© Laboratorium. 2014. 6(3):80–92

"GIVE ME THE BOOK OF COMPLAINTS": COMPLAINT IN POST-STALIN COMEDY

Milla Fedorova

Milla Fedorova is an associate professor in the Department of Slavic Languages at Georgetown University. Address for correspondence: Department of Slavic Languages, Georgetown University, ICC 307, Box 571050, 37th and O Streets, NW, Washington, DC 20057, USA. lf85@georgetown.edu.

This essay investigates how the means of complaint and the figure of the complainer changed in Soviet comedy films from the Stalin era to the 1960s–1970s. It focuses on the ambiguous nature of complaint during the Thaw and the subsequent Stagnation, periods of radical social change—namely, differentiation between complaint as an instrument of expressing grievance and denunciation as a means to harm an undesirable person. The essay discusses how the motif of complaint correlates with the function of the satirical genre—to expose social and political shortcomings.

Keywords: Post-Stalinism; Complaint; Denunciation; Satire; Comedy; Film; Thaw; Riazanov; Gaidai; Daneliia; Klimov

Taking into account the fact that comedy in the post-Stalin era existed at the intersection of the audience's expectations, the authorities' demands and control, and the director's personal artistic task, the present study investigates the image of complainers and the phenomenon of complaint in Soviet comedy films during the 1960s and 1970s.[1] At that time, Soviet society needed to form a new attitude toward complaining and to deal with the legacy of Stalin-era mass complaints, while the authorities needed to convey new permissible and desirable modes of expressing grievance. The essay gives a systematic review of complaints, portrayed both positively and negatively, in comedies during the Thaw and Stagnation eras, developing Sheila Fitzpatrick's (2005) and François-Xavier Nérard's (2001) classifications of denunciations. Both Fitzpatrick and Nérard define various categories of letters to the authorities: petitions, appeals, complaints, denunciations, confessions, threats, and statements of opinion. However, the main ethical problem the comedies of the 1960s and 1970s dealt with in this regard is the difference between *zhaloba*, "positive" complaint, whose aim was to protect the abused and/or

---

[1] For the essay's purposes, the difference between Stalin-era satirical comedy and post-Stalin comedy is more significant than the difference between satires of the Thaw and Stagnation periods. Therefore, the comedies of the 1960s and 1970s are studied here as a single phenomenon of posttotalitarianism, as, for example, in Yurchak (2006).

change an undesirable situation, and *donos*, denunciation with the purpose of harming an undesirable person.

While comedy was not the only cinematic genre dealing with the expression of grievance,[2] this study is restricted to satirical comedy, since the motif of complaint as a satirical object coincides here with the very function of the genre—to expose social and political shortcomings. Satire is most closely connected with the formation and manifestation of social norms. My object is the comedies that were most popular and, thus, significantly affected audiences of that period the most: those of El'dar Riazanov, Leonid Gaidai, Georgii Daneliia, and Elem Klimov. The focus of this analysis is the process of complaining and the ambiguous figure of the complainer rather than the regrettable phenomena about which citizens complained. The essay will also cursorily treat the question of how the new acceptable modes of complaining affected comedy as a norm-shaping genre.

The phenomenon of Soviet citizens' mass complaints to authorities occupies a significant place in new research on Stalinism and the Soviet era. Such historians as Sheila Fitzpatrick (2005, 2008), Sarah Davis (1997), and François-Xavier Nérard (2001) construct a new discourse on Soviet subjectivity challenging the traditional view that such letters merely demonstrate the total power of the state terrorizing its citizens.[3] "Soviet subjectivity" studies suggest that Soviet citizens functioned not merely as objects manipulated by the authorities but as subjects with their own motivations and understandings of the social situation and their roles within it. In contemporary scholarship on Soviet history and culture, this concept, based on Michel Foucault's theory of subjectification applied to Soviet material, has been controversial.[4] According to scholars like Igal Halfin and Jochen Hellbeck, subjectification was encouraged by the Soviet government, which attempted to forge a new type of man (Halfin 2002a, 2002b; Halfin and Hellbeck 2002; Hellbeck 2002). Svetlana Boym (2002), Eric Naiman (2001), Alexander Etkind (2005), and others have criticized this view with varying degrees of irony, pointing out that conflation of the authorities' rhetoric with their actual practice leads to assuming that the state actually cared about the individuals and, therefore, to justifying the regime. However, if we do not ascribe the promotion of subjectivity to the Soviet government but view subjectivity as a focal point of scholarly method—through the analysis of personal documents, including diaries, autobiographies, and letters—it proves to be essential for under-

---

[2] See, for example, the film *If you are right…* (*Esli ty prav…*, dir. Iurii Egorov, 1963), where a slander forces the protagonist to make ethical decisions both in the social and the private spheres of his life.

[3] On the shift towards Soviet subjectivity in the methodology of Stalin era studies, see Dobrenko (2012).

[4] Important discussions of Soviet subjectivity can be found in *Ab Imperio* (2002, 3:209–418), in the section "The Analysis of Subjectivization Practices in the Early Stalinist Society" (which includes Boym [2002], Halfin [2002], Hellbeck [2002], among others). In April 2014, a conference "Subjectivity in the Late Soviet Union (1953–1958)" took place at the European University at St. Petersburg. An essential monograph treating the topic of late Soviet subjectivity is Yurchak (2006).

standing the Soviet world.[5] The new historians study how, even within the narrow limits set from above, Soviet people made their choices. Such an approach allows us to understand individuals' and groups' motivations and does not deny their responsibility for their actions. Fitzpatrick, Davis, and Nérard discuss complaints from two points of view: that of the citizens and that of the authorities. For many Soviet citizens, in the absence of possibilities for open resistance, complaining was their sole means to express dissatisfaction with their daily life and the work of the state apparatus, as well as their only means of exercising power. In turn, the authorities actively encouraged the wave of complaints, since it helped them to stay informed about public opinion and to maintain surveillance and also served as a social safety valve, giving citizens at least a vague hope of being heard.[6] Among authorities' responses to complaints we can list satirical comedy. As scholar of Soviet and post-Soviet literature and film Evgenii Dobrenko argues, satire is the most organic genre for a totalitarian regime, since it both embodies the population's ideals and teaches the citizens how to complain—and what to complain about (2013:163–192).

The goal of satirical comedy in the Stalin era was as much to conceal as to reveal: to expose concrete instances of social shortcomings, such as bureaucracy, alcoholism, abuse of power, negligence, and to conceal the actual reasons and foundations for these shortcomings, the central one being the system itself. The main conceptual problem that the comedy authors faced was tension between the individual and the general, the necessity to expose specific wrongdoers and to save the pillars of the system from any criticism—in other words, the problem of typification. Critical reviews of satirical comedies appearing in the central press showed that literature could hardly overcome this discrepancy: authors were criticized both for individualizing undesirable phenomena and, at the same time, for overgeneralizing.[7]

Like comedies, denunciations were supposed to expose concrete people and their actions or statements rather than state policies.[8] Dobrenko discusses satire as the flipside of denunciation, claiming that while humor does not exist in a totalitarian state, satire is one of its most powerful tools. It was not a coincidence that in 1952, preparing a new wave of repression, Stalin addressed Soviet society with demands for new Shchedrins and Gogols.[9]

In the post-Stalin period, the role of satirical comedy began to change, which is especially visible in cinematic comedy. Of course, in discussing the liberalization of political and cultural life after Stalin, one should keep in mind that film production

---

[5] Irina Paperno's works (e.g., Paperno 2002, 2006), combining attention to individual voices of Soviet citizens and conceptual depth of research of the period, provide an especially important example of the productive uses of Soviet subjectivity.

[6] This process actively starts with Joseph Stalin's campaign for self-criticism in 1928. Apparently, the prefix "self" helped to cover the dubious morality of complaining: if people assume that in the big picture, they criticize themselves rather than the other, writing a denunciation seems more ethically acceptable; denunciation is masked as confession.

[7] For analysis of the comedies and the reviews, see Dobrenko (2013).

[8] For a detailed analysis of shortcomings open to criticism, see Nérard (2001:101–124, 236–257).

[9] Editorial in *Pravda*, April 7, 1952.

during the Thaw, and especially during the Stagnation, was still highly regulated by the authorities, and although the range of the permissible became broader, it was very far from freedom: film directors had to comply with official norms.[10] So, on the one hand, the authorities still defined what should be condemned and to what extent. On the other hand, the demands of the audience changed: in accordance with the spirit of the time, they required "more real" objects of laughter. The film director ceased to be merely the system's functionary and gained a certain level of artistic freedom. During the Thaw, the leading comedy film makers—Riazanov, Gaidai, Daneliia, and Klimov—transformed the genre of comedy, striving to "move from abstract, artificial situations of classical comedies of the Stalin era towards the combination of 'the recognizable,' 'real,' 'live' with grotesque and satire" (Kaspe 2010:187). While the comic effect of the big style comedy was built on gags and slapstick elements, the new social comedy had to feature a recognizable social situation in order to be funny.[11] However, in no way was the life on the screen a direct reflection of real social life. As Irina Kaspe, a scholar of Soviet culture, has noted, trying to reconstruct reality by watching the films of late socialism is somewhat similar to peeking through a keyhole, since you only get distorted fragments of the big picture (2010:205).

Among the new satirical objects, both required from below and allowed from above, was the past with its complainers—and its take on satire. Bureaucrat Ogurtsov forbidding light-hearted non-accusatory laughter and threatening to complain to the higher officials about the young people's initiative to merrily celebrate the New Year (in Riazanov's *Carnival night* [*Karnaval'naia noch'*, 1956]) becomes a legitimate satirical target. Ogurtsov epitomizes the old authority, which the audience wants to break with, and the new authority wants to distance itself from.

Despite film scholar Valentin Tolstykh's claim that "during the period from 1960 to 1985, only five or six satiric films were released" (1993:18), close analysis shows that many cinematic comedies of this time (including all comedies analyzed here) had critical, satirical overtones in them, which does not necessarily manifest political freedom. Tolstykh's statement follows from the traditional belief that satire "is inconceivable in a place where the spirit of social complacency and self-deception claim the throne" (18). On the contrary, our point of departure is Dobrenko's understanding of Soviet satire as "the carnival of authority." Dobrenko defines the fundamental features of socialist realist satire as the recostuming of authority and state-appropriated threatening laughter: refusal to laugh is not permitted. According to his perhaps overly harsh claim, Riazanov's *Carnival night* was the apotheosis of this carnival of authority, since what we see in the film is not a carnival but "a carnival in the form of court theater" (Dobrenko 1995:51). However, we may argue that during the Thaw, not all satire was fully appropriated by authorities prescribing the legitimate objects of laughter. That is to say, the state ceases to be the only power forming the public critical discourse. For

---

[10] Official statements regarding cinema "did not imply that the Party leadership had abandoned the requirement of orthodoxy itself, merely that the authorities had broadened the range of creative practices that it was prepared to consider orthodox" (Faraday 2000:76–77).

[11] Tat'iana Dashkova (2008), a scholar of Soviet culture's history and theory, discusses how the audience's perception of the realistic was transforming from the 1930s to the 1960s in her study.

example, Klimov's *Welcome, or No trespassing* (*Dobro pozhalovat', ili Postoronnim vkhod vospreshchen*, 1964) is satirical and controversial, since it points to the very foundations of the regime: the pioneers, succumbing to discipline planted from above, are no more "the masters of the pioneer camp," despite their official mottos, than Soviet workers were the masters of the factories. Gaidai's visual experiments with quasi-silent comedies demonstrate a significant gap between the artificial, externally prescribed satirical message—condemning moonshining and alcoholism or illegal fishing methods—and their true message: comical liberation of the body.[12] Later, in the 1970s, with the new tightening of the screws, cinema had to abandon such experimentation. Yet, the most influential satire created by these directors does not fully retreat to its totalitarian form. The comedy acquires a new dimension, resorting to lyrical humor and combining humor with satire.

While analyzing complaints in comedy films we should look for several "types of evidence." Of course, there are no strict borders between these three categories, but methodologically it is productive to list them. First, there are openly satirical images that aligned with official regulations, providing a permissible amount of social criticism; such images were more widely represented during the Thaw than later. Second, we have examples of cryptographic Aesopian language, when the directors communicated directly to the viewer over the censor's head, relying on cultural codes that the censor would not recognize and sharing jokes the censor would not see (in particular, Riazanov's intended audience was the broad intelligentsia, accustomed to such practices). For example, in Riazanov's *Old folk robbers* (*Stariki-razboiniki*, 1971) the characters consider writing an anonymous complaint but soon abandon this idea, since it is futile: "of course, nobody believes anonymous complaints in our country." While the censors apparently had no problems with this phrase in the script, it is the actors' (Iurii Nikulin's and Evgenii Evstigneev's) intonation that made it so ironic. The role of this satirical technique increased during the Stagnation, when the range of the officially permissible narrowed. Third, there are the elements of real life that could have seemed "normal" to the audience and the directors and, perhaps, were not even perceived as satirical; they constitute the background of major conflicts and, therefore, provide invaluable social material for the present-day researcher. The comedies reflect a social ambiance wherein peers, relatives, or strangers could complain to the authorities about you—something that seems quite appalling to an outside viewer. "Do you know what I could do to you if only I sent a complaint that you hold meetings during working time?" a character in *Zigzag of luck* (*Zigzag udachi*, dir. Riazanov, 1968) exclaims. The antagonist in *Beware of the car* (*Beregis' avtomobilia*, dir. Riazanov, 1966) lives under the constant threat that his father-in-law will inform the authorities about his illegal business. The comedies provide numerous other examples. Although the Thaw era is justly praised for its general liberalization of social life, it is important to remember that it was also a time of "dubious moral norms," as dissident writer Naum Korzhavin noted (2000:35); complaints and squeals permeat-

[12] Aleksandr Prokhorov (2003) interprets Gaidai's visual comedy as potentially more subversive than Riazanov's films based on traditional narrative, because of the former's stark contrasts to the verbal installations of official Soviet ideology within narrative-driven Soviet cinema.

ed all spheres of people's lives—social, private, and professional. Similarly, according to translator of Spanish and Latin American literature Liudmila Sinianskaia's memoirs of the post-Stalin era, "complaint constituted a sociopsychological aspect of Soviet life; wives complained about their adulterous husbands to Party committees and about their alcoholic husbands to the militia; young girls complained about young men neglecting them to youth newspapers and at the same time asked whether they should continue to love them; and writers, masters of the written word, naturally complained about each other and about their enemies to the Party's Central Committee itself" (2002:147).

It comes as no surprise that officially the term "squeal" (*donos*, or in slang, *telega*, "wheel-cart") was not used in the films. As Nérard points out, widespread denunciations in Russia started with the disappearance of the word *donos* (denunciation) with its negative connotations (2001:102–103). Interestingly, Gaidai in *Moonshiners* (*Samogonshchiki*, 1961) ironically explicates the literal meaning of the verb *donosit'* (to carry some information to the authorities): a dog brings a spiral from the moonshine-brewing machine to the militia, thereby exposing its master's crime. The euphemisms for *donosit'* that we hear in films are *proinformirovat'* (to inform), *donesti do svedeniia* (to make aware of), *signalizirovat'* (to signal). As Fitzpatrick (2005) shows, in the 1930s, these euphemisms were used in the first person, in various types of complaints. They either referred to the moral duty of citizens (in *zaiavleniia*), or expressed the frustration of supplicants asking for the restoration of justice (in *zhaloby*), or covered the intentions to gain personal benefit (in *donosy* per se). In the majority of social comedies of the 1960s, and in some of the 1970s, these expressions appear in a negative context: they are used by the characters whom the director intends to mock.

What complaints are shown in comedy as positive and what as negative? How can we distinguish a constructive complaint from a squeal? The most obvious criterion—whether the complaint is just or not—is an essential but insufficient characteristic.

Studying complainers and complaints in comedy, we can mark out the following features that determine the nature of complaint: (1) the image of the complainer—whether or not he/she is a regular complainer officially appointed to this function (or self-appointed and encouraged by the authorities); (2) personal gain or personal feelings involved in the complaint; (3) the trajectory of complaints and the position of the accused party, whether "vertical"—when a complaint is sent to authorities, higher officials, or militia—or "horizontal": complaints to peers, usually professional unions or collective meetings. Sometimes, vertical complaints were "taken down," that is, their resolution was delegated to the collective; (4) instruments of complaint: the use of special pseudodemocratic tools, such as the book of complaints or complaint to the press.

Let us review, according to these characteristics, how the comedy features complaints:

First, officially appointed and regular complainers are usually portrayed satirically. Gaidai's and Riazanov's comedies tend to portray complainers as squealers if they have been officially appointed to dutifully maintain social order; for example, by being mem-

bers of house committees (Varvara Pliushch in *The diamond arm* [*Brilliantovaia ruka*, dir. Gaidai, 1968], Ivan Bunsha in *Ivan Vasilievich: Back to the future* [*Ivan Vasil'evich meniaet professiiu*, dir. Gaidai, 1973]). Gaidai stresses the satirical aspect of Bunsha as a squealer: in the film, he threatens to write an absurd "collective complaint" (while in Mikhail Bulgakov's 1934–1935 play *Ivan Vasil'evich* on which the film is based [Bulgakov 1965], we only have "I will write a complaint").[13] Klimov, in his comedy *Welcome, or No trespassing* disparages a self-appointed squealer, a pioneer girl encouraged by the authorities. He does not show her face or even her full body: we only see the legs of the spy. That is to say, here we have a significant absence: the director chooses to not squeal on the squealer. In his lyrical comedy *I stroll through Moscow* (*Ia shagaiu po Moskve*, 1963), Daneliia portrays not an official but a paranoid complainer, played by Rolan Bykov. The complainer takes the main characters, who have been following him as a joke, for a gang of robbers and calls the police insisting on their arrest. The comedy makes fun of the quasi-official language he uses writing his police claim and of his general demeanor of a person scared of his own shadow, suspecting bad intentions in everyone. His type fits the portraits of the Stalin era's most persistent authors of denunciations that archival researchers could reconstruct. In the films of the 1960s, however, he is portrayed as an object of irony rather than as a threat.

Second, complaint is shown as squeal if the complainer's personal interest is involved: the complainer expects to gain something or is guided by personal feelings. Comedies of the 1960s–1970s are very sensitive to the relationship between the social and the private spheres of people's lives. For example, Riazanov's *Zigzag of luck* negatively demonstrates an attempt to transfer a personal conflict to the public sphere: Lidiia Sergeevna, offended by her colleague Oreshnikov's lack of interest in her charms, squeals on him to the professional union. She informs the collective that he has won 10,000 rubles using money he borrowed from the mutual aid fund. Not only does she manipulate the instrument of complaint to settle a personal score, but she plans to gain from her squeal and get her share of the sum, making her denunciation even more repulsive for the viewer. As the narrator's voice sarcastically notes, she has chosen a very contemporary method of revenge.

Third, trajectory: a complaint sent "upward," to higher officials by a personally disinterested complainer can be shown in a sympathetic light, if the accused party is the complainer's boss rather than a peer. We see such a situation in Riazanov's *Girl without an address* (*Devushka bez adresa*, 1954): the female protagonist Katia Ivanova, working as an elevator girl, is outraged by her boss's indifference to people (he

---

[13] This comic divergence from Bulgakov's text demonstrates a significant sociopolitical change in the status of complaint that occurred from the 1930s to the 1970s. The difference between the personal and the collective complaint in the Stalin era was crucial: while the former was the main means of two-way communication between the authorities and the population, the latter was a sign of treacherous organized activity. Thus Bulgakov's Bunsha, who knew the rules of behavior with authorities and could effectively use the available tools to manipulate them, would not even consider writing a collective complaint. Contrastingly, the new, Gaidai's Bunsha could rely on the power of the collective (whom he claims to represent and, absurdly, even embody) in his appeal to the authorities.

does not attempt to fix the elevator) and writes a complaint. In Fitzpatrick's classification (2005:205–239), this is a typical "signal from below": a complaint intended to protect common people from negligence of those in power (and the housing department officials indeed represented real power in everyday Soviet life). Riazanov's heroine has a predecessor in Stalin's era cinema—another Katia Ivanova from Konstantin Iudin's *Girl with character* (*Devushka s kharakterom*, 1939), who is also a whistle-blower. A young activist, she goes to Moscow with a complaint on the bureaucratic, incompetent director of a state animal farm (*zverosovkhoz*). Comparison of the two films allows us to see the difference in the treatment of the theme of complaint in the late 1930s and late 1950s. In films of the Stalin era, when the authorities wanted to encourage mass complaining, Katia's complaint constitutes the major point of the plot. Iudin's Katia is a typical young activist of the 1930s who goes to Moscow to appeal to the highest authorities, since her appeal to the regional authorities remained unanswered. As Fitzpatrick notes, such activists were not unpopular among "non-active" citizens, since they criticized bureaucrats: "The paradox of activism of the 1930s was that, on the one hand, it suggested the support of the regime but, on the other hand, included the critique of its trusted representatives" (2008:47). Katia believes that in the Kremlin, the highest authorities expect such behavior and praise it. At the end of the film, the highest authorities respond to her complaint by making her the farm's director. In comparison, the reason for complaint in Riazanov's film is comically minor, both in its scale and its role in the plot. Additionally, the complaint remains futile and even harms her: the administration fires the girl, not the boss. However, the general type of complaint remains the same: it comes from below, it is targeted at a person in power, the complainer seeks to change the situation rather than to punish the wrongdoer, the complainer herself does not belong to those abused. Such complaint was viewed as positive and ethical both in the Stalin era and during the Thaw.

A complaint to the collective about a peer is usually shown ambiguously. During the Stalin era, the collective in comedies is the most objective arbiter of conflicts, which does not contradict the fact that collective complaints were considered dangerous and were not shown in films whose role was to demonstrate permissible and desirable models of social behavior. The establishment of justice and punishment of wrongdoers as responses to complaint were supposed to express the collective will, even if performed by higher authorities. In the 1960s and even in the 1970s, the situation notably changes. The collective on the screen may be wrong; meeting participants perceive the discussion of complaints as a formal, boring task and want the meeting to be over (*The unyielding* [*Nepoddaiushchiesia*, dir. Iurii Chuliukin, 1959], *Afonia* [dir. Daneliia, 1975], *The garage* [*Garazh*, dir. Riazanov, 1979]). Riazanov manages to show in a satirical light the corrupted collective, where the members complain about each other.

Paradoxically, democratic and pseudodemocratic instruments of complaints—complaints to the press and the book of complaints—while potentially effective and ethically positive, do not achieve their purpose in Thaw comedies. In the Soviet Union, a "book of complaints and suggestions" was supposed to be present in any

store or, more broadly, in any venue offering any kind of service. Its task was to give customers' feedback to the administration and the administration's bosses. Curiously, in none of the comedies where a customer demands the book (*A story about pies* [*Istoriia s pirozhkami*, dir. Naum Trakhtenberg, 1961], *Give me the book of complaints* [*Daite zhalobnuiu knigu*, dir. Riazanov, 1965], *Zigzag of luck*), can he receive it. Usually, the customer is not even surprised. The comedies show that demanding the book of complaints becomes a figure of speech, an empty formula of the customer's dissatisfaction, and a symbolic threat to service workers.

Riazanov's film *Give me the book of complaints* fully embraces the typical ambiguity of such instruments of voicing social grievance in the late Soviet era. Therefore, I will analyze it in some detail. As Riazanov writes in his memoir, in this film he used cinematic techniques that the viewer would perceive as documentary: black and white film ("despite the fact that the characters and the situations were asking for color") or scenes shot in the streets with a hidden camera, rather than in pavilions (2003:109). The director tried to come as close to "real life" as it was possible in the frame of the Thaw-era comedy.

A company of friends comes to the restaurant Dandelion where the service is grotesquely bad: after an hour of waiting they cannot even persuade the waitress to clean the table after the previous visitors, not to mention to take their order. They demand that she bring them the book of complaints and get an ironic answer: "*Esli tol'ko ona svobodna*" ("Ok, only if it is free at the moment"). The viewer, naturally, concludes that there are so many complaints about the service that the book is always in use. However, the book is never given to the visitors; instead, the director's assistant comes. Then, when the customers still insist on seeing the book, the director herself appears. She functions as a personified book of complaints—and the phrase "*Esli tol'ko ona svobodna*" ("You can see her only if she is free at the moment") acquires a second meaning, blurring the more ironic first one. As we see, the administration uses all possible means to prevent the customer from accessing the instrument for expressing dissatisfaction, since the book will be read by the higher officials and potentially could have repercussions for the restaurant's administration.

The protagonist, a journalist, stays after his party has gone and continues to observe the restaurant. He sees that his own incident is only a fragment of a wider picture of degradation: young people who do not have much money to spend receive outrageously bad service, the restaurant encourages guests to drink liquor (in order to fulfill the plan), the whole ambience is outdated—from the decadent music and to the bourgeois interior with dusty plush curtains. In order to expose this typical phenomenon in the sphere of service, the journalist exercises another instrument of complaint: he writes a feuilleton about the Dandelion restaurant and publishes it in a daily newspaper.

Next, Riazanov shows us how the higher officials, the Department of Trade, react to the complaint: they summon the restaurant's director and the journalist to a committee meeting to discuss the issue. The higher officials take the director's side, viewing the journalist as their common enemy. They are pleased that the restaurant is fulfilling the plan by selling much food and alcohol. The journalist supports his

message with numerous letters from readers telling about similar incidents.[14] The officials reluctantly promise to "further improve" their work. At first glance, it seems that the people's dissatisfaction has been successfully conveyed and the newspaper article, if not the book of complaints, has reached its goal.

However, the plot makes an unusual twist: the director, a young woman who has been dissatisfied with her social role, tries to implement certain changes—that is, to react properly to the public's concerns. In order to reorganize Dandelion's interior, musical repertoire, and attitude to customers, she suggests closing it for several weeks, redesigning it, and firing the rudest waitress. Neither the restaurant's collective nor the Department of Trade approve of these changes, since they would undermine the immediate profit. In order to get rid of the director, who has fallen out of grace, the Department and the staff manipulate the instruments of public complaint. The staff uses the book of complaints (it is the first time we see the book), fabricating a customer's complaint about the director. The Department of Trade chooses to react to the feuilleton—now, when some real changes are taking place—and fires the director. When the journalist tries to defend the director, the Department representative Postnikov answers with a demagogical reproach: "You yourself have asked us to take measures—we are only reacting to your complaint." He suggests that the journalist is defending the director because he has developed feelings for the young woman, which is not untrue—the social conflict in the film is, indeed, complicated by a personal one.

Thus, in Riazanov's film we see how high officials abuse a just public complaint. Liudmila Sinianskaia's memoirs about her work in the Department of Culture attest to the fact that manipulating complaints and squeals was a usual bureaucratic practice in the Soviet Union: "A squeal (*telega*) was a tool in the bosses' hands: if you were persona non-grata, an insignificant complaint could easily destroy you. But if, for some reason, the authorities needed you, they preferred to ignore the complaint" (Sinianskaia 2002:147).[15]

---

[14] In principle, if such complaints written by ordinary people—"criticism from the masses"—appeared in press (endorsed by officials), the authorities considered them more seriously than professional criticism of journalists or one's peers. Official campaigns of the period against figures who had fallen out of favor were often initiated by the "people's voice" published in the central press (for example, in 1964 the newspaper *Vechernii Leningrad* published ordinary people's demands to arrest poet Joseph Brodsky). Riazanov himself had suffered from an abuse of this "democratic instrument": before the official release of his *A man from nowhere* (*Chelovek niotkuda*, 1961), *Sovetskaia Rossiia* published a negative review of the film under the rubric "Letters from the audience." Analyzing the style of this review, Riazanov came to the conclusion that it was written by a professional critic, which gave him grounds to defend himself (2003:126–127).

[15] Sinianskaia's memoirs give the most curious example of how well-meaning public servants of lower ranks could, in their turn, manipulate the mechanism of complaint: her job in the Department was to choose translations of foreign plays for staging in Soviet theaters. When she supported a play but her bosses ignored her suggestions, she recommended that the translator write a complaint about her work—to criticize her for delaying the approval of the play. In many cases this technique worked: higher officials paid attention to the play and often approved its release. However, at least once this tactic backfired, when a translator complained that Sinianskaia for some reason recommended him to complain about her.

In *Give me the book of complaints*, the director of the restaurant makes a personal appeal to the highest official, the director of the Department of Trade, whom she knows personally, persuading him to interfere and endorse the changes. As we see, Soviet comedies of the 1960s–1970s demonstrate complaints as either morally flawed or futile, because the social instruments for conveying grievance do not work. The bureaucratic apparatus is portrayed not as "vulnerable to manipulation by denunciation" (Fitzpatrick 2005:226) but as manipulative by denunciation as well as by just complaint. The films demonstrate that in order to effectively establish justice, abused parties must either have personal contacts with the highest officials, as in *Carnival night* and *Give me the book of complaints*, or must execute justice personally, as we see in *Kidnapping, Caucasian style* (*Kavkazskaia plennitsa*, dir. Gaidai, 1967) and in *Beware of the car*. This paradoxical picture demonstrating the failure of democratic, open means of establishing justice can be interpreted as the result of a clash of satirical comedy's functions in the post-Stalin era: comedy continued to be authorities' instrument for educating citizens about the permissible and desirable, but it also started to function as a medium for conveying social grievance.

CONCLUSION

Over the course of the Soviet era, the complex phenomena of expressing grievance—including types of complaints, socially accepted and officially promoted models of complaining, and official and unofficial attitudes toward complainers—were significantly transformed. On the one hand, complaints' portrayal in art functioned as the model the authorities wanted to impose on Soviet citizens, and, on the other hand, it mirrored social transformations. The recent evolution of methodologies aimed at studying complaints adds a new dimension of complexity to this problem. Research on Soviet subjectivity, posing complaint as a moral dilemma, provides the most comprehensive view of this problem.

The study of satirical comedy provides us with a crucial understanding of the status of complaint in the Soviet era, since, by the virtue of the genre, satire itself constitutes a complaint in the artistic form. Intended to educate the audience about how and what to criticize, Soviet satire had to deal with an inherent paradox: the criticized phenomena were supposed to be typical and, at the same time, not to undermine the foundations of the Soviet regime. The complainer's image, therefore, presents a problem: he/she should expose the shortcomings of social life, but not too serious ones; complaining must not be excessive.

One could expect that with the advancement of socialism and improvement of the New Man, satire would cease to be necessary and the chastising pathos would give way to the positive heroic mode. However, in the Stalin era, satire continues to be one of the dominant genres, as the search for an enemy never stops.

In their turn, Thaw-era ideologists, parting with the totalitarian past and exposing its atrocities, have to disparage the excessive complaining of the Stalin era. Thus, the image of the complainer in the Thaw comedy acquires more negative connotations than in the previous era. The heroic images of whistle-blowers are left

behind; the new comedies attract the viewer's attention to squealers and portray self-appointed and official complainers satirically. While this tendency objectively reflects Soviet society's growing distrust towards complainers, often perceived as denunciators, paradoxically, it also turns out to be beneficial for the authorities, since complaint as an instrument of expressing social grievance becomes compromised. Thus we can conclude that, on the one hand, Thaw-era comedy conveys the motif of dissatisfaction with complaining per se and demonstrates that even democratic and pseudodemocratic means of complaint can be manipulated by authorities and, thereby, prevent citizens from complaining. On the other hand, the new comedy is more in touch with Soviet subjectivity than in the previous era: it reflects the point of view of Soviet people as subjects rather than merely objects shaped by ideological propaganda. The collective ceases to be the most objective arbiter of conflicts, and the viewer is supposed to draw his own personal ethical conclusions.

REFERENCES

Bulgakov, Mikhail. 1965. *Dramy i komedii*. Moscow: Iskusstvo.

Boym, Svetlana. 2002. "Kak sdelana sovetskaia sub"ektivnost'?" *Ab Imperio* 3:285–296.

Dashkova, Tat'iana. 2008. "Granitsy privatnogo v sovetskikh kinofil'makh do i posle 1956 goda: Problematizatsiia perekhodnogo perioda." Pp. 149–169 in *SSSR: Territoriia liubvi*. Moscow: Novoe izdatel'stvo.

Davis, Sarah. 1997. *Popular Opinion in Stalin's Russia: Terror, Propaganda and Dissent, 1934–1941*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Dobrenko, Evgenii. 1995. "Soviet Comedy Film; or, The Carnival of Authority." *Discourse* 17(3):49–57.

Dobrenko, Evgenii. 2012. "Stalinskaia kul'tura: Vslushivaias' v pis'mo, chitaiia golos." *Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie* 117(5):490–502.

Dobrenko, Evgenii. 2013. "Gogoli i Shchedriny: Uroki polozhitel'noi satiry." *Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie* 121(3):163–192.

Etkind, Alexander. 2005. "Soviet Subjectivity: Torture for the Sake of Salvation?" *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 6(1):171–186.

Faraday, George. 2000. *Revolt of the Filmmakers*. University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press.

Fitzpatrick, Sheila. 2005. *Tear Off the Masks!: Identity and Imposture in Twentieth-Century Russia*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Fitzpatrick, Sheila. 2008. *Povsednevnyi stalinizm: Sotsial'naia istoriia Sovetskoi Rossii v 30-e gody: Gorod*. Moscow: ROSSPEN.

Halfin, Igal. 2002a. *From Darkness to Light: Class, Consciousness, and Salvation in Revolutionary Russia*. Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press.

Halfin, Igal. 2002b. "The Syntax of the Bolshevik Subject." *Ab Imperio* 3:403–408.

Halfin, Igal and Jochen Hellbeck. 2002. Interview. *Ab Imperio* 3:217–260.

Hellbeck, Jochen. 2002. "'Soviet Subjectivity' – a Cliché?" *Ab Imperio* 3:397–402.

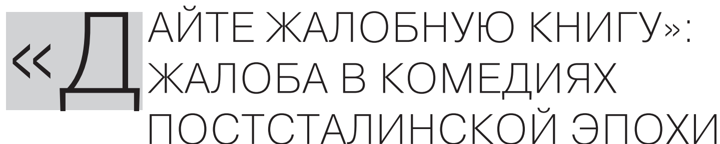
Kaspe, Irina. 2010. "Granitsy sovetskoi zhizni: Predstavleniia o 'chastnom' v izoliatsionistskom obshchestve." *Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie* 101:185–206.

Korzhavin, Naum. 2000. "V soblaznakh krovavoi epokhi." *Druzhba narodov* 12:8–72.

Naiman, Eric. 2001. "On Soviet Subjects and the Scholars Who Make Them." *The Russian Review* 60(3):307–315.

Nérard, François-Xavier. 2001. *Piat' protsentov pravdy: Razoblachenie i donositel'stvo v stalinskom SSSR (1928–1941)*. Moscow: ROSSPEN.

Paperno, Irina. 2002. “Personal Accounts of Soviet Experience.” *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 3(4):577–610.
Paperno, Irina. 2006. “Dreams of Terror: Dreams of Stalinist Russia as a Historical Source.” *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 7(4):793–824.
Prokhorov, Aleksandr. 2003. “Cinema of Attraction versus Narrative Cinema: Leonid Gaidai’s Comedies and El’dar Riazanov’s Satires of the 1960s.” *Slavic Review* 62(3):455–472.
Riazanov, El’dar. 2003. *Nepodvedennye itogi*. Moscow: Vagrius.
Sinianskaia, Liudmila. 2002. “Zapiski na pamiat’.” *Znamia* 12:146–175.
Tolstykh, Valentin. 1993. “Soviet Film Satire Yesterday and Today.” Pp. 17–20 in *Inside Soviet Film Satire: Laughter with a Lash*, edited by Andrew Horton. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
Yurchak, Alexei. 2006. *Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More: The Last Soviet Generation*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.



«ДАЙТЕ ЖАЛОБНУЮ КНИГУ»: ЖАЛОБА В КОМЕДИЯХ ПОСТСТАЛИНСКОЙ ЭПОХИ

Людмила Фёдорова

Людмила (Мила) Фёдорова – профессор факультета славянских языков в Университете Джорджтауна, Вашингтон. Адрес для переписки: Department of Slavic Languages, Georgetown University, ICC 307, Box 571050, 37th and O Streets, NW, Washington, DC 20057, USA. lf85@georgetown.edu.

В работе исследуется, как изменилась репрезентация жалобы и фигуры жалобщика в советских кинокомедиях в 1960–1970-е годы по сравнению со сталинской эпохой. Особое внимание уделяется противоречивому статусу жалобы в эпоху радикальных социальных изменений – во время «оттепели» и последующего периода застоя. В частности, здесь рассматривается различие между жалобой как формой социального протеста и доносом как способом навредить конкретному лицу. В работе обсуждается, каким образом мотив жалобы соотносится с функцией сатирического жанра – выявлением социальных и политических проблем.

Ключевые слова: постсталинизм; жалоба; донос; сатира; комедия; фильм; «оттепель»; Рязанов; Гайдай; Данелия; Климов