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# PERFORMING THE IMAGINED NATION THROUGH FEMALE BODIES IN THE CIRCUS (1936)

**Résumé**

Cet essai explorera le film de 1936 de Grigori Aleksandrov, The Circus, produit originellement en russe sous le nom de Tsirk, prouvant qu'au lieu d'être une comédie romantique légère, il s'agit en fait d'une production visant à contrôler non seulement le corps des femmes, mais aussi la perception de l'Union soviétique en tant que nation sur la scène mondiale. En analysant le gouvernement totalitaire stalinien et les rôles de genre qu'il confère à travers le cinéma, cet essai démontrera que le corps féminin, contrôlé par des attentes patriarcales primordiales, est analogue au contrôle de la nation sur son peuple.

**Mots clés :** nation, maternité, The Circus, Tsirk, Grigori Aleksandrov, femme

**Abstract**

This paper will explore Grigori Aleksandrov's 1936 film The Circus, originally produced in Russian as Tsirk, proving that in lieu of being a light-hearted romantic comedy, it is in fact a production intent on controlling not only women's bodies but also the perception of the Soviet nation on a world stage. By analysing the totalitarian Stalinist government and the gender roles it imparts through cinema, this paper will demonstrate that the female body, controlled by overarching patriarchal ideals, is analogous to the nation's control of its people.

**Key words**: nation, motherhood, The Circus, Tsirk, Grigori Aleksandrov, woman

From maple leaves to croissants, from pyramids to chopsticks, countries' national symbols are recognized across the world. While some are constructed from stereotypes, many depend on how the nation chooses to represent itself. Eastern Europe, often forgotten on the world stage, is nevertheless no different. Russia's turbulent socio-political status in the 20th century resulted in a cinematic history rife with images of national identity and implicit political agendas. Grigori Aleksandrov's 1936 film *The Circus*, originally produced in Russian as *Tsirk*, explores the inner working of show business, complete with animal acts, clowns, and tightrope walkers. Through the stories of two female performers, the Soviet circus director's daughter Rayechka and the American Marion Dixon, *The Circus* proposes the *right* way to perform within a totalitarian nationhood. Both Rayechka and Marion, while participating in the circus as human cannonballs in semi-revealing outfits, face obstacles in their careers and romantic encounters. It is only when the spiralling situation is remedied by the male characters that the women's suffering ends. This essay

will prove that *The Circus*, in lieu of being a light-hearted romantic comedy, is in fact a production intent on controlling not only women's bodies but also the perception of the Soviet nation on a world stage. First, we will analyse the Stalinist government that spearheaded the nation during the film's production and connect its ideologies to a larger political movement: totalitarianism. Then, we will demonstrate that the female body, controlled by overarching patriarchal ideals, is analogous to the nation's control of its people, highlighting how the film subtly encourages these regulations within the microcosmic circus. Finally, this paper will consider how the body of the mother changes gender roles in Soviet cinema, specifically in Marion's case. Her racialized son, a source of shame in her home country, is celebrated in the USSR—again signalling the director's manipulation of his nation's image.

Those having grown up in the Occident may not have been exposed to much Russian history beyond the name Joseph Stalin (1878-1953), communist leader of the Soviet Union from 1927 to 1953 and, notably, during the Second World War. How did Stalin rise to power? Which political movement best defines his style of government? Into what national image did he fashion his people? This paper will begin by answering these questions in order to situate the reader in *The Circus*'s context of production. After the death of Vladimir Lenin (1870-1924), who ruled the USSR from 1917 to 1924 with a variant of Marxism called Leninism, Stalin quickly seized power and began his so-called socialist project for improving the nation. James Ryan and Susan Grant introduce Stalin by identifying the "personality cult" that formed around his leadership: "Stalin had come to personify Soviet power, its supposed benevolence, achievements and promises. He was, after all, the father-figure that had inspired Soviet victory over the terrifying Nazi war machine" (1). For this reason, posterior critiques of the "one-party dictatorship" were risky—in spite of his despotic tendencies, the leader made significant advances in agriculture, industrialization, and political party unity (2). Of course, the brutality of the regime cannot be ignored, for "it was under Stalin that the Soviet Union became the most violent state in peacetime modern European history. Many millions of Soviet citizens and inhabitants were arrested, deported, executed, starved, or suffered from neglect as a direct or unintended consequence of the actions of the Stalinist state, often at Stalin's command" (3). This 'benevolent' communist dictator "held out promises of stability in order to hide [his] intention of creating a state of permanent instability" and systematically

purged the political party to cleanse it, according to Hannah Arendt ("Totalitarianism" 390-391). Meanwhile, Stalin engaged in international relations, especially in the 1940s and 50s. In fact, "the foremost legacy of Stalinism in global affairs was the Soviet Union's contribution to the Cold War" (James & Grant 4), which impacted the nation's outward appearance and Stalin's own heroic image, especially as Stalinism—Stalin's policies inspired by his understanding of Marxism and Leninism—crossed the USSR's borders. Stalin's take on communism as a "'superior civilization'" and his curation of artistic works in his own honour also contributed to his popularity (6). Regardless of Stalin's enthusiastic following and the few benefits his leadership brought to term, his government was undoubtedly totalitarian. Arendt proposes the following: "If lawfulness is the essence of non-tyrannical government and lawlessness is the essence of tyranny, then terror is the essence of totalitarian domination" ("Ideology" 464). Indeed, Stalin's time in power proves that a terrified people is easier to control; terror was (and perhaps still is) at the heart of the nation, making cheerful depictions of the country like in *The Circus* that much more telling.

The ideal nation under Stalin was, like for many dictatorships across history, one under control—the allegory for which is the family, with the patriarch governing the household and Stalin governing the USSR.[1] Aleksandrov's film, produced and distributed in the early days of Stalinism, is a prime example of the patriarchal authority and the measured public image that characterized Stalin's Soviet Union. In fact, Ekaterina N. Shapinskaya begins by stating that films of the 40s and 50s "demonstrate how gender roles are constructed on the basis of dominant ideological values" (150). These values were indeed imparted on the society as the film saw incredible box office success, a return to popularity in the 1990s (151), and again seventy years after the original release; the female leads are the personification of these values.[2] The ideal woman in Soviet Russia had a dual identity, one that combined the public and domestic spheres. Shapinskaya traces the woman's double identity trope to 19th century Russian literature and follows the creation of the double-role (feminine and

[11] This notion is comparable to the fascist dictatorship in Spain lasting from 1939 to 1975. Under Francisco Franco's rule, the home became a microcosm of the nation and emphasized the dictator's values: patriarchal authority, traditional gender roles, and Catholic morality.

[2] "Seventy years after its release, Aleksandrov's *Circus* continues to captivate domestic viewers and to attract scholars' attention precisely because the director found a magic narrative formula for the key myths of Stalinist culture: the positive hero, the "Great Family" of nations, and the ideological clash between Soviet 'us' and capitalist 'them' as a dominant principle of totalitarian culture" (Prokhorov 2).

masculine) into the Soviet era (150). This woman is, on the one hand, man's equal in the public, active sphere—but on the other hand, she takes on the extra responsibility of mother and homemaker in the patriarchal conception of family. Alexander Prokhorov identifies "the contradictions and instabilities of the myth of Soviet gender equality" (4) in the film, leading to a better understanding of the USSR's 'progressive' stance on women in the workplace. While women contribute to the industrialization and modernization of the country, they also maintain the perfect home and family—it is a lot to balance, but for characters in *The Circus*, this is not difficult, especially under a male authority. The two female leads, Marion and Rayechka, promote the Stalinist social order by participating in the circus; Rayechka actually begs her father to join so she can be a part of the act rather than sit on the sidelines. Shapinskaya proposes that the woman in the totalitarian ideology has "equal participation in the process of constructing of a new social order" but must uphold "the image of woman as a wife and mother" (150). This holds true in the film as Marion and Rayechka are equally concerned with their careers and their love lives—a woman's eligibility for marriage is discussed on several occasions, for example the comical interactions between Rayechka, her suitor, and her father.[3] This highlights the double standard in totalitarian films, where the mythical dual woman is pure (i.e. saving her sexual desire for the future) and actively participating in communal labour while maintaining her beauty (Shapinskaya 151).[4] This beauty is crucial but must also be limited since "[b]eauty is necessary for the marriage, but love to work is always even more important" (qtd. in Gradskova 147). Both Marion and Rayechka are beautiful, but are not so preoccupied with their appearances that they fail to contribute to society or, in Marion's case, to care for her son. Yulia Gradskova underlines that in Soviet cinema, "Usually, it was the women who were considered too attractive or too occupied with appearance who were presented in publications in the role of the spy or traitor, saboteur or simply a person useless to Soviet society" (147). This ideology is not, however,

[3] Rimgaila Salys quotes Aleksandrov himself describing the purpose of the film: "to reflect…a significant idea of racial equality and international solidarity … *Circus* is not a comedy, but a melodrama with comic scenes" (128). An "eccentric comedy" would not have accommodated necessary social contexts (128), but the melodrama does by having only certain scenes with light-hearted jokes and foolish conflicts, such as the manager has with a dog-owner intent on having his pet perform in the circus—the dog only says three French words, but was apparently a hit in other circuses. The manager, however, continuously casts the owner and his dog out of his studio with comical exaggeration.
[4] Yulia Gradskova refers to this duality as the "traditional universal dualism of male expectations: showing her virtue and, at the same time, being seductive" (147).

unique to Stalinism; parallels can be made to Muslim or Christian Orthodox notions of womanhood (147). The control of the female body and the imposition of impossible standards of femininity are universal.

Female bodies are controlled in many ways in this film. While Marion suffers gender-based violence at the hands of her American manager who blackmails, hits, and emotionally manipulates her, the daughter of the Russian circus manager is told by her own father that she is not allowed to eat and must maintain her figure for the sake of the circus act she must perform (28:50). Even half a kilo would, according to the circus manager, put the other performers running the cannon in danger. However, the American man—himself a cannon designer—assures her that a slice of cake won't hurt the act, suggesting that her father's decree is more about her appearance than circus safety. Gradskova's thesis includes interviews with Russian women who explain this same "fear of excessive weight: 'Everybody in my family is rather corpulent and when I studied at the university, I never ate a roll or a cake. I was afraid of getting fat'" (254). Rayechka adamantly refuses a cake in *The Circus* until a *man* convinces her in a condescending tone that it will not do any harm (see *fig. 1*). The social pressure to maintain a perfect figure extends beyond the USSR, as we see in

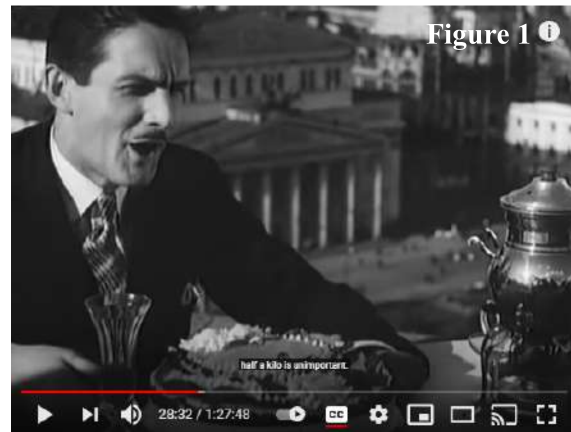


Fig. 1. The American manager convinces Rayechka that she can in fact eat cake.

Marion's struggles with her appearance. Gradskova explains the focus on the aesthetic appeal of fashion and body: "Feminine forms and a good slender figure is contrasted to a figure with 'deviations'" (70). Soviet women should dress in good taste and make choices based on their figure, refusing the "rotten fashion from the West" (70-71). While Rayechka dresses modestly when not performing, the human cannonball act requires form-fitting garments, decorated as part of the performance—Marion is often in tight, sparkly outfits that are nevertheless not too revealing, encouraging the Soviet woman to be modest while still being attractive (see footnote 4 and *fig. 2*). In fact, "attractiveness was viewed as [an] important female characteristic" even though "all Soviet citizens had to dress in an aesthetically and culturally appropriate manner" (Gradskova 147). The 30s and 40s saw less feminine and

Fig. 2. Marion’s costume is reserved yet appealing to the circus’s and the film’s audience.

frivolous clothing for women in the working world, but the circus is different in its inherently performative state. Of course, “Soviet politics of physical culture is well-known for organising mass displays of athletic female bodies, primarily through propaganda posters, pictures and films of the 1930s and 40s … one can assume that these obsessive images played an important role for male voyeuristic visual pleasure in a period when depictions of the female body were censored” (121). The two female cannonballs are fit, shown performing long acts, swinging from trapezes, and bursting out of cannons. These women are “illustrative of the social role woman was supposed to undertake in society and of the aesthetic construction of female figures on the screen” (Shapinskaya 151), therein performing Stalinist ideals of womanhood and female aesthetics.

Moreover, the body politics in the film play with notions of identity and performance. Salys Rimgalia gives the example of Marion being thrown to the ground by her abusive manager and then lifted up by Martynov, her romantic interest (167). Rimgalia connects this motion to the circus numbers that mirror the upward flight, namely Marion’s trapeze performance and the final dramatic circus scene of the film in which Jimmy is saved from the American by the Soviet people, who lift him up to safety (168). Meanwhile, in the second finale of the film, the ‘Great Family’ marches cheerily, as if in a commercial, with balloons rising overhead. This recapitulates “the dynamic vertical axis of the film as balloons rise up from the documentary footage of marching crowds and then descend to the ground as parachutes emblazoned with the letter spelling out ‘The End’” (168). The continual upward motion recreated in the film—both by characters and by cinematography—is especially compelling when compared to the American man’s ultimate failure at the lowest physical point of the scene. In other words, the capitalist West is by all means inferior to the successful, joyous Soviet family.

In addition, Soviet constructions of the female body would see women in their “natural” beauty, not too fat or too thin; of course, this carefree look was not easily

obtained, and women made significant efforts to recreate the ideal image of femininity, especially in regards to their face and hairstyle (Gradskova 183). Now that woman had joined the workforce, she should look neat, kind, and feminine in public spaces (184). While “natural, healthy skin and hair was a sign of good looks and signalled sexual attraction and healthy offspring”, using too much makeup at a young age implied sexual deviation (185). The ideal was a young, natural woman—while young women played up their natural beauty, older women took advantage of beauty products and fashion styles that concealed the marks of age (186). Soviet women were caught between being “too much” and “too little”, too fat or too thin, too young or too old, too made up or too unkempt. Who established these norms? Who decided what made a woman attractive? The quick response is men, while the more in-depth response is the patriarchal system that valued the youthful and the pure and influenced fashion trends accordingly. The opposition of the natural Soviet female and the hypersexualized Western woman “is illustrated [in the film] through a visual contrast of the heroine’s performance as a sexual symbol illustrative of the bourgeois world and the desexualized (but not de-aestheticized) image of a Soviet woman participating as an equal in a man’s world” (Shapinskaya 151-152). This aesthetic is key in the projected image of Soviet women: they are pleasant to see without risking their virtue (like Western women do). Shapinskaya traces the transformation Marion undergoes as she joins the Soviet family:

> When featured as belonging to the Western world, she is presented as a typical object of exploiting male gaze, transforming herself into this object reluctantly but with a feeling of inevitability vis à vis such subjugation. When she changes her allegiance, however, and finds warmth and love in the socialist world, she is depicted as an equal, a comrade and therefore as a participant in technological progress, which will transform fairy-tale to reality. Both man and woman in that reality are devoid of any sexual characteristics. (152)

These Soviet bodies are “pure cosmic beauty, aesthetic beings” that represent the future of the USSR built through socialism (152). Again, we see the notion of aesthetic as more important than the sex appeal that characterizes Hollywood performers, proving the Eastern superiority Stalin so adeptly prescribes. Martynov guides Marion into the safe, Soviet aesthetic of natural beauty and equality, while Rayechka’s father and fiancé help her live fully within that same

Eastern sphere. Indeed, *The Circus* depicts a controlled female body that flourishes under male authority. This parallels the nation's development under Stalin—or, at least, signifies what Stalin wanted to show his country and the world about the strength and propriety of the USSR. The families in *The Circus*, namely Raychecka's (her father, her fiancé) and Marion's (her son, her new lover), are an allegory for the nation. The adult men in both families are in control and foster success and improvement, much like Stalin saw himself doing for the Soviet Union. Aleksandrov's film reproduces the patriarchal authority that drives the family (and the nation) onward.

Furthermore, Marion's unique position as a mother allows the filmmaker to further comment on the Soviet woman and her body—in this case, a body capable of reproducing. The USSR's focus on social contributions meant that "State support of motherhood, according to [Bolshevik feminist Alexandra Kollontai], would not only make society more prosperous, but would also liberate mothers from a 'burden of motherhood' that prevented them from being more socially active" (Gradskova 73). Post-revolution Russia saw a plethora of notions concerning motherhood and collective childcare. Gradskova highlights that "The ideas varied from the fully Utopian vision of collective upbringing of children in orphanages, nurseries and boarding schools (limiting the function of mothers to pregnancy, birth and breastfeeding) to a very moderate type of state intervention in family life" (75-76) and that "Soviet social motherhood discourse was based on an assumption of childbearing as an inherent characteristic of the female sex" (76).[5] While the 1920s idealized the stay-at-home *ángel del hogar* [angel of the hearth] mother, in the 1940s and 50s emerged the working mother, who saw some pushback from more traditional Soviet citizens (80).[6] Nevertheless, the mother occupied a fundamental space in the USSR—this prompts Gradskova to present the state as the mother (i.e. the motherland) rather than the father (84). Although this seems to contradict this paper's claim that the state is the father of the national family, Gradskova explains that in its repression of its citizens, the state is the father, while in regards to their care, it serves as the mother (84). This reinforces the

[5] The simplification of mothers' functions to "pregnancy, birth and breastfeeding" is echoed in the contemporary body politics discourses that frame bodies with uteri as mere vessels for procreation.

[6] The *ángel del hogar* is a trope discussed in Bridget Aldaraca's work on Spanish definitions of gender roles and domesticity. This perfect wife and mother would silently care for the children, manage the household, and cook wonderful meals—all from her rightful place in the hearth.

traditional gender roles and ideals of domesticity prescribed by many dictatorships; it also contributes to the domestic side of the Soviet woman's dual identity.

In addition to her role as a mother, Marion's situation becomes more complicated when taking into account racial tensions in her homeland. Marion's son Jimmy, the only BIPOC character in the film, is the cause of most of Marion's turmoil.[7,8] Having a mixed-race child, especially as an unmarried woman, would have brought unimaginable hardships in the United States. Marion's American manager uses her child to shame her and manipulate her, telling her she will never be loved by a White man because nobody can overlook her past "transgressions". Since *The Circus* fits into the Soviet media's effort to show the USSR in a different, more compassionate light, it shows the American system as regressive when compared to the Soviet conceptions of gender equality and racial relations. The American man criticizes Marion's son's appearance: "the stinking hair, the flat nose, these teeth" (38:07). Endowed with his country's racist ideologies, he believes this child will be the end of her career and of her search for love. At the end of the film, the spectators prove him wrong and unite against his misconceptions about their country, singing and protecting the Black child. The circus manager even says that in the USSR, you can have "a child of any colour" including polka-dotted (1:25:01) without consequence—in the film, at least, this holds true. Stalin's insistence that the Soviet Union was superior to the capitalist west is supported by this racial equality; unlike the U.S., the USSR welcomes people of colour and even celebrates them. Marion's son is not an obstacle to her finding her place in Soviet Russia, nor does it keep her from a loving relationship with the Russian performer and sharp-shooter Martynov. In fact, as Shapinskaya notes, in "*The Circus*, the basic aesthetic opposition is that of the image of Soviet womanhood and motherhood versus the external world of alien sexualized femininity" (151). Again, Aleksandrov contrasts Soviet morals with the overtly sexual, racist, sexist, capitalist West to prove the USSR's overarching superiority. Prokhorov's introduction argues for the pivotal role of *The Circus* in Soviet culture:

[7] BIPOC refers to Black, Indigenous, and People of Colour.

[8] Jimmy is played by James Lloydovich Patterson, who was just three years old at the time. Patterson is the son of a Russian theatre designer and an African American man who immigrated to the USSR looking for work as an actor. (Rosenberg)

> While Western musicals offered Utopian solutions to domestic social ills, *Circus* inaugurated a Stalinist final solution to the social ills of capitalism while cunningly deflecting attention from the contradictions and issues of Stalinist society: *Circus* "offer[s] strictly Soviet-based solutions to the Western social inadequacies that Western entertainment abets or represses." Holmgren investigates how the filmmaker exploits a tale of gender and racial emancipation to naturalize Soviet communal identity, including gender, ethnic, and racial hierarchies as an integral part of that identity. (1)

Aleksandrov contributes to the 'us versus them' rhetoric that characterizes most nationalism, including the USSR's under Stalin. The goal is to *not* be the Other, or even to be better than the Other. The U.S.-Russia competitiveness began well before *The Circus* was produced and continues even today. Part of Stalin's national construction was to *not* be like the U.S., and Aleksandrov's film clearly demonstrates why the Soviet Union is the superior society. Prokhorov argues that *The Circus* is

> a propaganda film designed to frame a political event of major mythological significance, with music carrying much of the 'message' and simultaneously rendering that message palatable. … *Circus* was designed to bring visual coherence and narrative stability/legitimacy to the myth of the Soviet Union as a society living according to the rule of socialist law. (3)

Indeed, a major box office success, especially a fun melodrama filled with animals, costumes, dancing, and music, is the perfect vessel for subtly emphasizing Stalinist values and Soviet nationalism while also rejecting Western influences. Prokhorov concludes that, "Having won the ideological war and technological race with the West, Aleksandrov's victorious Soviet entertainers take as booty Westerners' women and children: both the American protagonist and her black child choose to stay in 'Our Motherland' with the Soviet white man" (5). Marion and Jimmy find their place in the USSR with Martynov, who accepts them into his family just like the nation accepts immigrants into their Stalinist family.

After exploring Stalin's rise to totalitarian power and his projected national image, this paper explored how the controlled female body serves as an allegory to the USSR's control of its citizens and its international image as is represented in the 1936 film *The Circus*. While the two women whose narratives were told on screen come

from opposite ideological spectrums, both find happiness in the Soviet Union where they can contribute to society. Marion, in addition, is freed from the shackles of American racism by staying in the USSR with her mixed-race son under the protective wing of Martynov and Stalin. Aleksandrov's depictions of East versus West also establish the USSR as superior to the capitalist Occidental superpowers. With its happy-go-lucky characters finding success and love in the Soviet Union, the film takes on a propaganda-esque style of showing only the best parts of the country. Although colour TV was still a few years away from taking the nation by storm, *The Circus* proves to be anything but black and white.

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[9] Some information is missing from this citation since the author did not have access to the full article, only an extract (which did not list date of publication or page numbers).