Yet, the Soviet Union was not always so repressive. Unlike the Stalinist 1930s, the 1920s were an age of (relative) cultural pluralism. Historians refer to this period, from 1921-1928, as the era of the New Economic Policy (NEP). During this time period the so-called avant-garde (primarily Sergei Eisenstein, Vsevolod Pudovkin, and Dziga Vertov) created many artistically significant films. Directors produced humorous films as well, which, while not cinematically experimental in the manner of the avant-garde, were still unique in the history of the Soviet Union. By examining such comedic films, one gains a fuller vision of early Soviet culture and the challenges associated with creating Soviet humor, particularly in regards to the Russian concept of *byt*.

*Byt* is a Russian philosophical concept that describes the daily struggle of existence. Christina Kiaer notes that “in Russian language and culture, *byt* has deep ties to materiality” (52) and typically refers to the physical and earthly aspects of contemporary life. The literal translation of *byt* is “to be,” so the emphasis on the material is apparent. By the late nineteenth century, the concept of *byt* acquired negative connotations, and among the intelligentsia was contrasted with *bytie*, or spiritual life, whether religious or ideological (Kiaer 53). Intellectuals saw the spiritual life of *bytie* as a higher plane of awareness that allowed individuals to remove themselves from the oppression of *byt*. The conflict between *byt* and *bytie* “is often understood as the opposition between everyday life and ‘real’ life” (Boym 29). In this case, “real” refers to the truth that

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can be gained through a spiritual, or in the case of the Soviet Union, a socialist awakening. In both cases, *bytie* led to a transcendence of the material.

Discussions of *byt* were rampant in the early days of the Soviet Union. The introduction of NEP created a fear among the Bolshevik leadership that materialism would once again creep into everyday life after the scarcity of the Civil War. Leon Trotsky himself wrote on the subject, suggesting that *byt* would “undermine the forward movement of the revolution” (Kiaer 54). Thus, it was the mission of any good communist to confront, and perhaps transform, *byt* itself. Thus, Soviet thinkers constructed the idea of *novyi* (meaning new) *byt*. In the new Marxist reality of the Soviet Union, “the everyday had to be created anew” (Boym 33), thus, *novyi byt* was a positive re-imagining of *byt* wherein everyday life had purpose in helping to build a new socialist utopia, allowing the masses to achieve *bytie*. Under *novyi byt*, everyday life would no longer oppress, but would help pave the way to communism. Most strikingly, part of the ideal of the *novyi byt* was the liberation of women, whom many communists saw as disadvantaged by the forces of capitalism (Kiaer 57). This is of particular importance as *byt* (and thus *novyi byt*) was seen as the realm of the woman. Kiaer writes that

whether intending to liberate or discipline them, propaganda promoting the *novyi byt* was directed toward women, because everyday life was perceived to be their sphere of influence. Men obviously experienced everyday life as well; but they could not be expected to institute changes at the level of everyday experience, because their roles lay in public or working life. (58)

Immediately following the close of the Civil War, the Soviet film industry was in a shambles. Such a small number of films was produced between the years 1921 (the beginning of NEP) and 1924, that the period has been referred to as “prehistoric” in regards to Soviet film history, a term often used by historians to describe the Russian cinema from before the Revolution (Youngblood Movies 14). The film industry was hit hard by the economic devastation that was the result of nearly eight years of war, because of the enormous monetary cost of producing a film (which includes equipment, personnel, and facilities).

In 1922, Vladimir Lenin and Anatoly Lunacharsky, the Chief Commissar of Enlightenment, together made a fateful decision that would enhance the growth of the film industry for the rest of the decade: they resolved that large quantities of foreign films should be imported to the Soviet Union. “New foreign imports, if marketed properly, could satisfy pent-up demand and provide income to be passed on to domestic producers” (Kepley 72). This plan was in keeping with Lenin’s “Directive on Cinema Affairs,” published earlier in that year which established the idea that “[f]or every film program a definite proportion should be determined: (a) entertainment films, specially for publicity purposes and for their receipts ... and (b) ... films of a particularly propagandist content” (56). Lenin’s directive became the general rule for all film companies

that sought to make a profit, as well as serve the interests of the Party. Due to cinema's silent nature, it was easy for the government to import foreign films, since only the intertitles and credits needed to be translated. As a result, these films proved to be incredibly lucrative, as well as adored by the Soviet people, an issue that later became a significant part of the debate over cinema.

This debate was focused primarily on entertainment films versus ideological films. Cinema held a special place for the Bolsheviks, as it was an art form that was technologically based, representing forward thinking and industrialization. Cinema was also a young art form that was "less contaminated by bourgeois ideology than the other arts" (Youngblood Movies 13). Finally, cinema was popular with the masses, a fact that the Bolsheviks were eager to take advantage of. The Soviet leadership commented frequently on the importance of cinema as an art form. Lunacharsky wrote that it was "important that there should be artistic propaganda for our ideas in the form of entertainment films" (Conversation 57) and Trotsky compared cinema favorably as a socialist alternative to alcohol and religion (94-97).

Many filmmakers sought to break with the past. To them, pre-revolutionary cinema was not true cinema at all. Among these, some of the most influential individuals were Dziga Vertov, Vsevolod Pudovkin, and Sergei Eisenstein. While all three men had viewed cinema in different ways, all agreed that it was the art of the future. Their films sought to embody socialist ideas and present them to the audience. Vertov in particular, espoused the view that all narrative in cinema should be dropped in favor of documentary filmmaking that focused on real experiences (Fiction 115-116). These filmmakers gained international fame for their experimental work and were called the Soviet avant-garde.

Other directors chose to maintain a more traditional stance when it came to filmmaking. Among them was Iurii Zheliabuzhskii, a man who had worked in the pre-revolutionary cinema (his Soviet debut, *The Cigarette Girl From Moscow*, is analyzed below). While Zheliabuzhskii and other more traditional directors were influenced by the ideas of the avant-gardists, they typically retained the film techniques developed from the pre-revolutionary age; their cinema was essentially filmed theater. This was antithetical to the ideals of the avant-garde whose films were revolutionary not only in their content, but in their form as well.

By 1924, the backdrop of Soviet cinema had begun to form. In terms of debate, the two major factions had already developed (entertainment and ideology), as well as the major players within those factions. The Party itself had also officially stated its position on the importance of cinema through a resolution dated May 29, 1924, which emphasized the need to direct the productive activity of the cinema organizations into a channel which will provide the masses of workers, peasants and Red Army soldiers with the maximum of healthy film material, and also to achieve stricter and more systematic control and leadership of the ideological side (Resolution III).

The year 1926 saw further changes. Influential films, like Eisenstein's sem-

inal *Battleship Potemkin* and Pudovkin's adaptation of Gorky's novel, *Mother*, were released, proving the talent of Soviet filmmakers. Yet, "Soviet cinema was approaching its Armageddon even as it was in full flower," writes Denise J. Youngblood; members of the Party disagreed over whether these experimental and vibrant films actually served the interests of the state (Soviet Cinema 108). While the work of the avant-gardists was imbued with ideology, it was not popular. Critics and Party leaders complained that the avant-garde films were too cerebral to be understood by the masses. Simultaneously, they criticized the popular films of the age for detracting from the mission of Soviet film, namely, to help bring class-consciousness to the people. "One might say ... that there was an inverse relationship between the popularity of the film and its propaganda value from the point of view of the Communist authorities" (Kenez 84).

Comedy and humor played a vital role in the Soviet cinema of the 1920s, as comedies were almost universally popular, especially if they were foreign. According to Youngblood, a plurality of films shown in the Soviet Union between 1921 and 1928 were American comedies, which were beloved by the masses for their energy and pacing (Movies 73). Combined with other foreign comedies as well as Soviet comedies, funny films were only succeeded in numbers by melodramas (Movies 73). Thus, Party leaders yearned for a successful, popular, and *ideological* comedy throughout the decade. Lunacharsky wrote about the usefulness of comedy as a method of describing the socialist struggle in 1924 (Revolutionary 109). He saw a definite use for comedy films, even if they were primarily meant to entertain and lacked a strong ideological component. He was firmly of the opinion that Soviet audiences were attracted to "brilliance, a variety of experiences, romance, beauty, rapid actions, an interesting plot and there is nothing for us to fear in that" (Cinema 155). The resolution of the Party Conference on Cinema explicitly noted that the Party "must pay special attention to the creation of Soviet comedy" (211). Yet, in spite of many efforts, comedies were "the perennial sore spot of Soviet cinema. Critics agreed that successful comedy was important (because viewers liked it)—but nonexistent in Soviet production" (Youngblood Soviet Cinema 137). An examination of the films themselves reveal that these fears were not unfounded, many of the Soviet comedies produced during the 1920s lack the ideological rigor that was desired by hardline Bolsheviks. Still, many of the comedies derive their humor from issues related to *byt*, a peculiarly Russian (and by extension, Soviet) concern.

An early comedic film was *The Cigarette Girl of Mosselprom* (1924), directed by Iurii Zheliabuzhskii. The film is a romantic comedy and follows the titular cigarette girl, Zina, as she is wooed by three suitors: Latugin, a love-struck cameraman, Mityushin, a bumbling bookkeeper, and Oliver MacBride, a corpulent American businessman. Each attempts to woo Zina in his own fashion. Mityushin, for example, buys a pack of cigarettes from her each day, in spite of the fact that he does not smoke, just so he can be near her. Latugin, infatu-

ated with her beauty, suggests that she become a movie actress and brings her to the Mezhrabpom-Rus studios where together they work on a film about life in the “new” (Soviet) Moscow, a project that is funded by MacBride. The studio executives decry the film within a film, *Everyday Life in Moscow*, as it is primarily taken up with images of Zina, rather than of the city itself; one scene even shows Latugin and Zina passionately kissing! Zina and Latugin both lose their jobs, and Zina decides the only way to make an income is by modeling for MacBride.

Mityushin, meanwhile, has also lost his job (partially due to his grandiose vision of himself as a talented screenwriter) and has begun working as MacBride’s secretary because he can speak English. Eventually, MacBride proposes to Zina, but Mityushin, seeing an opportunity to “rescue” her, botches the translation, causing Zina to run away and MacBride to return to America in disappointment. The film ends with a startling twist, however, as it is revealed that everything the viewer just witnessed was a film itself, and that Zina has ended up happily with Latugin.

It would be difficult to find a more “American” film from the Soviet Union in this period. As Youngblood remarks, “the only thing ‘Soviet’ about it was the citizenship of most of its characters” (Movies 75). Much of the comedy comes from Igor Ilinskii’s character, Mityushin, who is a slapstick buffoon, an archetype that would become his signature role. Many of the funniest scenes simply rely on Ilinskii, for example, when he sings and plays guitar bemoaning the loss of his love, Zina, to MacBride. Mityushin is also used in other humorous ways, such as when his love letter for Zina is accidentally found by his co-worker, and she thinks it is meant for her—much to Mityushin’s dismay—or when he drunkenly (but purposefully) mistranslates MacBride’s marriage proposal to Zina. Certainly, Mityushin, and by extension, Ilinskii’s character archetype, would have been viewed by Party members as a poor socialist role model and representative of *byt*.

This is not to say that the film does not touch on ideological issues. Zina, as a saleswoman, could be representative of NEP capitalism. Another example is the character of MacBride. He is depicted as a stereotypically fat, materialistic capitalist: a living embodiment of *byt*. When he is introduced, he has so much luggage that the horse-drawn taxi he hires collapses under the combined weight of MacBride and his possessions. During this scene MacBride also has difficulty exiting the airplane that has flown him to Moscow and needs a servant to assist him in climbing down the exit ladder, which emphasizes his helplessness without the aid of simple workers. Still, the lampooning of MacBride is not as sharp as it could be. For instance, MacBride is shown to be legitimately smitten with Zina, and rather than taking her as a mistress, seeks to marry her, whereas he could have been depicted in a far more unsavory light.

The more biting satire of the movie is its depiction of the city. The film itself, and nominally the film within a film, *Everyday Life in Moscow*, focus on the new, Soviet city. “Yet the ‘new Moscow’ that Latugin films, like the city

the protagonists inhabit, is no clearly articulated public space.... It is rather an urban space characterized by chaos and energy” (Widdis 81), bringing to mind issues related to *byt*. It is difficult for people to navigate this new urban environment; while Latugin is filming Zina, many passersby walk into the shot, but are shooed away by the aggressive director, highlighting the chaos of the city. Another scene features Latugin rushing to Zina between two trolley cars. A policeman whistles at him aggressively, but the distraction attracts a large, bustling crowd, characterizing the city not as a place of socialist order, but one of confusion.

The film also seems to directly refute the theories of cinema being proposed by such directors as Dziga Vertov. Vertov wished to portray the socialist “truth” of everyday life (a form of *bytie*) through editing and other cinematic techniques. In doing so, he hoped to make viewers understand the meaning and purpose of socialism, emphasizing the goals of the *novyi byt* (Kino-Eye 48). Perhaps in *Cigarette Girl*, Zheliabuzhskii was commenting on the fact that everyday life was not a unified effort for the greater good of socialism, as Vertov wished to depict it, but was a more individual and personal affair, essentially refuting the ideals of the *novyi byt*. After all, both *Everyday Life in Moscow* and *Cigarette Girl* are really about the love between Zina and Latugin. In spite of the film’s popularity among the masses, it is easy to see why critics felt that *Cigarette Girl* was decidedly un-Soviet (Youngblood We Don’t Know 40).

A younger director, Boris Barnet, made a similar film entitled *The Girl with the Hatbox* (1926). The movie was commissioned in order to advertise the state lottery. Barnet, however, clearly saw the commission as more than a simple job; he put a great deal of effort into making the movie, and later cited it as one of his personal favorites of his own films (Eisenschitz 152). The story follows a young girl, Natasha, who lives in the countryside with her grandfather. Together, the two make hats that Natasha sells in Moscow at the shop of Madame Irène and her husband, Tager. While Natasha nominally has space to live in the city above the shop, she instead commutes via train almost daily, which earns the romantic attention of the rail station cashier, Fogelev. She runs into a student, Ilya, who has just arrived in the city and has nowhere to stay. Feeling sorry for him, she suggests that “[t]hey enter into a ‘fictitious’ marriage so that he can live in Natasha’s room at Madame Irène’s” (Youngblood Movies 131). This infuriates Irène and her husband, who use the other room for hosting parties and other such affairs. Thus, they fire Natasha, and instead of giving her a final paycheck, Tager gives her a lottery ticket. The ticket turns out to be worth 25,000 rubles, which results in two slapstick confrontations between Tager and Fogelev. The ending is quite happy indeed; Natasha and Ilya realize that they have fallen in love, removing the need for a “fictitious” marriage—not to mention the fact that they now have 25,000 extra rubles.

The film is a modest affair, focusing on issues that are closely related to *byt*. One of the most important aspects of the film is Ilya’s difficulty in finding a place to live in Moscow. One scene reveals that Ilya was forced to spend the

night on a bench in a cold park, as he awakens covered in snow. Another scene depicts him sitting alone in the railroad station. The vast emptiness of the building highlights his separation from the life of the city and his connection to the daily struggle of living: *byt* in its simplest form. Ilya's initial experiences in the city are contrasted with those of Natasha. She commutes almost daily between the countryside and Moscow. Thus, "[t]he village ... is not distanced from the city" (Widdis 83), which serves to deemphasize Moscow (or more broadly, the city) as a central space, something that was not often portrayed in film. This also underlines Natasha's position as a new Soviet woman. As opposed to Ilya, she is fully acculturated to the ways of the new city, suggesting that she has achieved some form of *bytie*. Natasha helps the disoriented Ilya upon his arrival in the city by using the new Soviet systems that have been set in place to regulate housing.

The film deals with many issues that are unique to NEP. The ease with which couples could marry and divorce obviously is a vital part of the story (a topic that was also a focus of *Third Meshchanskaia Street [Bed and Sofa]*, which will be discussed below). Crowded railcars abound, as well as crowded park benches and city streets. Madame Irène and her husband's greedy, spiteful behavior mark them immediately as members of the petty bourgeoisie, which is further emphasized by their position as owners of a small hat shop. It is significant that these hats are made for fashionable customers, as it indicates Irène's shop as a business that caters to materialistic desires. Independent business itself, however, is not portrayed negatively. It is noteworthy that Natasha and her grandfather are independent producers, rather than city workers. Clearly, Barnet did not condemn every aspect of NEP.

The film's comedy primarily comes from two sources, the new social landscape of NEP and the actors themselves. The complications encountered by the characters are quite funny in and of themselves; the "fictitious" nature of Natasha and Ilya's marriage leads to humorous situations that play with the viewer's expectations of their relationship. The comedic nature of the characters is obvious from their introductions. The grandfather is shown wearing a woman's hat, while Trager is introduced by dramatically "giving the fig" (the Russian equivalent of "flipping the bird") to a picture of his overbearing wife. Fogelev also is quite funny, in part due to the talents of actor Vladimir Fogel. He is madly in love with Natasha and is so entranced by her that when she attempts to buy a train ticket from him, he cannot help but stare, much to the chagrin of the other travelers waiting in line. The slapstick fight scenes between the lanky Fogelev and the stout Trager also demonstrate Barnet's effective use of actors for comedy (Youngblood Movies 132).

Critics decried the film for its lack of clear ideology. It was described as being from Paris, an unfair comparison considering the setting of the film, but one that Youngblood suggests served to identify Barnet as a bourgeois director (We Don't Know 40). Critics compared *Hatbox* unfavorably to *Bed and Sofa* (1927), a film by Abram Room. While *Bed and Sofa* was not a pure comedy, its

story is based on a comedic situation and serves as an excellent example of *byt* in film. Nikolai lives with his wife, Lyudmila, in a cramped Moscow apartment. Nikolai is not a very good husband and treats Lyudmila poorly. A friend of Nikolai's from the Civil War, Vladimir, arrives in the city and is able to find work, but not living space, so Nikolai offers him a spot on the sofa. Nikolai is soon called off on a work trip however, and Vladimir and Lyudmila enter into a relationship. As in *Hatbox*, the ease of marriage and divorce is used as a plot device, as on Nikolai's return, he finds that Lyudmila is now with Vladimir. Accepting his fate, Nikolai tries to leave, but because of the housing shortage he remains in the apartment, only now he and Vladimir have exchanged their sleeping arrangements: Vladimir in the bed with Lyudmila and Nikolai on the sofa. Lyudmila's bliss is short-lived, however. When she discovers she is pregnant, both Nikolai and Vladimir encourage her to get an abortion, but Lyudmila instead chooses to leave them and start a new life outside of the city.

Modern historians consider the film to be an excellent example of urban Soviet life during NEP, like *Hatbox* (Youngblood Soviet Cinema 148). The crowded apartment recalls contemporary tales of communal living, but things are slightly different. In spite of the tight quarters, Lyudmila and Nikolai seem to live what might be termed a materialistic existence, as exemplified through the many trinkets on Lyudmila's dresser, or the many magazines she reads while Nikolai is out working. This bourgeois trend continues while Nikolai is gone as well; Vladimir takes her to the movies as well as on an airplane ride to sightsee, suggesting that the characters are immersed in *byt*.

The comedy in the film stems not from the character of Lyudmila, but rather, from the interactions between Nikolai and Vladimir. In spite of all the changes that have taken place in the apartment after Nikolai moves back in, the two men continue on as if nothing has changed, playing checkers together as they did before. Lyudmila, on the other hand, is able to transcend this and leaves to embark on a new chapter of her life. The lack of any strong ideological characters, however, earned the ire of many critics, and the critical reaction to the film "was one of resentment rather than of satisfaction" (Leyda 216).

Having examined some prominent examples of Soviet comedy from the 1920s, it is clear that creating a successful comedy that appealed to both the masses and the critics was difficult, if not impossible. Still, in comedic works from the 1920s, *byt* served as a source of humor. *Byt* was a product of the pre-revolutionary world, a time of materialism and bourgeois excess, and though a socialist utopia and a *novyi byt* were in the making during NEP, neither had yet been achieved. As a result, the process itself was treated humorously. One need not look far to find the influence of *byt* as a comedic device.

The films examined in this paper, as well as other contemporary films, feature female protagonists, and in nearly all of these films the female protagonist either is in the process or has achieved some sort of socialist consciousness. In addition, the female characters are typically not a source of comedy; rather it is the *byt* (and the men) around them that lead to comedic situations.



This trend is in full effect in *Bed and Sofa*. Lyudmila very clearly rises out of the *byt* of her apartment on Third Petty-Bourgeois Street to something more. Here, the female protagonist encapsulates part of what was expected of the new Soviet woman by escaping the corruption of the old world. Back at the apartment, the men play checkers again and again, and argue about who should fulfill what domestic duty, like going shopping. In this way, Nikolai and Vladimir serve as comic relief and a reminder of *byt*. But where is the *novyi byt*?

*Cigarette Girl* is quite subversive in this respect. Zina does not seem to reach a proletarian understanding by the end of the film. The progression of cigarette girl to movie star was not a desirable outcome in Soviet Russia. The film within a film, *Everyday Life in Moscow*, depicts the *novyi byt* as a life of romance, something that most Bolsheviks would have associated with the old *byt*. This reveals something about the culture of the Soviet Union in NEP: it was not necessarily developing in the way that the Party wanted. The implication of *Cigarette Girl* is that the new everyday life is ultimately not that much different from the old everyday life, or at least that the most that NEP socialism can achieve is the replacement of a bourgeois star for a homegrown proletarian one, but not transcendence to a socialist understanding.

The focus of the comedies is not on the ideals of *bytie* or the Soviet *novyi byt* of the future. Instead, it is the current reality, the *byt* of NEP, on which they focus. Often, this focus manifests itself in what today is termed “low” humor. The Ilinskii-style of physical clowning was a standard comedic device. The fact that he was not only a comic star, but also the best-known Soviet star of NEP goes to show how influential this comedic style became. Even comedic films that he did not appear in, such as *Hatbox*, used physical comedic elements. Since *byt* deals with the *physical* world, the relation between slapstick comedy and the focus on *byt* in comedic films is no coincidence.

The comedies of the 1920s reveal the complications of the early Soviet cultural landscape. These films, which were so often attacked by critics, but viewed and beloved by audiences, highlight the challenge of creating a comedic film that appealed to both the populace and the Party, a nearly impossible task in part because of the emphasis on *byt*. Yet, in spite of the frequent attacks upon such films for their lack of ideology, they do fulfill one of Lenin’s statements on art: “Art belongs to the people. It should reach with its deepest roots into the very thick of the broad working masses. It should be understood by these masses and loved by them” (Tsetikin 51). While the focus on *byt* may have alienated Soviet officials, it allowed for the creation of genuinely popular comedy that was uniquely Soviet.

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