

## **What can the 1985 Soviet film *The Most Charming and Attractive* tell us about attitudes toward the consumer culture of the late Soviet era?**

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### **Abstract**

*This essay explores whether the 1985 Soviet film *The Most Charming and Attractive*, which presents a negative attitude toward late Soviet consumer culture, can tell us anything about real Soviet attitudes toward the consumer culture of the late Soviet era. This essay explores the film's status as a form of popular entertainment and a propaganda device and argues that this status significantly limits the film's ability to act as a reliable historical source since ideological and financial pressures would likely have been prioritised over historical accuracy. Ultimately, *The Most Charming and Attractive* cannot tell us anything useful about real attitudes toward consumer culture in the Soviet Union.*

**Keywords:** Brezhnev-era, Soviet consumerism, Soviet entertainment, Soviet film, Soviet propaganda

### **Introduction**

Set during the late Soviet era, *The Most Charming and Attractive* tells the story of a young Soviet woman's attempts to lure a husband. Nadya, the film's protagonist, is over the age of thirty, yet she remains unmarried. When she runs into her old high school friend Susanna, a sociologist, Susanna agrees to help Nadya find a potential suitor. What follows is Nadya's attempts to attract Volodya, her male co-worker, through expensive, fashionable clothing and changes to her behaviour. The film, directed by Gerald Bezhanov, was released in 1985, three years after the end of Leonid Brezhnev's rule over the Soviet Union, under which patterns of consumption and living standards changed significantly (Rutland & Smolkin-Rothrock, 2014, p. 300). As a result, a new and unique consumer culture emerged during the late Soviet era. The film ultimately presents a negative attitude toward this consumer culture since the film ends with Nadya's realisation that she will not find love through the use of material products. However, the film's ability to act as a reliable historical source on late Soviet era attitudes toward consumer culture is limited. I will argue that the film's status as both popular entertainment and a propaganda device significantly influences its reliability as a historical source.

### **Consumption and consumerism in the late Soviet era**

After the rule of Joseph Stalin, the Soviet Union changed significantly in numerous aspects, including politics, economics, and culture. Nikita Khrushchev, who succeeded Stalin, had a vision of a greater shift toward a welfare state and a life for Soviet people under which living, cultural and technical standards would improve substantially (Edele, 2019, p. 169). This idea continued under Brezhnev, who increased material

wellbeing and expanded the welfare state, granting Soviet citizens more time, money, and opportunity to pursue a lifestyle more consumerist than they had before: people were now able to spend more time in private life, go on holidays, and care about material possessions (Edele, 2019, p. 179). The consumer culture that arose from the policies of Khrushchev and Brezhnev, however, was different to common Western notions of consumerism. Since consumption in the late Soviet era was associated with short supply of many products, the relationship between consumer and retailer was one in which the buyer would attempt to please the retailer to convince them to sell them a certain, desirable product, as opposed to the retailer attempting to convince the buyer (Bogdanova, 2015, p. 117). Furthermore, consumers were not passive or mindless, or “deprived, shabby Soviet citizens” (Klumbyte & Sharafutdinova, 2012, p. 9). Rather, shopping was an ordeal, even a sport or a hobby; one needed the time and patience to stand in a queue, and connections with retail assistants were beneficial in obtaining products which were often in short supply (Bogdanova, 2015, p. 137).

### **Consumer culture in *The Most Charming and Attractive***

Many specific elements of late Soviet consumer culture are portrayed in *The Most Charming and Attractive*. One such element is generational differences. Increase in Soviet consumption emphasised the generational gap; youths were generally more materialist than older generations in the sense that products such as clothing and tape recorders were a much bigger part of their lives (Chernyshova, 2013, p. 129). This is reflected in the film when Nadya and her co-workers discuss whether they prioritise money or profit. The older co-workers prefer love, and the younger co-workers profit. The film also depicts a gendered difference in consumer behaviour: Nadya’s decision to attract a husband via material goods is inspired by her dissatisfaction at being over thirty and unmarried. In the Brezhnev era, emphasis was placed in the media on the importance of feminine appearances and “natural” female roles associated with love, family, and children (Raleigh, 2011, p. 259). Films in this period often depicted characters experiencing midlife crises, and for female heroines, this was often because they did not have a family (Shcherbenok, 2016, p. 79). Thus, many women may have felt pressured to rush into marriage and to pursue this goal through apparently materialist strategies to adopt a more feminine or appealing look. Consumer culture is also often associated with the allure of foreign products – such as American jeans (Chernyshova, 2017) – which Yurchak contends were appealing because they were representative of an imaginary place that was abstract, unattainable, and exotic (2005, p. 159). In the film, the characters speak admiringly of foreign fashion brands such as Pierre Cardin and Christian Dior. Value was also placed on brands in general; at one point in the film, when Nadya arrives to work in new, fashionable jeans, she points out the label as her female co-workers admire the jeans, and when Susanna’s husband arrives to pick Nadya up from work in his car, her co-workers are entranced: after all, the car is the “latest model of Zhiguli”. Concern with status is also portrayed in the film: when Susanna asks Nadya about different men at her workplace in order to find a potential suitor; she dismisses one man for being a “second-class” engineer instead of a first.

The film’s depiction of its characters’ concern with products, money, brands, and status is done comedically, yet its tone is ultimately contemptuous: at the end of the film, Susanna’s husband asks Nadya to lie to Susanna so that he can – as implied – commit adultery, and Susanna’s expertise in the field of attracting men becomes dubious: if her own husband cannot remain faithful to her, then how can Susanna’s materialistic

advice to Nadya be convincing? By the final scene, Nadya has successfully attracted Volodya's attention, yet she realises that her pursuit has still been fruitless: material products will not make him truly love her. The film, therefore, ultimately criticises late consumer culture, contending that consumerism and materialism will not lead to true happiness.

## **The Soviet film industry and its influences: propaganda and popular entertainment**

The film's attitude toward consumer culture, however, is not necessarily indicative of any broader attitudes toward consumer culture during the late Soviet era. Various factors influenced film as a medium, compromising its ability to portray historical events accurately. Films, for instance, were restricted by the pressure to produce something ideologically 'acceptable'. While the film industry was far less constrained than it had been under Stalin, the aims of Soviet cinema were still defined as ideological rather than commercial; films still sought to promote socialist values and the building of the communist project (Roth-Ey, 2011, pp. 100-01). Brezhnev-era authorities also had a particular reason for placing ideological constraints on films: consumer culture was now prominent in the Soviet Union, and they wanted to depict a version of consumerism that could compete with that of the West (Chernyshova, 2013, p. 78). In condemning what appeared to be shallow and materialistic consumerism (such as that portrayed in *The Most Charming and Attractive*), the Soviet Union could assert their notion of consumerism as superior to common – often negative – notions of consumerism. Furthermore, films were one of the most effective ways of spreading propaganda during this period; after the 1950s, the film industry expanded significantly. There were now more theatres, more viewers, and more free time, and so more people went to see more films (Roth-Ey, 2011, p. 74). Films were thus one of the most efficient ways of disseminating ideological messages to a wide audience and were not necessarily concerned with historically accurate depictions of Soviet life and society.

Yet the film industry was not just concerned with propaganda, and we cannot assume that the attitudes presented in *The Most Charming and Attractive* were primarily influenced by ideological pressures. Soviet movie-goers had far more choice in this period than they had under Stalin: the presence of more options at the box-office, both foreign and Soviet, meant that movie-goers had the freedom to decide to watch some films and not others (Roth-Ey, 2011, p. 102). Filmmakers thus had to ensure their films were entertaining; if a film was not entertaining, it would not attract viewers, and any ideological messages it may have intended to promote would have reached no one. There was thus an array of other concerns involved in the filmmaking process outside of anything propaganda related. Financial pressures – such as the increasing popularity of television, which threatened to supersede film – meant that the Soviet film industry had to pay more attention to audiences and viewership, resulting in the increased popularity of genre films, such as thrillers, romcoms and melodramas (Kelly, 2021, p. 127). Many popular blockbuster films were genre films and can – at least somewhat – owe their popularity to their largely non-political nature: blockbuster films often affirmed conventions and created the illusion of stability, drawing attention away from the political realm, which may have been bleak and uncertain (Beumers, 2003, pp. 442-43). A film that imposed too heavily on ideology, therefore, may have been unsuccessful at the box office. Films also benefited from portraying relatable

characters: *Moscow Does Not Believe in Tears*, a widely popular and successful Brezhnev-era film, depicted flawed heroes with ordinary lives (Furst, 2013, p. 622). Likewise, Nadya in *The Most Charming and Attractive* is likeable and relatable: she is funny and outgoing, she has an ordinary job and lives with her mother, yet she is also dissatisfied with her life. We sympathise with her precisely because she has both strengths and shortcomings. Thus, films had to be concerned with portraying characters that were appealing to an audience. Ultimately, Soviet filmmakers were not just placed under ideological constraints but financial ones; a film unsuccessful at the box office would also be unsuccessful as a propaganda device, and thus it was important to make films entertaining and relatable for their audience.

Both ideological and financial pressures influence how a film is made and thus its historical accuracy, but to what extent have these pressures influenced *The Most Charming and Attractive*? The film is a comedy, and comedy films are often less associated with politics. Furthermore, the film perhaps does not aim to promote a condemnation of consumer culture, but rather of the choices of individuals: Nadya learns her lesson for acting materialist in her pursuit of a suitor, but no ideological messages about society are subsequently conveyed. Therefore, the film may have been an exaggerated and comedic portrayal of a materialist consumer rather than an attempt to convey anything ideological or political. Yet this comedic treatment of Nadya and consumerism may itself have been political. Soviet comedy directors of the 1970s and 1980s often portrayed what Prokhorov and Prokhorova refer to as the ‘automatism’ of late Soviet culture: characters behave in an automatised way, participating in empty rituals and remaining comically unaware that they are doing so (Prokhorov & Prokhorova, 2017, p. 109). Nadya’s automatism manifests in her repeated attempts to impress Volodya with material items, such as fashionable clothing and nice cars. These attempts are unsuccessful for most of the film, yet she desperately continues, unaware of the comical and ridiculous nature of her behaviour. Witnessing Nadya participate in these “empty rituals” while maintaining a lack of self-awareness is what makes the film humorous to watch. And yet this comedy is made political through its use of automatism. Nadya’s empty rituals constitute a participation in consumer culture, and a belief in the ability of material goods to provide or lead to happiness. We, as an audience, are encouraged to laugh at Nadya, not with her, and ultimately to see the mindlessness of her consumerist behaviours and consumerism in general. Furthermore, even if the film were only criticising the actions of individuals – as opposed to a political attack on consumer culture – it would not be necessary for this criticism to be entirely of a non-political nature. Klumbyte and Sharafutdinova contend that, in the Brezhnev-era, the values of individuality and self-reliance – attitudes commonly associated with the Western world – were promoted as modern Soviet values, and people were more expected to control themselves than they had under the Stalinist state (Klumbyte & Sharafutdinova, 2012, pp. 9-10, 13). Therefore, individual choices were seen as important to the building of the communist project and cannot be disconnected from politics. Nadya’s individual decision to abandon her pursuit of Volodya at the end of the film is ideologically acceptable: she abandons materialism for the pursuit instead of an honest life.

*The Most Charming and Attractive*, therefore, conveys a political message in its condemnation of consumer culture, and should be approached as a form of Soviet propaganda. The film, as a comedy genre film, is also a form of popular entertainment, suggesting that its filmmakers were largely concerned with attracting an audience. As both a propaganda device and a form of entertainment, the film cannot act as a reliable

historical source since ideological and financial pressures rather than historical accuracy were more likely to have been prioritised in production.

## Conclusion

*The Most Charming and Attractive* tells the story of a young woman attempting to find a husband with the aid of material products, and the film encourages its audience to condemn these efforts. Yet the film is very limited in its ability to provide any useful insight into either negative or positive attitudes toward consumer culture in the late Soviet era. Its status as a propaganda device and a form of popular entertainment mean that ideological and financial pressures were given higher preference than historical accuracy.

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