LOVE IN THE AGE OF COMMUNISM

Soviet romantic comedy in the 1970s

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av Julia Skott
Abstract:
The author discusses three Soviet comedies from the 1970s: Moskva slezam ne verit (Moscow Does Not Believe in Tears, Vladimir Menshov, 1979), Osenniy marafon (Autumn Marathon, Georgi Daneliya, 1979), and Ironiya Sudby, ili S lyogkim parom (Irony of Fate, Eldar Ryazanov, 1975), and how they relate to both conventions of romance and conventions of the mainstream traditions of the romantic comedy genre. The text explores the evolution of the genre and accompanying theoretic writings, and relates them to the Soviet films, focusing largely on the conventions that can be grouped under an idea of the romantic chronotope. The discussion includes the conventions of chance and fate, of the wrong partner, the happy ending, the temporary and carnevalque nature of romance, multiple levels of discourse, and some aspects of gender, class and power. In addition, some attention is paid to the ways in which the films connect to specific genre cycles, such as screwball comedy and comedy of remarriage, and to the implications that a communist system may have on the possibilities of love and romance. The author argues that Soviet and Hollywood films share many conventions of romance, but for differing reasons.
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INTRODUCTION

There is, perhaps, a perceived notion of the history, and the tradition, of Soviet film. Even more so, most likely, when it is seen or discussed through a modern and Western perspective. Thinking of Soviet film we are likely to think of Eisenstein and Tarkovsky, or, perhaps, we have a vague general idea of gray, dreary films dealing with ideological and historical issues. It is not entirely unfounded – it is true that a large portion of the production, for quite obvious reasons, deals with matters of great social and socialist importance (imagined or otherwise). Published histories of Soviet film tend to reflect this notion (and, again, to some extent this reality), and focus mainly on the idea of the Great Soviet Film. Little attention has been paid in academic study to the more light-hearted film – the comedies and the romantic films. They are sometimes mentioned in passing, sometimes brought out as contrast, but even so it is usually in the political and ideological context. There has been some focus on the comedy in the sense of satire, which is interesting in a society intensely colored by repression, but I feel there are more levels to be explored. The gaps in Soviet Cinema History are not entirely unacknowledged – in the introduction to her Illustrated History of Soviet Cinema, for instance, Neya Zorkaya points out that “[i]t seems that the Soviet cinema remains largely a terra incognita: its major development trends are still insufficiently researched”. More than fifteen years have passed since Zorkaya published her history, but it seems that much of that unknown land has still been left unexplored. It should be pointed out that the comedies are not absent from Zorkaya’s or others’ histories, they are just not given much attention. Where the study of Soviet film has excluded the romantic comedies, the more general study of romantic comedies in its turn has not included Soviet films. There is clearly an unexplored space here that deserves attention.

Another factor is that of the more general discourse of romance. Many, if not most, of the conventions of romantic film and romantic comedy will stem from a more universal idea of romantic convention – or perhaps a convention of romantic narrative that is different from the romantic conventions of real life. It may seem obvious that this idea and practice of love will differ slightly from culture to culture, but there are also certain aspects of romance and romantic convention that have been thought to stem from or depend on certain

aspects of a capitalist, liberalistic, society. These may need to be addressed differently in a Soviet context.

I intend to investigate three Soviet films from the seventies, and discuss the extent to which they utilize, on the one hand, a romantic-comedy genre tradition, and, on the other, a discourse of romance. Arguably, these two aspects overlap to a large degree, and the division may be unclear, but it is one to keep in mind, at least. The tradition and discourse should be understood both as that within the Soviet Union (and by extention that of earlier Russia), and an international context. In a sense, I am interested in what happens to a mainstream genre in a highly controlled society. Perhaps, the discussion can also be said to include what happens to the highly individualist concept of ‘love’ in a society focused almost exclusively on the collective. I want to explore the idea of a romantic chronotope, a unit of space-time, and see how the Soviet films create and deal with it. The conventions, then, are used to delineate and mark the romantic chronotope as such.

The three films I will be studying are Moskva slezam ne verit (“Moscow Does Not Believe In Tears”, Vladimir Menshov, 1979), Osenniy marafon (“Autumn Marathon”, Georgi Daneliya, 1979), and Ironiya sudby, ili S lyogkim parom (“Irony of Fate”, Eldar Ryazanov, 1975). I have chosen these three because they are among the most popular and successful films of the period, and have additionally garnered some success abroad – Moscow Does Not Believe In Tears, won the Academy Award for Best Foreign Film in 1981, and was nominated for the Berlin Golden Bear at the 1980 Berlin International Film Festival, where Autumn Marathon also won the Interfilm Award in Forum of New Cinema. Irony of Fate is traditionally shown on Russian television every New Year’s Eve, and even if you do not watch it every New Year’s Eve, it is almost part of a sort of collective consciousness.

Moscow Does Not Believe in Tears tells the story of Katya, a girl from the country who works in a Moscow factory. A wealthy relative asks her to take care of his luxurious apartment when he is out of town, and her friend Lyudmila convinces her to pretend that they live there, in order to entice men of a different class. Katya falls in love with one of these men, Rudolph, only to find herself pregnant and abandoned. The films jumps forward about twenty years, and we find Katya a successful factory director, living in her own apartment with her daughter. She meets Gosha, a mechanic, on a train, and begins to fall in love with him, while Rudolph comes back into her life when he turns up to interview her at the factory.
Autumn Marathon is about Andrei Buzykin, a translator who rushes back and forth between his wife and his young mistress, lying to them both about his life and his intentions. His days are marked off by the early morning jogs he takes with a visiting Danish professor. His wife finally decides to leave him, at the same time as his mistress decides she can not play second fiddle any longer – but when he tells them both that the other woman is gone, they come back and he winds up exactly where he was.

Irony of Fate takes place on New Year’s Eve. Zhenya is set to spend the evening with his girlfriend, Galya, and is ready to propose, but when his friends take him out for an increasingly drunken sauna visit, he winds up on a plane to Leningrad without knowing it. In Leningrad, there is an identical address with an identical building, and an identical apartment with an identical key. There, he finds Nadya, who is planning to have dinner with her lover, Ippolit. Ippolit is not happy to discover a man in Nadya’s apartment, and does not believe their explanation. As the evening goes on, Nadya’s and Zhenya’s dislike for each other grows into affection and love. They decide that they can not let their whims rule them, but when he returns to Moscow, she follows and lets herself in with her key, and they kiss and make up.

My categorization of these films as romantic comedies may seem questionable at times, and I am not necessarily rigid in defending them as such. I hope, although it is by no means the main thrust of the analysis, that it will be clear that they can be categorized as such, and that they utilize many of the genre’s conventions. In the case of Autumn Marathon, I also assumed that a film could perhaps be said to belong to the genre because it seems to flaunt itself as an antithesis to the conventions and traditions of said genre; it uses them in distorted form – that is to say, it is a romantic comedy because it almost positions itself as an anti-romantic comedy.

In part, the seventies are an interesting period in Soviet history in general because it is, first, a time when the societal and cultural climate became even more rigid and controlling after a period of the so called “Thaw”, and second, a time before a period of change. When focusing on cultural production from a historical point of view, it may seem unfair not to focus mainly on the actual conditions – film makers could only relate to their current and actual situation, not a future that they knew nothing of. But knowing what was to come adds another level to a discussion of the seventies. In periods of repression, comedy was a traditional outlet for frustration and was treated more leniently, because it is not necessarily seen as being serious and noteworthy. The 1970s are also interesting and relevant in the context of the genre, because at this time the Hollywood romantic comedy was changing as
well. The focus moved away from one of love and romance, and edged towards a more self-aware and complex stance – partly to the sexually and physically explicit films that William Paul dubs ‘animal comedies’ and partly to what Frank Krutnik calls ‘nervous comedies’. The romantic comedy as we may tend to think of it today started developing in Hollywood in the mid-to-late eighties – and I will argue that in some ways it has more in common with the Soviet romantic comedy of the seventies, than with the U.S. romantic comedies of the first half of the twentieth century. Some discussions compare late romantic comedy with early screwball comedy, but most of them do admit that the former tends to be rather more conservative than the latter.

I am also interested in whether or not Soviet romantic comedies could be said to work on several levels. There were more or less strict rules (sometimes expressed, most often implied) about what was an acceptable topic and setting for a text. I hope to show that the films I’m going to discuss on the one hand adhered to the socialist and aesthetic ideals of the time, and on the other disregarded them. This is and has been a fairly common practice, in film, art, and literature, in a country where expressing dissent and discontent was not only frowned upon, but in some cases fraught with very real and tangible danger. Comedy in general, and perhaps romantic comedy in particular, has almost always provided an opportunity for the carnivalesque, a temporary freedom from the rules and constrictions of everyday life. In Revolt of the Filmmakers, George Faraday discusses Eldar Ryazanov mainly in the context of his reputation as creator of ‘sad comedy.’ The first film he mentions happens to be Irony of Fate, but it is not clear if this is because it is an example of the aforementioned genre, or because he begins with, as he does say, Ryazanov’s greatest popular success. He does, however, move on to a discussion of the duality of the film:

Despite the comic and sentimental satisfaction Ryazanov’s films of this period offered the audience, they had socially critical undertones – the protagonist’s confusion over his location in Irony of Fate, for instance, as an implicit commentary on the soulless uniformity of the Soviet Urban landscape. Nevertheless, the generally emotionally reassuring character […]

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drew criticisms that he allowed his audiences to escape from the unattractive features of Soviet reality [...]

Clearly, comic films were not the uncomplex matter they might be (or seem, at least) in a less controlled and ideologically demanding society – they could not be too far removed from reality, or a perceived realism, perhaps, but they could also not come too close to reality, as comedy could easily spill over into criticism. Ryazanov does not seem unaware of this, as he stated in an interview that he did not feel it was a sin to try to cheer up and encourage the viewer, which Faraday feels “implies that the conditions of Soviet life created a need for such reassurance, a not-altogether-welcome proposition from the point of view of official ideology.”

I have chosen not to discuss the actual objective influence or lack thereof that the Hollywood genre and tradition have had on Soviet film makers. The practical aspects – finding out which films were legally accessible at which times, or were accessible through private film screenings or illicit fifth-generation copies, and finding out which ones the filmmakers might or might not have seen, or read of – are next to impossible to deal with. This is even more true if you consider that a fair investigation of the genre tradition’s influence would reasonably have to span the almost seventy years between the Soviet Union’s founding and the films in question. Instead, I start with the assumption that there is a transnational relationship between the various types of films, and have focused on what that relationship might entail and imply, rather than how it may have been instituted practically. Although the conditions of Soviet film makers and their access to Western films would make an interesting subject for analysis, there is not room for it here, and I have chosen to exclude it, focusing instead on the films themselves.

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4 Faraday, p. 98-99
5 Ibid., p. 99
CONCEPTS; METHOD; PREVIOUS SCHOLARSHIP

There are two key concepts throughout this study. The first is reasonably that of *romance* or *romantic convention*. These overlapping concepts are explored and discussed more extensively later, but there is one distinction that needs to be mentioned initially. The word ‘romance’ can be used to signify both a narrative of love, and an ethereal quality we associate with courtship and with flowers, poems and the like. In this context, it is mainly the first meaning that is intended, although there is some intermingling. The romantic conventions are to be understood both as those of the romantic narrative, and of things we consider to be romantic in the latter sense.

In the introduction to *Romance Revisited*, Jackie Stacey and Lynne Pearce set the stage, by discussing the narratives of romance and the elements that might make up a classic romance. Early on, they say that “[t]he dictionary definition of romance as a ‘love affair viewed as resembling…a tale of romance’ […] confirms that, in life as well as art, it is first and foremost a narrative. […] It is the narrativity of romance which crosses the common-sense boundaries of ‘fact and fiction’, ‘representations and lived experience’ and ‘fantasy and reality’.” This pointing-out of romance’s complex nature is good to keep in mind. Our experience of romance is tinted by our experiences of romantic narratives, and our experience of romantic narratives is tinted by our experience of romance – and of other romantic narratives.

The second key concept is that of the *chronotope*, and more specifically the *romantic chronotope*. The chronotope is a term coined by Mikhail Bakhtin. It is meant to signify a discrete unit of space-time, where time and space “are fused into one carefully thought-out, concrete whole.” Lynne Pearce writes on what she calls a romantic love chronotope, “a spatio-temporal continuum which exists apart from the ‘historical’ lives of the characters.” Pearce discusses feminist fiction, with largely historical and fantasy settings, but her definition is still applicable.

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8 Ibid, p. 84
Additionally, there is a concept that may not in and of itself be central to the argument, but which nonetheless warrants mentioning – the concept in question is genre (both on its own, and by extension the idea of romantic comedy.)

The main thing to keep in mind, which is sometimes easily lost in both text and thought, is that genre is not a natural, objective category, fixed over time, space and culture. It is a fluid and changing structure, a social and theoretical construct. It allows us to understand films in relation to and context of themselves, of other films like them, other films unlike them, and texts and situations entirely outside the cinematic sphere. Thus it can be complicated to discuss a genre over time, or the classic form of a genre, because it implies that there is a set and lasting norm for what constitutes a genre text. Instead, it is always in flux, and at times given to self-reflection and self-awareness.

In order to discuss the extent to which the films in question could be said to relate to conventions of romance and romantic comedy, it is beneficial to start with some discussions of what those conventions might be. To this end, I have used two larger studies on romance as sociological and societal phenomenon, and a number of studies that discuss various aspects of the romantic comedy as a genre, as a genre in evolution, and as a social phenomenon. My focus will be primarily on a number of areas where some of them intersect and overlap, and some points where the discussion is more specifically relevant to my discussion of the Soviet films. Many of the texts that focus on the genre of romantic comedy discuss screwball comedies and comedies of remarriage; my reasons for including them are twofold. First, these are two large sub-genres within the classic (both in the sense of early, and in the sense of ideal or traditional) romantic comedy, and as such they have played a significant part in the evolution of the genre as a whole – and, as a result, they play a generally correspondingly significant part in the existing theory and discourse in the field. Secondly, I found that these two subgenres share significant aspects in common with the three films I have selected, and in order to discuss the connections between the films and the subgenres, it is necessary to have an understanding of what screwball and comedy of remarriage entail.

For background on general conventions of romance, I have used Romance Revisited (1997), edited by Jackie Stacey and Lynne Pearce, where a number of feminist theoreticians discuss romance from several perspectives and regarding several cultural phenomena, and Eva Illouz’s Consuming the Romantic Utopia, which explores the extent to
which romance and capitalism are dependent on and help create one another.\textsuperscript{10} The latter may seem a strange choice, as my films are set in the Soviet Union, but her discussion is useful in two ways. It can be considered an imagined contrast to the anti-capitalist ideology in which the films were created. More interestingly, however, I found a number of her assumptions of what a capitalist society entails and creates, to be just as applicable on a communist society in general and the Soviet Union in particular. It is true that the connections between romance and \textit{consumption} she discusses are not going to be present in quite the same way in a Soviet context, but when she discusses the conditions in which lovers meet and interact, some of her delineations seem too rigid – and in effect, useful in discussing a non-capitalist context as well. Noteworthy in her study of romance and capitalism, on a more general level, is the fact that so many of the aspects she brings up in her discussion of capitalism’s control over romance could easily be translated into Soviet society (ideal or actual). She never acknowledges this fact, which almost seems strange – perhaps she is so focused on capitalism that she never sees the parallels, but sometimes they are glaringly obvious. For instance: “Romantic love is irrational rather than rational, gratuitous rather than profit-oriented, organic rather than utilitarian, private rather than public. In short, romantic love seems to evade the conventional categories within which capitalism has been conceived.”\textsuperscript{11} In this quite in particular Illouz sets up cases where romance seems diametrically opposed in terms to concepts understood to be inherent to capitalism, but her claim seems questionable. Under its own premises, the Soviet system was highly rational, profit-oriented for a certain value of the term “profit”, highly utilitarian (the greatest possible good for the greatest possible number was, if not the reality, at least the maxim) and highly public. The same contradictions that Illouz sees between romance and capitalism, are there in Soviet society – sometimes even more so. (I am going to do Illouz the favor of not assuming, for instance, that she dismisses communism as inherently irrational.) It seems even stranger when you consider that Illouz does discuss, briefly, the Marx-Engelsian view that only among workers, where there is no material wealth to be gained or lost in marriage, as there is among the bourgeoisie, can there be true romantic love – and that, in the extension, a socialist society would provide freedom for the family and for love.\textsuperscript{12} It seems equally unjust to suppose that Illouz assumes that if


\textsuperscript{11} Illouz, p. 2

\textsuperscript{12} Ibid., p. 7
Marx and Engels say so, love will be totally free and unhindered by any of the aforementioned.

A large number of the existing studies of romantic comedy either focus on early or classic romantic comedy, from the first half of the 20th century, or relate the films or periods they discuss to those early genre cycles. It would appear that I am no exception – although I hope to align myself more with the line of scholarly works that try to find and analyze intertextual relationships between various periods and cycles. In my case, there is also a cross-cultural aspect to these relationships.

In her article "Romantic Love and Friendship: The Redefinition of Gender Relations in Screwball Comedy", Tina Olsin Lent discusses the way gender patterns and relations change and reassemble in screwball comedy. Stanley Cavell’s study of the “comedy of remarriage” in itself presents an interesting concept, but has also been problematized by several people, particularly in Charles Musser’s article “Divorce, DeMille and the Comedy of Remarriage”, where Musser argues that some of Cavell’s categorizations and delineations are somewhat too restrictive. These texts focus mainly on the early subgenres of romantic comedy. I have also used two articles by Frank Krutnik; “The Faint Aroma of Performing Seals” and “Conforming Passions?: Contemporary Romantic Comedy”, and an article by Steve Neale entitled ”The Big romance or Something Wild?: Romantic Comedy Today” in which he discusses formal, structural and ideological characteristics of romantic comedies. His main focus is the contemporary cycle of what he calls ‘new comedies’, but many of his statements can be more generally applied, and some turn out to be highly applicable in discussion of the Soviet romantic comedies.

Thomas E. Wartenberg’s Unlikely Couples discusses the way popular films about a mismatched pair, be it class, gender, or racially, can subvert society’s prejudices and boundaries. I use it only briefly, because the specific films his chapters discuss deal with

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16 Steve Neale, ”The Big romance or Something Wild?: romantic comedy today” (Screen 33:3, 1992)
17 Thomas E. Wartenberg, Unlikely Couples: Movie Romance as Social Criticism (Boulder: Westview Press, 1999)
somewhat specific matchings, which are not found in the three Soviet films, but some of his reasoning is still applicable and useful, even if only as a back-of-the-mind help.

Svetlana Boym’s book *Common Places* discusses everyday life in the Soviet Union, and I found her chapter on the communal apartment specifically useful in my discussion of the romantic chronotope.\textsuperscript{18}

In my discussion of how the Soviet films may fit into some more specific genre traditions, I have chosen not to discuss all the possible connections with all possible genre cycles. Since the romantic comedy is a late occurrence in Soviet film history, it seemed a plausible starting-point to focus initially on the earlier Hollywood genres and the surrounding theories, and see what was applicable, and then move on from there. It might seem equally natural to focus on the chronologically contemporary Hollywood films, but as I have mentioned, they were in transition into a much more physically and sexually explicit form of comedy, and it was rather obvious that this was not the case with the three Soviet films, thus the decision to start at the beginning. I found that there were significant points of connection with two of the earliest genre cycles, what have been dubbed ‘screwball comedies’ and ‘comedies of remarriage’ (or, in some studies, comedies of divorce), and that these connections warranted more extensive discussion. I initially decided to focus on these two particular subgenres for a very simple reason – they were the first to occur to me during my early viewings and consideration of the films. During the consequent research, and in relating some of my texts to one another, I also found that they had aspects in common with some contemporary and later films. It did seem to me, however, that these were perhaps not as interesting to discuss, and did not raise the same kind of questions and implications, as the connections to the earlier cycle. Consequently, I include them only briefly, to show that I am, indeed, aware of the possibility for further discussion.

There have been comedies with romantic elements made in the Soviet Union far earlier than the period I discuss, but as Andrew Horton mentions, they have often been dismissed and excluded from the perceived Soviet tradition and history: “Critics panned the film [*The Cigarette Girl from Mosselprom*, 1924] in the niggardly fashion all too common in early Soviet film criticism. These criticisms are telling ones. While critics admitted the film was funny, they vigorously denied that it was a Soviet comedy.” He goes on to discuss the critics’ dismissal of it and other films made “according to ‘capitalist standards’”. (Despite

this, it should be mentioned, the film in question was widely popular with the general public.)\(^{19}\) It may seem simplistic to dismiss the earlier films because they do not adhere to a contemporarily perceived tradition, but as they also tended to be made with Hollywood filmmakers involved, I have chosen to consider them as a sort of amalgam of Soviet and Hollywood romantic comedies, and exclude them from this particular discussion.

An additional issue, of which I am very well aware, is that examples and conventions appear and reappear at several different points throughout the text. Because they are interesting and relevant from different aspects, I have chosen to repeat them rather than exclude them.

THE ROMANTIC CHRONOTOPE

In this chapter, I explore the ways in which the films create a romantic chronotope. This includes the very specific romantic-chronotopic element of the apartment; the general concept of the romantic chronotope as it is delineated in the films through time and space; the aspects of chance and fate; and the ways in which the characters, more or less actively, seem to try to create or change their chronotope. In the three Soviet films, the romantic chronotope plays out in three very different ways, both in the temporal and spatial aspects.

The chronotope is usually understood as a distinct unit of space-time. Mikhail Bakhtin, who coined the term, uses it both on a generic level, and for specific situations. In the sense of the romantic chronotope this can be understood as both the genre’s overall stage, or playground, even, or as the specific situational unit of space-time. I will use it here in the latter sense, which is one of a reasonably concrete section of narrative. It seems clear that in this sense there exists a distinct romantic chronotope within most romantic comedies – the position in space and time that the romantic narrative occupies, regardless of its relation to the actual film’s chronotope. A little more clearly – just as there is a beginning, a middle, and an end to both the film’s story and its plot, there is a beginning, a middle, and an end to the romantic narrative, and the two do not necessarily correspond. The aspect of space is a bit more complex – it entails not only the physical place, but also the cultural, social, emotional, and other implications of that space.

The ideal or conventional romantic chronotope is limited temporally, for various reasons – the main reason most likely being that larger amounts of time, and corresponding development, is not altogether perceived as romantic. Stevi Jackson, writing in Romance Revisited, has some interesting observations on the beginnings of love – and the beginning is where the romantic comedy tends to stay, ending before the messy realities of everyday life can come into play. She says, “It [love] appears to be experienced as a dramatic, deeply felt inner transformation, as something that lifts us above the mundane everyday world […] it is different in kind from

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20 Bakhtin, for instance, discusses the fairytale chronotope, and the chronotope of the road. They function on different levels and with different scopes, but the general idea is the same.
lasting, longer term affection and widely recognized as more transient.”21 It is this difference, and the transition between the two, that is particularly interesting, and this is even more so as Jackson goes on: “There are fundamental contradictions between passionate, romantic attraction and longer term affectionate love, yet the first is supposed to provide the basis for the second: a disruptive, tumultuous emotion is ideally supposed to be the foundation of a secure and durable relationship.””22 It is not difficult to extrapolate, although Jackson does not (which is natural, as she is not discussing film specifically) that we make a parallel assumption when we are watching romantic comedies – just as obstacles make a subsequent love more worthwhile, a mad, whirlwind falling-in-love can, should, and will lead to a long-term and stable relationship, even if we never get to see it after the final credits.

Obstacles (real or perceived) of space and time can serve to increase a situation’s romantic possibilities. Think of some of the lasting clichés of romantic narrative – of the couple separated by a great ocean, or the former lovers reunited after decades apart. In that respect, the ultimate romantic chronotope is not necessarily limited in scope. Even so, the distinct and clear points of romance, if they can be called that, in the tale of separation, are usually relatively short, and intense – the moment the lovers meet, the moment they are separated, and the (possible) moment of reunion. However, the romantic comedy as such, as opposed to the romantic narrative on the whole, usually tends to focus on somewhat more limited obstacles, of the sort that can be overcome within a feasible amount of time and effort, and thus the romantic comedy chronotope in its ideal form will generally not span a large amount of time.

It is interesting here to make a comparison with some of the reasoning in Illouz’s study. It is based largely on interviews with a number of North Americans from different socioeconomic backgrounds, and how these subjects perceive and experience romance. Perhaps most notably, at least with regard to romantic narratives, a number of her subjects were conflicted when it came to the topics of love at first sight, and intense passion as a model and ideal.23 In response to explicit questioning, they were fairly practical and did not feel that it was a sound basis for a relationship, preferring the stories where love grew over time. However, when they were asked to choose the story that was the most romantic,

22 Ibid., p. 53
23 At one point during the interview process, Illouz let her subjects read three short stories; one where two people fell in love instantly on a train, one where a couple was set up by their parents, and one where the pair decided to get married for what seemed to be practical, objective reasons. Because the discussion runs over several chapters, I have not included page references for this general argument.
almost all chose the one where a couple fell instantly and madly in love and were married almost immediately. (Interestingly, both the subjects and the text refer to it as “stereotypical” and “Hollywood”.) Clearly, we can and do appreciate a narrative that follows grand romantic conventions, even though we do not believe it is plausible—or even perhaps desirable. Jackson agrees: “Readers of romance are of course perfectly aware that it is not a realistic representation of the social world – indeed that is part of its attraction”.24 This does not have to be an accusation of escapism—perhaps it is merely acknowledgement of the fact that we prefer narratives in general, and romantic narratives in particular, to be on a grander scale than reality. Instinctively (if there could be said to be such a thing as a culturally created instinct) we want passion and madness, but on a more logical level, we want practicality and mutual development. Perhaps, when the romantic chronotope is limited in scale, the passion and romance is perceived as more concentrated and intense—more love per minute, to speak.

One point where Illouz’s claims do hold some interest and problem for the idea of love in a Soviet system, is where she claims that while romantic love existed before capitalism, it embodied certain ideas that would come to be central in capitalist ideology, particularly “the sovereignty of the individual vis-à-vis the group.”25 A communist society would place the group, the collective, highest—but could not minimize the importance of love. Love was perhaps not deemed as necessary for the individual, but it was necessary for the development of the family unit. As Marianne Liljestöm points out in her dissertation on the Soviet gender system, as discussion of the woman’s place in the Soviet Union evolved, there was an increased emphasis placed on “the functions of the family and its increased importance for both the development of society and the happiness and success of the family members.”26

Even more complex, then, in a Soviet perspective, is Illouz’s concept of the secluded couple. She says: “[T]he contemporary vision of secluded couplehood [...] signifies a complete withdrawal from the proceedings, rules and constraints of the urban industrial world and an entry into the euphoric realm of leisure.”27 The idea of the ‘urban industrial world’ is not one exclusive to a Western, capitalist context, and it is not at all difficult to see how lovers might want to escape the controlling rules and constraints of Soviet society. The complexity enters the equation when you look at the second part. In a capitalist system, the

24 Jackson, p. 56
25 Illouz, p. 9
27 Illouz, p. 87
euphoric realm of leisure is one of consuming, of commodities such as travel, shopping, and restaurants (and Illouz discusses this at length). Reasonably, Soviet lovers also traveled and ate and bought things in the course of their courtship, but their romance was not and could not be the same *carte blanche* to consumption – that would be contrary to the reigning and accepted ideology. Similarly, they could not explicitly escape, for long, into a private world, as everything was to be public and collective. If they did so in order to emerge (a little later) as a family, that could be more acceptable – but if, as we have seen, romance narratives focus on the high-point of passion, and leave the viewer or reader to imagine the practical consequences of that love, there would be no room for the family unit in the ‘withdrawal’.

It is more beneficial to focus on the temporary aspect of the withdrawal. Regardless of whether it is one isolated incident, or a repeated pattern, romance does not allow for “complete” withdrawal, if we understand complete in the sense of permanent. Romance (either our own, or a narrative) allows us to withdraw *temporarily* into a sphere where the regular rules and constrictions do not apply. We can play with gender and power structures, and experience a release from society’s expectations, but at the end of the romantic sequence, we must return to the norm or be punished for our transgression. Much like another of Bakhtin’s concepts, the carnival, it provides a temporary freedom, a space to let off steam and frustration (indirectly, in this case) before we have to return to the reality of life. As Andrew Horton says in the introduction to *Inside Soviet Film Satire*, “Carnivalesque satire and laughter is a popular, folk laughter of the people, by the people, for the people, and is, in the spirit of carnival, a sanctioned, liberating attack on all authority.”

The sanction, however, is also limited to the period of carnival, of withdrawal, as carnival is a way to appease the crowds by allowing them the illusion of freedom and transgression. Similarly, the individuality of love can perhaps be permitted under the Soviet structure because it will lead to, or return to, the structurally acceptable family unit.

**THE APARTMENT**

All three of the films employ the idea of the apartment as an initial marker of the romantic chronotope – not in the sense that events simply take place in apartments, but that the apartment(s) plays an integral role in delineating the chronotope. In addition, they elaborate

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with very specific ideas of the Soviet apartment. The three different ideas of apartment are to varying degrees contextually specific to the Soviet Union – none of them could play out in the same way in a Hollywood film.

The apartment was an ideologically charged concept for a Soviet filmmaker and audience – it could never be merely a place where people lived. In the chapter “Living in Common Places: The Communal Apartment”, Svetlana Boym explores communal living and its tensions and realities, and the conflicts of communal living and the quest for private space.\textsuperscript{29} She specifies that “[It was] a revolutionary experiment in living, an attempt to practice utopian ideologies and to destroy bourgeois banality”\textsuperscript{30} – although she is aware that this was the theory, not necessarily the practice. If the experiment was intended to inspire a desire for communal living and common life, it did not succeed – the quest remained to attain your own room, and then your own apartment once that possibility became available. Even though private living eventually became available, and perhaps attained, it could not then exist in a vacuum; it existed in relation and contrast to the communal apartment. Boym even writes that the communal apartment was “a favorite tragicomic setting for many Soviet jokes.”\textsuperscript{31} For a Soviet narrative, and its audience, the apartment was not merely a stage on which a story was to play out; it held its own very specific connotations, and carried with it inescapable ideological and social aspects.

\textit{Moscow Does Not Believe in Tears} employs the contrast of the workers’ corridor and shared rooms with the professor’s apartment. The latter permits romance and courtship, where the former almost precludes it. In a Hollywood film, a character might similarly pretend to live somewhere other than he or she actually does, and such a narrative would involve aspects of class, but it would not be as marked as in the Soviet context. Worth nothing is the possibility that when Katya and Lyudmila move into the professor’s apartment, it is used as a humorous parallel to the early 20\textsuperscript{th} century expropriation of the apartments of the wealthy.\textsuperscript{32} The difference is that Katya and Lyudmila do not only expropriate the living space, they attempt to expropriate the social and class status that comes with it. In addition, their expropriation is not permanent. They know it is only a limited reprieve, a temporary chance to experience a privacy and seclusion they are not guaranteed to achieve again.

\textsuperscript{29} Boym, p. 121-167.
\textsuperscript{30} Boym, p. 124.
\textsuperscript{31} Ibid, p. 124
\textsuperscript{32} Ibid, p.124
It should be pointed out that the communal corridor living does not in and of itself make romance impossible. Katya and Lyudmila’s friend Antonina manages to carry out a courtship in the communal corridor (when she marries, her wedding party takes even place there) and she is also the one of the three friends who is happy and with the same man throughout the entire film. For Antonina and her straight-forward country boy, appearances are not as important as they are for Lyudmila, and by extension to Katya (who, protest as she might, does not tell Rudolph the truth). When I say that corridor living precludes romance, I mean that this is how it is treated by the majority of the characters. For instance, Lyudmila trains the old woman at the front desk to answer the phone in a way that does not reveal their living status, and the old lady does take pains to phonetically learn how to say “Hello” in English.

Further, Katya’s private apartment in the second half provides some hint to Gosha that she is not the mechanic or tradesperson he has first assumed, and that she may indeed be above him in rank, but he ignores this until it becomes totally obvious.

*Autumn Marathon* also takes place both in a communal and a private apartment, but the chronotope seems to play out almost between them. Buzykin is always running from one to the other, from the life in the comfortable apartment he shares with his wife, to the room his mistress has in a shared apartment, where her uncle is always present, and back. The film toys with space and this division in its opening, when we see Buzykin napping on a chair, squeezed into a small space between two large looming pieces of furniture, an upright piano and a cabinet. One might even go so far as to note that there is one symbolically useful piece (the cabinet) and one frivolous, entertaining piece (the piano) and draw parallels to the other two places he is caught between.

The communal apartment is not in itself a major component of the romantic chronotope, but it does play a part. Buzykin, when he needs to use the phone or the restroom, is forced to interact with Alla’s uncle. The uncle, in turn, is not unaware of the problematics of communal living – he tells the lovers that when they are married, he will go and live in the country and they can have two rooms to themselves.

*Irony of Fate*, in its turn, takes place solely in a private apartment – but it is two apartments as one, or one apartment split into two. Both Zhenya and Nadya have recently moved in, and they are both, significantly, living with their mothers. Soviet “private” does not necessarily correspond to a Western idea of private – adults in their late thirties living with
their parents carries decidedly different connotations on either end. (We do not know where they have lived before, but it is not unreasonable to assume that it has been a communal apartment.) They have the same furniture and the same wallpaper – it is not government-issued, but it might as well be. The aspect of the communal remains, in the sense that all spaces are one space. This is made even more apparent as Zhenya and Nadya are allowed very few uninterrupted stretches of time alone – the doorbell rings at closely-spaced intervals, and they have to keep letting in Ippolit, Nadya’s friends, and, at one point, a band of accordion-playing revellers who have the wrong apartment number.

The idea of identical apartments and mistaken addresses is possible in a Hollywood romantic comedy, but it would be a more far-fetched notion, calling for a certain suspension of disbelief. In *Ironic of Fate*, it is presented as a very real consequence of bureaucracy- and government-controlled city-building. The animation with which the film opens shows how a bureaucrat strips every identifying artistic decoration from the architect’s design, until rows upon rows of identical boxy high-rises march across the earth, imposing themselves everywhere from deserts and beaches to mountaintops. The following voice-over, which accompanies us through establishing shots of Moscow, and then disappears entirely, makes the point even clearer as it notes how the same street names appear throughout the Soviet Union, and that “every town will feel like home”, with its “typical apartments” and “standard furniture”. As it does not return at any other point of the film, it feels almost like an advertisement or a slogan postcard.

TIME, SPACE AND POSSIBILITY

In *Ironic of Fate*, the romantic chronotope spans most of the entire length of the film, beginning around the first half-hour mark. This may seem somewhat late to introduce our two would-be lovers to one another, but as the whole film runs to just over three hours, it is proportionately reasonable. I would not say that Zhenya’s early interactions with Galya, with his mother, and with his friends, are part of the romantic chronotope. They provide background and set-up, but the chronotope does not begin until he and Nadya actually meet. It then continues until the very end of the film, when they profess their love for one another and to their (explicit and implicit) audience. The objective literal time the romantic narrative has taken, is short, highly concentrated. The whole film takes place on New Year’s Eve, and only a number of hours pass between Nadya and Zhenya’s first meeting and their ultimate happy
ending. Spatially, *Irony*’s chronotope employs both the larger and the smaller scale. Most of the story takes place in Nadya’s apartment – which is also Zhenya’s apartment. Objectively, they are in her apartment in Leningrad (St. Petersburg), but it is mirrored by his, and thus the chronotope places them in a common space, where they are both, in a philosophical sense, on their own turf. This common space, these identical apartments (on identical addresses in identical buildings and so on) is another sign that they are meant to be together. It is coincidence on such a grand scale that it cannot be anything other than fate. On a larger level, the lovers are separated, first hypothetically and then practically, by the distance between their two cities. This duality, of the small shared space and the large dividing space, is employed to evoke twice over the sense of chance and fate. Imagine, not only do they have the same address and apartment – their love is so great as to overcome the vast distance. Another example of the romantic chronotope’s play with space is when Nadya is walking back from the train station; the vista of Leningrad is a traditionally romantic one, it is narrated by a romantic song, but it is also the first time we see her without enclosing walls, and it is at that point that she also opens up to the possibility of love and happiness.

What is perhaps particularly interesting about *Irony of Fate*’s romantic chronotope, is that it is so explicit, in a way – New Year’s Eve is a night of revelry, of merriment and chaos. It is a night of liminality, of in-between, and it is the perfect stage for confusion and a mad romance. The combination of New Year’s Eve and the common space only increases this effect.

*Autumn Marathon* is a bit more complex, in that it does not have one clear couple with a happy ending, but if we take the somewhat distorted romantic conventions for their straight-up counterparts, the chronotope is reasonably conventional and does span the length of the film. We have an initial romantic situation, which meets with complications and separation but ultimately ends in reunion. What we might have, however, and interestingly so, is a split chronotope, or parallel chronotopes, with neither ever really being allowed to take precedence over the other. A different take might be that we have one romantic chronotope, but we never really know what it is. The film opens with a sequence where Andrei Buzykyn talks to a young woman who, we quickly learn, is his lover. Shortly afterwards he interacts with his wife. The mistress might be seen as the main narrative, the romantic chronotope, because it is the first thing we see, and indeed we are given a taste of her longing and her love. She proclaims to him that she wishes they had a child, who would be just like him, and she and the baby could wait for him together. Then again, tradition says that a wife is more important,
more serious, than a mistress, and while we do not see her first, she was definitely there first. The viewer is never given the unequivocal opportunity to decide that one narrative makes up the romantic chronotope, and the other is the obstacle to be overcome. Buzykin promises them both that they are the only one, tells each woman that she is the one he wants to spend his life with. The wife, although it is not explicitly stated, is quite clearly as aware of the mistress, or at least the existence of such a creature, as the mistress is of her. The two possible chronotopoes run almost identically – if we had not seen one, we would have easily enjoyed and recognized the other, and vice versa. The parallel separations allow for a brief moment of uncertainty, of possibility. Buzykin could choose to try and salvage his marriage of many years, or he could start a new life with a young girl who loves him. When, instead, they are followed by parallel – although not very passionate – reunions, not even the conclusion provides the opportunity to decide on one main romantic chronotope. Buzykin and the Danish professor set off on their eternal jog, now darker as the months have passed into autumn, leaving the lovers and us where we started. Perhaps this hints that there was no romantic chronotope – if there is no marked end to the romantic (or, in this case, “romantic”) events, are they romantic to a viewer?

The chronotopic confusion is made even more explicit by Buzykin’s ever-buzzing watch, which marks when his time in one place is over. The aforementioned opening, where he naps between a cabinet and a piano, is interrupted by its buzzing, and he gets up and gets moving. He never has an opportunity to let anything evolve, to let time play out on its own terms – but perhaps it is not only the opportunity that is lacking, but the ability, or the desire. It is as if he is happy to let the watch determine his time and his life for him. He is never still, always moving, more specifically running, but never getting anywhere – he even says, over and over, “I’ll run off now” instead of telling the person he is with that he will leave, or go, or walk. (At one point, when he is teaching translation, he is frustrated with a student who has used the too-similar begat’, to run, and ubegat’, to run off or away, in the same portion of a translation, and asks the other students for synonyms to “running” and modifiers to describe the various ways in which one can run.) The only time he is close to still is when he is shut into tiny cramped phone booths, trying to convince one of his women that he will be there soon and everything is all right. The telephone is used throughout as a means of mis-communication, and the last thing Buzykin says is “I’m here” – simultaneously to Alla, on the phone, as he has explained that his wife is gone, and to his wife who has come in and asked him if his mistress is truly gone. He is “here”, but he has not actually gotten anywhere, for all his running.
Earlier, I suggested that the chronotope plays out between two apartments – maybe it is even more extreme, and the romantic chronotope is played out entirely between two hypothetic romantic chronotopes; it plays out between two possibilities, neither of which is realized, and thus it is not realized itself. It is defined almost through its non-being.

*Moscow Does Not Believe In Tears*, in turn, could be said to contain two distinct and in some ways opposing romantic chronotopes, divided by a filmic jump, an ellipsis, of almost twenty years. The first, despite following several romantic conventions, is not consummated, while the second is consummated despite reversing several conventions or expectations. Again, another possibility might be that it is in fact only one romantic chronotope, where a fake-out reveals that the chronotope we think we have been following was in fact no such thing, and the romantic narrative begins much later. There is room for different interpretation, but I choose to call it two chronotopes, rather than one real and one fake chronotope.

When, in the first half of the film, the young Katya and Lyudmila pretend that the swanky professor’s apartment is theirs, the stage seems set for a farcical comedy of errors and misunderstandings which begins, even, with what Steve Neale calls the ‘meet cute’.33 There is every possibility for a string of misunderstandings leading up to the amusing discovery of their deceit, and the subsequent proclamation of love not for economic factors but for inner personality, or something to that general effect. Young lovers exit stage left, lit softly and laughing into their happy-ever-after. While Katya is in fact found out as a factory worker, the youthful good times instead lead to a hint of social realism and misery, as she is left to fend for herself when she becomes pregnant. The chronotope contrasts the dreary and cramped factory workers’ quarters, with the beautiful and spacious apartment in one of Moscow’s fanciest and most exclusive apartment buildings, and its promise of a family life to come. Its possibilities are never fulfilled, however, and it is cut short in a highly unromantic way, as are our expectations. Failed love is romantic on a narrative or generic level, but it is not romantic-comedy romantic, which is what we are primarily exploring here.

In the second half, Katya has grown up and established a successful life for herself and her daughter. This is where the chronotopic possibilities get a bit muddled. If we view the first half as the romantic chronotope, it continues here, with the coincidence of Rudolph – now calling himself Rodion, following the capriciously changing fashions - being the cameraman sent to interview her. Under the romantic conventions, this should imply that

33 Neale, p. 287-288
she and Rudolph are meant to be— they have overcome the obstacle of space and time, and fate has sent them back together. They have a past, and a daughter, and now they meet again by coincidence— clearly, they are meant to be. The other possible romantic chronotope, where Gosha and Katya meet on the train, is downright ordinary in comparison, but they are the ones who turn out to be the film’s happy couple. Despite its ordinariness when it comes to the element of chance, the latter chronotope is more complex on other levels. It employs, for instance, the romantic contrast of urban and rural settings, when Gosha takes Katya and her daughter for a picnic in the countryside. (On a less complex level, Gosha and Katya’s romantic chronotope is closer to the ideal as it is shorter in time than hers and Rodion’s— the points of romance are closer together.)

**CHANCE, FATE AND THE HAPPY ENDING**

Added into the equation is also what Steve Neale calls, via Mike Bygrave, the “meet cute”— a way of getting strangers together— but Neale feels that the ordinary quality of Bygrave’s examples are not characteristic of romantic comedies in general (or at least not the ‘new comedies’ he discusses). He says, “In screwball films, for instance, there is always something *extraordinary* (something unusual, eccentric— something screwball) either about the meeting itself or the situation in which it occurs”. ³⁴ I would agree that the ‘meet cute’ tends to be of the more unusual type, and I posit that it, like most of the conventions Neale discusses, is in order to maximize the unusual or special qualities of the couple and their story— the wackier or unlikelier the meeting, the stronger the implied element of chance and fate; these two and these two specifically are meant to be together. Neale does mention this idea, when he discusses the general eccentricity and playfulness of comedies in general and romantic comedies in particular: “[I]t serves, in particular, nearly always to bestow signs of uniqueness and individuality— of ‘specialness’— both on the couple and its members, and on their romance.”³⁵

As has been mentioned, chance and fate are a vital aspect of the romantic chronotope— they bridge the gap of space between the two lovers and bring them together. Corresponding conventions are the misunderstanding and separation, with subsequent

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³⁴ Neale, p. 287-288
³⁵ Ibid, p. 291
reunion, and the happy ending. The question of the happy ending is played out quite differently in the three films.

*Irony of Fate*, despite numerous complications up until the very end, has a fairly conventional if non-specific happy ending. Nadya finds Zhenya in Moscow – which is not altogether difficult, considering the premise of the film – and the two finally express their love for each other. It is not explicitly stated that they are going to get married, but it is not difficult to extrapolate that this time, both of them have found the person they are meant to and are going to spend the rest of their lives with. They are better suited for each other than the recently-abandoned partners on either end – but we are never quite sure why they are more likely to be together than the previous great loves of their lives. Granted, Zhenya is, unlike Nadya’s former lover, not married, but other than that we are not really given any real reason why the two should be together; we just know that it is so. They have been pushed together by fate, they have overcome initial aversion, existing partners, and distance, and now that they have expressed their love (and been approved, if somewhat confusedly, by each others’ friends) they will be together forever; read, get married. Zhenya’s mother, mutters that they will see what will come of it, but it seems more the loving grumblings of an indulgent mother than a true ominous foreshadowing.

*Moscow Does Not Believe in Tears* has an ultimately happy ending – though perhaps some would say that it depends on your definition of ‘happy’. As already stated, the film contains two love stories; one failed and one successful. In the first part of the story, we expect a happy ending – once Katya and her friends are found out, Rudolph should chuckle and take her home. Instead, she winds up pregnant and abandoned. In the second part, it is not immediately clear what the possible happy ending would entail – a reunion with Rudolph, or a new romance with Gosha. When, finally, Katya and Gosha find their way back to one another, it is with the explicitly stated agreement that he will be the head of the household. From one perspective, this is a very straight-forward happy ending. They are in love, they will spend the rest of their lives together, and they are creating a traditional family unit, albeit from a somewhat untraditional starting-point. A slightly more cynical reading, however, is that Katya has sacrificed her possibilities as a strong and independent woman – not because she falls in love or gets married, mind you, but because she is so eager and willing to fall into a submissive and conventionally feminine role. She has accepted and therefore legitimized the view that a woman in a position of power poses a threat, a threat that must be disarmed and
diverted. The audience is never given the sense that she is unhappy with the arrangement, or that she accepts it because it is the best offer she is going to get – we only see her looking happy and fulfilled.

It is interesting to note that Katya is both punished and not punished for her youthful transgressions. She is left to fend for herself and her daughter, yes – but, allowing for the fact that we do not see any difficult years in between, she does well for herself. She carries on with a married man, and is not punished; in fact, she ends the film all-but-engaged and with the promise of a happy life. From a feminist standpoint, one might say that the reward is also the punishment, but within the film’s universe, this does not seem to be the case.

_Autumn Marathon_ also has an ending both happy and unhappy. Under the narrative conventions, it is happy because the story ends with the (re)creation of a romantic relationship, except that in this case, it is two relationships. The main character has overcome obstacles and separation, and has love back in his life. As has already been discussed, however, the actual reality of the situation is not that happy. Buzykin has not really overcome anything; he has somehow managed to negate the obstacles and the situation, and returned to the way things were without ever having to deal with anything.

It is worth noting that part of the perceived unhappiness in Buzykin’s situation lies in the fact that he is entangled with two women at the same time, and does not ultimately choose only one. This facet depends on a number of societal expectations and assumptions. Romantic convention says that love is for one man and one woman, or at least a maximum of two people. Under different circumstances, Buzykin and his women might reach a mature and mutual agreement, where the women shared the man or all three lived in a triad. One wonders, however, if this ending would be perceived as a happy ending, or just a compromise.

**MODIFYING THE CHRONOTOPE**

All three of the films also play with the idea that the characters in different ways try to affect or change their romantic chronotope.

In _Autumn Marathon_, Buzykin’s wife enters the apartment, at one point, to find all the furniture pushed together, and Buzykin on a ladder, putting up new wallpaper. He explains to her that the place seemed too “gloomy.” It is as if he is trying to refashion their (possible)
romantic chronotope, both by trying to make it less gloomy – figuratively and literally – and by performing the type of nesting, nurturing actions that associate repair and decorating with home and happiness.

Initially, he has a key to the apartment Alla shares with her uncle. We see him running up the stairs and letting himself in. The chronotope is open to him – when the uncle finds out that he is married, he demands the key back, and the chronotope is closed. Less obviously, the possible wife-chronotope instead closes when she decides to go, leaving Buzykin alone in their empty apartment.

Almost as explicit Buzykin’s wallpapering is the point where Alla asks Buzykin to do her a favor – she wants him to give her his “damn watch,” so that it can’t buzz and interrupt their time together. In essence, she is trying to save, and protect, their chronotope, which is ever threatened, and make it possible for him to stay in their little bubble. When she decides to break it off, she abandons her attempt and sends him his watch back.

_Irony of Fate_ also toys with the key as a symbol of openness, but only at the very end, when Nadya lets herself into Zhenya’s apartment, thus re-opening the romantic chronotope they had attempted to close, when they decided to each go back to their own lives. Instead, the main attempt to affect the chronotope is played out through the picture of Ippolit which Nadya has on a shelf. When her friends first arrive, and she pretends that Zhenya is Ippolit, she lays it face-down – so that they can not recognize the ruse. Later, the pair battle over whether or not it should be visible or not, as he flips it over and sticks it between books, and she turns it back and rescues it, almost as if they are deciding if they have a romantic chronotope or not. If Ippolit is visible, he is in their chronotope, and they have to decide whether or not to try to clean it up, free it from unnecessary intrusions. Zhenya even throws the photo out the window, trying to expel Ippolit entirely, but when Nadya goes out, she finds it and picks it up – at the same time as Zhenya is pulling a photo of her out of its frame, to keep. He later tears the picture of Ippolit into pieces.

A smaller example is when Zhenya washes the dishes after eating some of the dinner Nadya has prepared. By a simple act of at-home-ness, he has established a comfort and created a joint space for them. In contrast, when Nadya goes and buys Zhenya tickets to get home, she is trying to end their chronotope, and separate it into two.

_Moscow Does Not Believe in Tears_ does not contain as explicit instances of trying to save or change the romantic chronotope, but there are some examples worth mentioning.
We have another example of male domesticity, which is used both by the character and in the film to create comfort and intimacy, and a common chronotope. Gosha cooks for Katya and her daughter, and does the dishes afterward. He also tries to mark off a romantic chronotope by inviting her into another intimate social chronotope – the picnic with his friends, celebrating his birthday.

On a more figurative plane, Antonina’s husband also tries to save the romantic chronotope, and it is done with a nod to chance and fate – he goes searching for Gosha, without knowing his full name or address, and finds him. We do not know how long he has to look, but it does not seem be very long.

This discussion of the idea of a romantic chronotope is not complete or conclusive by any means. Because of the nature of the concept of chronotope, every aspect of the space and time of the romantic narrative can be discussed at great length, which is not feasible within the scope of this text. I do hope, however, that I have at least provided a suggestion of what is possible – and that the possibilities are interesting and fruitful ones.
GENRE CONVENTIONS AS CHRONOTOPE MARKERS

In this section, I will discuss the three Soviet films more generally in terms of the conventions of romance, and of romantic comedy and the cyclical subgenres under which they could be categorized, and the ways in which they adhere to and diverge from genre “standards”. These conventions are used to mark the narrative as romantic, and thus in some respect to delineate the romantic chronotope. I begin with the two subgenres of comedy of remarriage and screwball comedy, and then discuss the ways in which the films use the more general convention of the wrong partner to make the romantic chronotope potentially unstable.

COMEDY OF (RE)MARRIAGE AND SCREWBALLY COMEDY OF ERRORS

As previously stated, genre is not a preexisting objective thing, but a constructed concept, fluctuating with time and cultural change – and reevaluating itself relative to new developments. Consequently, it is not entirely easy to discuss the chronological development of a genre. Were one to make some sort of timeline of the romantic comedy, with many reservations for exceptions and overlapping and decade oddities, and several texts that disagree wildly with one another on time lines and beginnings and ends, it might look something like this:

- Early romantic comedy, and comedy of divorce (1910s-1920s)
- Comedy of remarriage (1930s)
- Screwball comedies (1930s-1940s)
- Lighthearted sexual comedy (1950s and 1960s)
- Animal comedy and nervous comedy (1970s-1980s)
- “New romance” (late 1980s and on)36

None of this is uncomplicated or simple – for instance, two separate articles, by Catherine L. Preston and by Peter William Evans, on romantic comedy, agree that Meg Ryan’s films

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36 See for instance Cavell, Musser, Gehring, Neale, Paul, Krutnik, Potter, and others.
(among others) tread much of the same ground as screwball comedies.\(^{37}\) Does this mean that they are screwball comedies, despite being made half a century later, or does it rather imply that they self-consciously use some conventions and traditions from a much earlier incarnation of the genre, or perhaps even that ‘screwball’ is a tendency that occurs and reoccurs throughout the history of the genre? It could be all three, or none. Also to take into account are Frank Krutnik and Steve Neale, who to some extent compare and align their respective ‘nervous romances’ and ‘new romance’ with the screwball comedy. Both acknowledge the changes in genre over time, and do not try to say that the categories are identical, but the discussion of similarities and common points of reference does muddy the waters somewhat.

This particular issue presented some problems during my work with this thesis. On the one hand, the Soviet films seemed to have certain elements in common with some early genre cycles – on the other hand, some texts suggested that facets or aspects of these early cycles also started appearing in films almost contemporary with and later than the Soviet films. I had trouble deciding if this meant that it was some sort of natural development in both contexts, or if the differences in actual use of the elements or facets were enough to warrant separate discussions. I did eventually decide that the differences were large enough that I could focus my discussion on the points of commonality and divergence from the original, older genre cycles. In addition, the film that I feel has certain aspects in common with screwball comedy, *Irony of Fate*, handles those aspects differently enough from Krutnik’s nervous romances, which are chronologically more or less contemporary with the Soviet films that I would not consider it a nervous romance. The nervous romances are much more aware of themselves and of the problems of modern love than I would give *Irony* credit for, and do not, on the whole, contain any of the more extreme elements that define screwball. Neale’s cycle of new romances has its beginnings in the 1980s, and as such are not part of the tradition that the Soviet films could be said to refer to. Possible parallel evolution and development could be an interesting topic for a different study, but I have again chosen to exclude it for practical purposes, in order to focus on more classical conventions and the possible implications they entail.

What, then, is there to focus on? Evans discusses the way in which Ryan’s films follow conventions, and conveniently provides us with several examples of those conventions. He says that her films “cover much the same territory as screwball, exploring the meanings of romantic love, the arts of courtship, the social implications, fulfilments and limitations of marriage, as well as the pursuit of identity through the pathways of desire”\(^{38}\) and that they “overwhelmingly hold fast to many of the genre’s traditions, especially its idealisation of the couple”\(^{39}\) and “conform to the traditional conventions of courtship, loss and fulfilment (…)”\(^{40}\) which leads one to wonder how, exactly, Preston feels that screwball differs from other romantic comedies. On occasion, as in Preston’s article, screwball is used almost synonymously with romantic comedy as a whole (a position that hints at some of the possibilities mentioned above) – Wes D. Gehring instead writes, in his light-hearted book on the matter, that “[s]tudy of screwball comedy should begin with the realization that the genre satirizes the traditional love story.”\(^{41}\) I might not agree that it explicitly satirizes the traditional love story, in the sense that it completely distances itself from it and makes a mockery of it, but it does rearrange certain perceptions on what love and a romantic narrative entail. Says Cherry Potter, in \textit{I Love You But}: “Screwball is anarchic farce portraying not so much ‘the battle of the sexes’ as an endless series of bewildering and hilarious misunderstandings as the sexes puzzled about what each other wanted, or attempted to manipulate each other to get what they wanted themselves.”\(^{42}\) Gehring feels that the genre was “defined by the eccentric, female-dominated courtship […] with the male target seldom being informed that open season had arrived.”\(^{43}\)

It is interesting to note that Evans mentions the idealization of the couple as one of the convention – the idea would seem to be supported by Stacey and Pearce in \textit{Romance Revisited}, who in their discussion of the psychoanalytic perspective of love and romance say that “[a] central characteristic of romantic love, then is \textit{idealization}: the overvaluation of the ‘love object’ (as in the phrase ‘love blinds’).”\(^{44}\) It should be pointed out that that the authors do take into account the issue of gender – as they mention, cultural tradition is for women to be the ones more into romance, while Freud’s focus was on men as more likely to, or tending

\(^{38}\) Evans, p. 189  
\(^{39}\) Evans, p. 191  
\(^{40}\) Evans, p. 192  
\(^{42}\) Cherry Potter, \textit{I Love You But…: Romance, Comedy and the Movies} (London: Methuen, 2002) p. 7  
\(^{43}\) Gehring, p. 3  
\(^{44}\) Stacey and Pierce, p. 29
to, idealize their love object and romantic ideals.\textsuperscript{45} Although the authors do not come out and say it, I think they would agree that this position has little to do with any biological or cultural truth, and more to do with Freud’s biases and, let’s say, less-than-feminist stance. There do, tend to be differences in fictional romantic narratives when it comes to specifically how men and women idealize love and their love objects. Considering that, over most of known history, a large percentage of the creators of fictional narratives have been men, they are likely to write from their own perspective, or assign perceived perspectives to women, skewing the basis for comparison. In contrast, amusingly, women’s tales of love are often dismissed as less interesting or artistic precisely because they are women and thus prone to emotion and romance. Indeed, romantic comedies as such tend to be categorized rather pejoratively as “chick flics”, made for and by women, even when the creators are men.

The first-and-foremost convention of romance and of romantic comedy is undoubtedly two people who fall in love. This is not necessarily an uncomplicated matter, fraught as it is with culturally and historically loaded assumptions and issues of gender, sexuality, monogamy and numerically limited relationships, but such a discussion, interesting though it might be, is one for a different study. Let us say that romance is a question of two people and some love, and leave it at that for the time being.

With that in mind, I will instead begin with what I feel to be another key convention in both romance and the romantic comedy – that the couple, the principal characters, are ultimately meant to be together. This is necessary in order for a romantic narrative to hold any interest, and romance, for its audience. If we do not believe that the people we are following should be together, if we feel they could be with any old person who happens to flit into their life or the story, we have no emotional investment in the specific coupling and no expected, implied, satisfaction when they eventually get each other. The two aspects that tend to help create this convention and its accompanying expectations are those of obstacles or problems, of chance and fate.

In Stacey and Pearce, perhaps most interesting for this discussion is Freud’s remark that obstacles are required to heighten the experience of love (although he focuses on libido) and that where there are no natural obstacles to be found, people “erect conventional ones so as to be able to enjoy love.”\textsuperscript{46} It does not seem far-fetched to transpose a similar characteristic to the enjoyment of another’s romantic narrative – in the same way that we require obstacles to enjoy our own experience of love, we need the characters in a story to

\textsuperscript{45} Ibid., p. 29
\textsuperscript{46} Freud by way of Stacey and Pierce, p. 29
have obstacles or problems to overcome, in order for the story to seem romantic and engaging. The obstacles, and for two people to love each other despite them, are what makes a romance, a story, special. If they can succeed despite their problems, whatever they may be, then they deserve each other. Correspondingly, if there are few or no obstacles, the romantic nature of the story is diminished (not to mention, probably a significant deal shorter). This is not a foreign concept for film theoreticians either. Says Krutnik,

The screwball films championed the exploits of eccentric individuals who deliberately set themselves against the rigidity of convention when engaged in the game of love. Marriage was not in itself a source of legitimization for heterosexual desire but instead tended to derive its legitimacy from the nature of the ‘special attraction’ between the man and the woman, who seemed as if they were ‘made for each other’ despite whatever obstacles lay between them.

The concept of the obstacle itself is not unique to the screwball variety of romantic comedy – screwball just tended toward the wackiest and most bizarre obstacles. The main one, perhaps, being the fact that the two ‘lovers’ tend to spend quite a lot of time not at all wanting to be together. Screwball comedy revolves around a staid, boring man, whose stable and simple existence is upset by an eccentric woman who whirls into his life and confuses it. He often wants her gone and away, to be left alone as he was, and she does not always even see him as a possibility, as a man. Slowly, they discover each other and both of their extremes are tempered – he relaxes, and she calms down. Neale remarks that there is a function of suspense, played by “one of the genre’s commonest – and thus most characteristic – devices: the initial hostility of the members of the couple one to another.”

He is not alone in pointing out that the lovers do not always immediately take to one another – even if the level of animosity varies from real hostility to friendly, if acerbic, banter. Tina Olsin Lent, in her discussion on gender relations in screwball comedies, states that “[t]he films’ plots characteristically involved a sexual confrontation between an initially antagonistic couple whose ideological differences heighted their animosity. Their courtship entailed the verbal and physical sparring referred to as the battle of the sexes, and their recognition of mutual love and decision to marry (or remarry) ultimately reconciled the sexual and ideological tensions.”

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47 Krutnik, 1990, p. 58
48 Neale, p. 290
49 Olsin Lent, p. 315
which is not insignificant. I do feel, in a sense, that class conflict is not necessarily a convention in the romantic comedy as a whole, while class difference often is. The distinction may seem a tad pretentious, but I feel it should be stated.) In an article in Neale’s Genre and Contemporary Hollywood, Krutnik fills in that “screwball films define love as a kind of creative gamesmanship, with lovers engaging in duels of wit to secure the terms of compatibility.”

Olsin Lent posits that “[d]espite their freedom and assertiveness, the female protagonists of screwball comedy also conformed to contemporary expectations that a woman’s ultimate goal was marriage, and that a married woman’s place was in the home.”

The housewife aspect may have changed, but the ultimate goal remains the same – the main difference, perhaps, being that it is not necessarily the ultimate goal for the woman, but the ultimate goal of the romance, and film, itself. (In modern romantic comedy, the marriage/wedding is not necessarily acted out or explicitly promised within the film’s narrative, but it is usually at least implied that the happy ending results in a committed relationship, which tends to equal matrimony.)

Irony of Fate can be categorized as a screwball comedy, with elements of the comedy of errors. Conversely, both Moscow Does Not Believe in Tears and Autumn Marathon could be discussed as variants on Cavell’s “comedy of remarriage” or the comedy of divorce that Musser elaborates. However, while the films follow many of the conventions, they also diverge from them in a number of ways, to various degrees, which provides several interesting points of discussion.

As we have seen, the screwball comedy traditionally revolves around a staid and somewhat boring man, whose stable existence is upset when a free-thinking and unconventional woman whirls her way into his life. They are initially antagonistic, spar verbally, and eventually fall in love.

It is not difficult to see how Irony of Fate could be categorized as a screwball comedy. The notable deviation is that the gender roles are reversed. Zhenya is the eccentric partner who enters Nadya’s life and sets it all asunder, rather than the other way around. His eccentricity stems mainly from the excessive amounts of alcohol he has imbibed, and the resultant geographic misunderstandings, but this does not necessarily make it less potent – Neale even mentions a film example where a male character “is ‘liberated’ by spending the

50 Krutnik, 2002, p. 140
51 Olsin Lent, p. 318
evening with [a woman] (whose eccentricities are wilder but more temporary, being the product of drinking alcohol)." The eccentricity is exaggerated in the film’s main premise – it is the screwball meet cute to end all meet cutes. One might say that if the gender roles are reversed, the screwball comedy can no longer be a screwball comedy, if one of the defining characteristics is that

Much, if not most, of Nadya’s and Zhenya’s interaction consists of the aforementioned antagonistic verbal sparring – at first, she is enraged that he is in her apartment, and he is upset that she is in (what he believes to be) his apartment, and that she will not let him sleep in peace. His inebriation does not make their communication any easier; it certainly doesn’t make it any easier for her to believe him. When the initial misunderstanding has been sorted out, after several absurd rehashings of the same facts, Zhenya instead complicates Nadya’s existence by arousing suspicion in Ippolit, who will not be convinced of the pair’s innocence. Nadya has accepted Ippolit as her last resort – he is old, he is unattractive, he is abrasive, but she has tried a relationship based on love and it did not work. Ippolit brings her expensive perfume, he drives a car – it is implied that he can provide her with an existence that Zhenya cannot (in the Soviet Union, a surgeon was a low-salary profession). Zhenya, however, can give her the love that both he and she have long stopped believing in.

The sparring also has elements of the playful and zany – for instance, when Nadya’s friends first drop by the apartment, they mistake Zhenya for Ippolit, whom they have never met (and why not, one might wonder). Irritated and eager to fluster Zhenya, Nadya plays along, telling them that he is in fact Ippolit, despite his protests. When the friends return a few hours later, Nadya’s irritation has grown and she turns around and tries to explain that Zhenya is not Ippolit, but by then he has decided to play the part with gusto. This confusing of roles is mirrored at the very end, when Zhenya’s friends burst into his apartment, and mistake Nadya for Galya. Like Romeo, happy to exchange Rosalind for Juliet at the drop of a hat, Zhenya explains that no, this is the woman he loves more than anyone.

Moscow Does Not Believe In Tears is an unusual take on the comedy of divorce and remarriage. It is, pardon the cutesiness, a comedy of (re)marriage. As I have already mentioned, the first half begins almost as a fluffy comedy of errors, but ends with Katya pregnant and abandoned. Almost two decades pass without any detail, and we find Katya a

52 Neale, 1992, p. 295
successful single woman, a high official administrator with her own car, a fancy apartment and a lovely young daughter. We have here a whiff of the idea of separation and abandonment as a positive thing, forcing personal development and growth, but in the film’s universe, it seems to have more to do with Katya’s strength as a modern (Soviet) woman than with Rudolph’s leaving her.

We can see a doubling (or tripling, in fact) of romantic relationships here, showing parallel and differing points of view and the results they can have. Lyudmila, who explicitly expresses her view that love is practical matter of money and comfort, gets her hockey star – but when twenty years have gone by, she is alone and has nothing to show for it. Antonina, meanwhile, has a slow and steady romance, that leaves her with a husband and family and a charming little house in the country.

The narrative complications arise when Katya meets Gosha on the train, and Rudolph comes to film her. Both encounters have the romantic element of chance or coincidence, to varying degrees – Gosha just happens to sit next to her, and what are the odds of Rudolph being the one sent to film Katya’s speech? – and the viewer is initially not quite able to decide which of the meetings is also Fate; which of the two is, in fact, the ‘wrong partner’. Rudolph is, after all, her daughter’s father. With the conventional recipe, he should come back and make their (biological) family unit whole. And he does eventually try. Gosha, on the other hand, has no discernible ties to Katya, other than that he is interested. On the third hand, Rudolph did abandon Katya and her daughter. And so on. Both Rudolph and Gosha could be the right man, trying to win Katya (back) from the wrong man. Nor is Katya’s reaction to Rudolph’s reappearance easily read – she does not seem elated, but she does not necessarily seem sad or irritated.

Where the crux lies, then, is with compatibility. And, because it is a Soviet film, the compatibility or lack thereof lies mainly on a class level. Gosha is a mechanic, where Katya is a factory director, yet she has been a worker and has worked her way up. He also clearly has intellectual interests and friends, and we can assume an intellectual past. However, even though he may be her intellectual equal (or more) he cannot handle not being the man, the provider, in the relationship. He does not demand that she leave her job, but he does demand that she defer to him as head of the household, and she accedes. The conflict, and the possible transgression of the class, gender, and power roles is thus deflected. The film can show us the story of a modern, liberated, powerful Soviet woman, but it does not have to do so at the expense of the Soviet man. He is allowed to take his place as master.
Autumn Marathon, as has been alluded to previously, is not naturally or necessarily assigned as a romantic comedy. However, it should be somewhat visible that it aligns itself with several of the conventions of romantic comedy and comedy of remarriage, and that when it reverses some of them and our expectations, it can be allowed under the genre umbrella as a self-conscious anti-example. It is a dark comedy of dysfunctional remarriage, with severe satiric undertones. Like Moscow Does Not Believe in Tears, it contains a certain element of fake out. Expectations are set up according to romantic conventions, but not fulfilled to the logical conclusion – or, rather, they are fulfilled but in a markedly distorted fashion. Autumn Marathon follows the remarriage recipe to the extent that it is about a man who leaves an unhappy romantic situation, only to return to it at the end of the film. However, it deviates from the script in several ways. The first is that Buzykin does not have one romantic partner, but two. He tells his young mistress that he will leave his wife for her, and he tells his wife that he will do right by her. When he finds himself suddenly without either of his lady loves, Cavell and Musser would say that here is the opportunity for growth and development – and it might seem that he is headed that way. Instead, he manages to, without even really trying, weasel his way back into both of their good graces, and is back right where he started, jogging listlessly with his Danish friend through the dark and dreary morning. The double “re”-marriage does not stem out of any insight that he needs either his wife or his mistress, but rather happens almost on its own in the same inertia and stagnation that plagues Buzykin from the very beginning.

It is interesting to see that films made in the Soviet Union in the 1970s can be aligned so well with genre cycles that took place decades earlier, in a decidedly different social and economic climate. As I have mentioned, there are other elements from other decades which also shared common elements with the films, but not to the extent where they could be said to fall so closely under the same subgenre.

“THE ONE” AND THE OTHER ONE – UNDERMINING THE CHRONOTOPE

I have already discussed some aspects of the convention of people being right for each other, and the existence of a wrong partner. In this section, I hope to explore this topic further, using some specific examples from the films and suggesting some of the implications they might hold – I posit that they work like several others of the conventions, in order to make the final
coupling more special, which in the context of the romantic chronotope would be understood as destabilizing or unsecuring the romantic chronotope.

Neale discusses the factor of the wrong partner, stating that “a would-be suitor or a possible but unsuitable partner for one or other of the members of the couple […] is very common in romantic comedy” and that this convention “provide[s] points of comparison with, and contrast to, one or other of the members of the couple, and that they often represent, in addition, an aspect of the personality or motivation or aspiration of that member that stands in the way of couple’s formation and that thus has to be cast aside.” In addition, he feels that “these characters embody key ideological attitudes and perform key ideological functions.”

The wrong partner is there to provide suspense – the possibility is there, although slight, that the wrong choice can be made. The wrongness can be marked in various ways – Frank Krutnik describes a character’s new man as “a marked mismatch” because “he is a physical giant who visibly dwarfs her” which may seem a rather shallow reason to determine that he “is not allowed to pose any serious obstacle to her eventual reunion with [her husband].” The ‘wrong partner’ is, however, not always wrong for clear and enormous reasons – it can be a sometimes-slight difference in age, or class, but sometimes, they are just not as right as the romantic lead, and are disqualified simply by not being The One. There is also a somewhat correlated romantic aspect of the primary couple also being ‘wrong’ for each other, and succeeding despite of, not because of, their situation. Thomas E. Wartenberg discusses this idea in *Unlikely Couples*. He says that “the romantic perspective […] which is usually, but not always, that of the filmmaker, deems the transgressive couple appropriate – likely, I shall say – setting the love the two partners share above the conventions it violates.” Wartenberg’s focus, it should be pointed out, is mainly on couples that are, in his words, “genuinely violative of the (…) norms governing socially permitted romance” and his films are not as such traditional romantic comedies. However, Wartenberg’s term, “the unlikely couple film” seems a somewhat unfortunate choice, in that romantic comedy tradition almost stipulates that the unlikely couple is the likely couple. When he proclaims that “[t]he unlikely couple film traces the difficult course of a romance between two individuals whose social status makes their involvement problematic” he is describing probably half of the romantic

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53 Ibid, p. 289
54 Krutnik, 1990, p. 68
55 Wartenberg, p. 2, italics his
56 Ibid, p. 3
comedy canon.\(^{57}\) If one allows a somewhat broader definition of “social status” (where Wartenberg focuses on transgression and violation of societal norms) the inclusion can be even greater. The difference, perhaps, is that Wartenberg’s couples tend to struggle with their differences, and sometimes overcome them, whereas the conventional romantic comedy couple does not really ever have to deal with them in the same way, because they are Meant To Be.

In order for two characters to be right for each other, and meant to be, there needs to be an opposing possibility, someone who is wrong for them and not meant to be with them. This is again to heighten the romantic specificity of the couple in whom we are meant to invest emotionally. This romantic convention exists, as we have seen, in all three of the Soviet films, but it is used in different ways and to different ends.

It may be possible to divide the elements of wrongness and rightness into two categories – one which is at least theoretically perceptible to the characters, consisting of more obvious aspects of personality and manner, and one which is more general and ideological, perhaps, where aspects of class, gender, and other oppositions come into play. I will not, however, make explicit use of this division here.

In *Irony of Fate*, Zhenya starts the film with and in love with Galya, and Nadya in her turn is with Ippolit. Both of these relationships are presented as being serious and stable. This is conventionally often the case – they have to be serious, or the subsequent abandonment of them is not as intense and thus romantic. In the opening sequence of the film, Zhenya tells Galya that they will celebrate the New Year, that he will get drunk, and that he will finally have the courage to say all the things that he needs to tell her. As she is leaving, he tells her that he loves her and would like for her to be his wife – he even says, clearly, that “everything is decided, finally and unchangeably”. That is the situation he is trying to get back to, throughout most of the film, as he tries to get Galya on the phone and borrow money for a ticket home. Nadya’s intentions with Ippolit are not as explicitly expressed, but they have been together for a considerable time, and his expensive present to her is likely to signify his intention of proposal.

In addition, both Zhenya and Nadya each have a great failed love behind them, which is an interesting variant of the convention. In a sense, one instance of wrong partner is

\(^{57}\) Ibid, p. 7
partially used to explain a second instance. Nadya has accepted Ippolit as the next best thing, on logical merits, mostly for his social position and high income, because she has tried True Love and it did not work. (The fact that her true love was married does not seem to make any difference.) Zhenya, whose fear of love – that may be explained by mother dependence, but this is of no relevance here - long ago led him to leave his intended and flee to Leningrad, does truly seem to feel that Galya is the one. When she wonders whether he doesn’t worry about her being underfoot all the time, like he did with the girlfriend he abandoned before, he tells her to be underfoot all she likes. Her wrongness seems to be present mainly in the fact that she is younger than he, whereas Nadya is almost the same age. Perhaps the wrongness is expressed on a narrative level, instead – Zhenya has already fled from Moscow to Leningrad, for the sake of the wrong woman; the narrative parallel should make Galya the wrong woman as well. In addition, she was once his patient, which brings in some ethical questions.

*Moscow Does Not Believe in Tears* is fairly direct in its dealing with the right and the wrong partner. Rudolph has the upper hand of being the first man we see Katya with, and she seems happy, but that is pretty much the extent of his rightness. He is a snob who abandons his girlfriend when she turns out not to be rich and of high social status, and a coward who sends his mother to take care of the consequences when she turns out to be pregnant. He is pretentious, but a failure in his cultural endeavors – a television cameraman, respectable profession though it may be, can not reasonably be said to be a glamorous career, and it is not what he aspired to. The compatibility between Katya and Gosha is slowly developed, as we see how Gosha’s intellectual sensibilities balance out his economic status (besides, he most likely has considerable side income). Since Katya is not only a woman, but also (primarily?) a mother, Gosha additionally displays his right-ness by showing himself to be a much more apt father than Rudolph ever was – he takes Katya and her daughter on a picnic, and protects the daughter from the unwelcome advances and bullying of neighborhood youngsters. Rudolph, on the other hand, can not even speak to the girl; when he shows up at Katya’s apartment, we see them sitting in silence at the table, decidedly uncomfortable. Katya also has an affair with a married man, who is thus wrong by way of being unavailable, but as she does not seem to harbor any deep affection for him, further discussion of his wrongness seems irrelevant.

The film also demonstrates the explicit agreement where one aspect of power-imbalance is countered with another, to make right the aspects that could make Gosha wrong – although I wonder if this is an attempt to show how the sexes can interact and compromise,
displaying Katya’s and Gosha’s willingness to make their relationship work, or simply an attempt to diffuse the possible gender problematics. The two are not necessarily entirely mutually exclusive.

*Autumn Marathon* employs the convention in a different way. Buzykin’s two women are shown as being both right and wrong for him in several ways. There is never a decisive point of divergence, no way to mathematically decide which is more right or wrong. His mistress is young and pretty, loves him madly, and wants to have a family with him – but her youth carries with it inexperience and possibly the desire to do things that no longer interest him. His wife is older, perhaps not as pretty, but he has wanted her at one point; he has loved her and has chosen to stay with her for a long time, if mostly out of habit and convenience, and they have a life and a child together. There are no clear narrative devices that allow us to decide, either. There is simply a row of facts on each side of the diagram, with no conclusion to be drawn.

More significant, then, in its deviation from the convention, is that neither of the women is ever shown as being *uniquely* right. They are both exchangeable not only for each other, but for almost any other woman. Any beautiful young woman with passable typing skills and a need for a father figure could take the mistress’s place – unless we are meant to infer that her uncle’s promise that when they get married he will move out to the country and leave the two an entire apartment to themselves, is supposed to make her irresistible, and that seems a bit of a stretch. Buzykin does express joy and happiness to his mistress at one point, but what he is happy about is that she cooks him food, that she sews on his buttons – he appreciates her stereotypical feminine attributes, which are not at all unique to her. This might mean that even if Buzykin were to choose one woman over the other, fulfilling the romantic expectations of the viewer, it would not hold much romantic stock, as he could easily replace her for another at any point.

The convention of the wrong partner is another way for the romantic narrative to create tension and suspense, and make the lovers’ story more romantic. It uses the contrast of the wrong partner, and the ways in which they are wrong, to play up the idea that there is someone who is not only more right, but Right. The three Soviet films all use this convention, but remake it to various extents – following in a sense the extent to which they deviate from the generic idea of the romantic comedy.
MULTIPLE LEVELS OF DISCOURSE

In this section, I will discuss the self-awareness of the three films, and the effect this has on their discourse. They are aware and reflexive of their own nature as romantic narrative, and address this both in explicit dialogue on the nature of love, and in self-referential cynicism on romance and romantic narratives. In addition, there is a parallel discourse of social commentary, on the ideologically accepted topics, but this is also ironic or sarcastic at times, or made so by the incongruous way in which it appears.

I begin by discussing the explicit discourse on love, followed by the related topic of music, and end with a fairly brief discussion of the social commentary. The latter two sections deal only with Moscow Does Not Believe in Tears and Irony of Fate, as Autumn Marathon seems to exhaust itself with cynical comments on love and romance, and leave musical irony and social commentary to other stories.

EXPLICIT DISCOURSE ON LOVE

One of the aspects of romantic comedy in general and these films in particular that I find the most interesting is its own self-awareness and self-reflexivity. It has a tendency to comment on itself and the conventions of love in a way seldom seen in other films. This is exhibited partially in the common intertextual references to other love stories and the use of music with romantic lyrics and cultural allusion. More significantly, there is commentary not only in the implicit discourse of the film’s narrative, but in an overt discourse on love, in recurring scenes where characters explicitly explain to each other what love is and what men and women are like. This is sometimes set up as truth, and sometimes as irony. One character can express to another that women cry at chick flicks because they are sappy about love, and this is treated as objective truth and fact. When, on the other hand, a character explains to another that love at first sight is impossible, or that fate is a myth, it is usually a setup for one of them to discover that this is not the case. The possible skepticism of the viewer is acknowledged and thus disarmed. 58

All three of the Soviet films contain examples more or less explicit dialogue on love – what is interesting is how closely a large portion of this discourse follows a fairly

58 For instance, one film which contains both these examples is Sleepless in Seattle (Nora Ephron, 1993)
standard Western idea of love and convention, although at times it may be for slightly different reasons.

In *Irony of Fate*, there are two instances where other characters tell Nadya and Zhenya that their mad love may not be the be-all and end-all of everything. What makes these comments interesting compared to many other romantic comedies, is that they come late in the film. Usually, skeptics are allowed to vent early in the film, so that the rest of the story can prove them wrong. Here, the characters’ doubts are expressed at a point where their love is already established, which makes the happy ending not as fixed and sure. Ippolit, who returns drunkenly to the apartment to eat Nadya’s jellied fish, exclaims without malice, almost cheerfully, that they must realize that tonight is a night of madness, and that the morning is on its way – adding that with it comes reason and reality. He tells them, “You can ruin the old quickly, building the new is hard.” He is at this point drunk, and has realized that even if Zhenya does not win Nadya, she is forever lost to him, but because he is calm, the exchange does not seem as an act of bitter aggression, but an objective proclamation. Nadya reacts by saying to Zhenya that Ippolit has only said what they have been afraid to say to each other, that they have gone a bit crazy but now New Year’s Eve is over and “everything goes back to its place.” At the same time, Ippolit says that life is full of the unexpected, and wonders if there can be “programmed, planned, expected happiness,” so he is not portrayed as a complete pessimist.

Similarly, when Nadya at the very end asks Zhenya’s mother if she thinks her very flighty, the mother simply says that they will see what happens. The implicit subtext is that, as Ippolit has suggested, today and tomorrow are two very different things, and marriage is not as simple as it may seem. There is no way of knowing if Nadya is flighty or not, before she has had a chance to try her hand at her impending relationship with Zhenya. Galya also tells Nadya, when they wind up on the phone with each other, that she cannot build her happiness on someone else’s sorrow and that Zenya will abandon her just as he abandoned Galya. Considering Zhenya’s track record, this might not be an unreasonable suggestion.

The film is not unaware of the absurdity of its own premise, either. In the opening credits, the title is followed by the text “A totally unusual story that could only take place on New Year’s Eve” – again, an evening of liminality and carnival. Zhenya and Nadya have to explain the coincidental sequence of events over and over, to disbelieving listeners, and when they break up an uncomfortable silence by dancing to a record, they start laughing as they recount the evening to one another. When Nadya tries to tell her friends that Zhenya is
not Ippolit, as she had claimed, he exclaims, “Do you think she would spend the night with a strange man?” when this is exactly what she has done. At the very end, when they have reunited, he even says that if there hadn’t been the same house in both cities, they “would never have been happy.”

In *Moscow Does Not Believe in Tears*, Lyudmila is the one who proclaims that Katya is a hopeless romantic, and that love is really a matter of practical things, of money and status – while at the same time expressing skepticism at what she perceives as the social “Gosplan [government planning committee] for the future”. She states, several times, that life is a lottery, and she clearly intends to make the best of it. Her most explicit explanation of how love works comes when Katya asks her what she will do if one of the men she has enticed with their temporary lifestyles really does fall in love with her. She states, cheerfully, that once they are married, she can pretend to go to work until they have a baby, and by then it won’t matter because he will be in love with her and the baby. Her attitude backfires on her when her catch, the successful hockey player – who incidentally doesn’t care about her status - turns into a no-good drunk. One might say that Katya’s attitude, though not as clearly expressed, backfires on her as well, when she winds up pregnant and alone despite having chosen her mate for love. Ultimately, however, it would seem to pay off as she finally gets her man.

In addition, there are many instances where characters explain to each other what love is like, and by proxy explain to the audience what love is like, and what gender roles it presupposes. Gosha is not alone in saying that in a family, “the man has to be higher; if the wife makes more money or has a higher title, that’s not a family.” Antonina has already told Katya that “men don’t like it when their woman is above them.” Gosha also rankles at being praised for protecting Katya’s daughter, telling her that being protective and decisive is just being male, and that “you wouldn’t praise a woman for doing laundry” – cleaning clothes clearly being something programmed into the second X chromosome.

Antonina also explains that “you have to make yourself a good husband, you don’t find them ready-made.” The message seems to be that fate and true love are all good and well, but they are not by themselves going to make a good relationship – Antonina has a legitimate claim to explain love that Lyudmila lacks, in that she is the most traditionally successful at love. Similarly, Katya’s daughter tells Gosha that her mother “needs love to marry, and love needs time.” There is a willingness in the narrative to problematize the romantic conventions it employs.
There is not as much explicit and repeated awareness of the romantic narrative as there is in *Ironic of Fate*, but Rudolph does say to Katya that he feels “like I’m in some sort of play.” When they are curled up in bed, Katya tells Gosha that she has been thinking that she might have taken another train, and they would never have met, and he responds that he has thought the same thing. They, and by extension the film, are aware that coincidence has brought them together, and that this coincidence is not a given thing.

The uncle in *Autumn Marathon* who shares his apartment with Buzykin’s mistress (she is an orphan, and he has taken care of her since she was a child) has two opportunities to express his sentiment toward their relationship and by extension toward love as such. At first, he explains cheerfully that when the two are married, he will move out into the country and leave them their own living space. Later on, when he finds out that there is a wife in the picture, he demands Buzykin’s key back, expressing definite distaste for the situation. It seems fair to assume that we are meant to share his view of the situation, if not necessarily the level of his outrage. This is not as explicit as other examples, but it says something about what is the ideal – it is not only love, it is a stable twosome and a nuclear family, that is to be the goal. The same holds true for Hollywood films. The difference, then, is the reasoning behind it. When Hollywood films aim for matrimonial bliss, it is likely due to the largely Christian system of morals in which it operates. The Soviet society also demanded families, but it was for the perceived stability of the state and the reproduction of labor that families and children entailed. The effect was the same – the family unit of two parents and children was the ideal, and it was to be held together by marriage.

*Autumn Marathon* does not seem to be at all aware of itself as narrative – instead, it expresses multiple instances of cynicism and internal irony at the general idea of romance and love. Alla asks Buzykin, “Where can you ever find another [like me]?” – the audience, and the narrative, are completely aware, as I have hinted before, that she is all but completely replaceable. Buzykin tells his daughter that “You can’t just take, you have to give” and does not seem at all aware of the irony of this proclamation - though his daughter’s facial reaction suggests that she, at least, is.
In both *Moscow Does Not Believe in Tears* and in *Irony of Fate*, music is used as self-reflexive comment on the story. *Irony of Fate* is more egregious in this respect, as the characters repeatedly bring out guitars and sing to each other.

*Moscow Does Not Believe in Tears* only contains two real examples – the opening sequence is scored with a song where the lyrics begin “Moscow was not built in a day” mirroring Antonina’s suggestion that relationships take work, and time. During the dinner date where Rudolph eventually gets Katya pregnant, the song “Besame Mucho” is playing – and later, when she is at the apartment of her married lover, the song plays again, now with a ‘70s disco beat. The music creates a parallel between the two ‘wrong’ partners. (In addition, Katya’s daughter is at one point listening to “Daddy Cool” on her headphones, but I would not venture so far as to say that this is definitely commentary on the conflict Rudolph versus Gosha.)

*Irony of Fate* seems not to trust the viewer to understand outright the significance of its songs. When Galya and Zhenya are decorating the apartment, in the film’s opening, Galya asks him to sing, and wonders if he knows when people sing. He does not know, and she says, “When they are happy.” While not every following song takes place during a happy moment, the stage has been set for song and for meaningful song. And, indeed, the songs do at points take the place of the vanished narrator of the beginning. Some examples: Zhenya sings a song about what you can’t lose if you don’t have it – an aunt, a dog, a house, and so on – which ponders the question of whether it is better to have or have not. The implication is that the same question holds true in love – is it better to love, to take a chance, and risk being hurt?

Nadya sings, as they start to fall in love, a song that begins “I am glad that you are not sick for me, I am glad that I am not sick for you”, punctuating it with meaningful glances. When she and Zhenya have decided to part ways, she sings him a song about blessing someone on their way – but this someone gets killed in a train accident, and the last stanza goes: “Don’t part with those you love and take farewell for ever when you are leaving for a moment.”.

When Nadya leaves the apartment, and goes wandering through Leningrad, we hear a song where a man asks trees, and nature, and months, where his loved one is. After a few verses, the film starts to cut between Nadya and Zhenya, in the apartment, who it turns out is the one singing. The trees and the nature she is walking through, are indeed the ones
who could answer his question. Interestingly, the song ends with the man asking his best friend where his loved one is, and the best friend answering “She was your loved one, she became my wife.” Zhenya’s friend Pavel, the one who was supposed to go to Leningrad, is in fact married to the first girl Zhenya ever fell in love with.

**SOCIAL COMMENTARY**

There are several instances where both *Irony of Fate* and *Moscow Does Not Believe* make both explicit and implicit comments on life and practices in the Soviet Union. At times, it is overt, and at others it seems to be almost spouted dogma, filling a quota of social awareness, which takes on an air of irony and sarcasm because of its incongruity.

*Irony of Fate’s* opening animation mocks the overly bureaucratic and function-obsessed system that leads to identical cities and identical apartments. The ideals of the collective, communal, and equal, are shown to lead to dull and drab uniformity. When the voice-over tells us that at one time, coming to a new city was confusing, but now “every town will feel like home” it is almost as if we are supposed to be comforted by this invariable reality. When the statement is juxtaposed with the preceding animation, however, the result is much more critical.

A more straight-forward comment, it would seem, is when Zhenya and his friends are in the sauna. They discuss the fact that although it is nice that most people now have bathrooms in their apartments, there is still nothing quite like a sauna, where you spend time together. In comparison, they say, “bathrooms are just for washing off dirt.” Aside from the heavy drinking, we have no reason to feel that this is said in jest, or meant for the viewer to take cynically. It seems to be an honest desire for certain communal, collective spaces.

When they have both been thrown out by Nadya, Ippolit tells Zhenya that he and his kind don’t care for reason. He says, “You work on emotion and impulse; you’re a threat to society!” He does not specify what Zhenya’s kind is, exactly, but it seems that he means people who are not like himself – good, upstanding citizens. It is not entirely clear if we are meant to agree with Ippolit, or take offense to his dismissal of romance. Both interpretations can be supported with examples from the rest of the film – I suggest that it is a combination.
We should not entirely dismiss emotion and impulse, but we should temper them with the reason that Ippolit holds so dear.

In *Moscow Does Not Believe in Tears*, there is a scene where Katya, in her role as county official, goes to visit a marriage bureau, where the director expresses her shock and dismay at the number of single women in the city and the country. An unwed woman is an unproductive woman, in the eyes of the Soviet system, just as an unwed woman in a Western context is a (potentially) sinful woman and a woman who does not consume her full potential of commodities, depending on the point of view. The director explains that lonely people lead to falling birthrates and a rise in alcoholism, and that lonely people are not fullworthy workers. She says, explicitly, that the problem is people have forgotten how to be a community, to get along; she complains that people sit alone in their apartments and don’t know their neighbor’s name, and even exclaims, frustrated, that it’s “Urbanization!” On one level, the film has maintained and proclaimed the ideal of the communal and the collective. At the same time, the director is a humorous character, and so her words are perhaps not perceived as gospel by the viewer.

When Rudolph and Katya are discussing her pregnancy, and the possibility of an abortion – Katya says the doctors have told her it’s too late – Rudolph exclaims that “we have the best healthcare in the world!” and that the clinics “have to care for the health of the workers.” On the one hand, he is frustrated at the situation – but he has also squeezed the party line into a personal conversation. Similarly, when Rudolph comes to the factory and Katya is asked to read some pre-written lines for an interview, she instead discusses the pay and labor practices, leading Rudolph to exclaim, “So it turns out you’re a working class heroine,” with an established Russian term that, officially at least, did not hold the same poetically clichéd connotations that it holds in English. He may be sardonic in his use of it, but Katya does not protest, and can thus be established as exactly that.

The explicit discourse on love in romantic comedy provides ample opportunity for further exploration. The three films in question not only discuss and explain love to its audience through explicit dialogue, they also comments on the absurdity of romance and romantic convention through an awareness of their own use of those conventions. In addition, the Soviet films comment on the society in which they play out and are created, but do so
implicitly, or through a situational irony where they can say one (acceptable) thing, and mean another (less acceptable) thing.
IN CLOSING

I have attempted to explore the extent to which three films, made in the Soviet Union in the 1970s, relate to conventions of both romance and the genre of romantic comedy in a Western, Hollywood, context. The discussion has therefore also included a great deal of consideration of what those conventions look like, what they might imply, and what other options may be possible, and what the romantic conventions as they are perceived in a Western context might entail in a Soviet society.

The main focus was the idea of a romantic chronotope, a distinct unit of space-time that defines the romantic narrative, and by extension certain conventions which could be said to assist in making up that chronotope. These conventions included chance and fate, destabilizing the romantic chronotope through the use of the ‘wrong partner’ and the temporal scope and intensity of the romantic narrative. In addition, the discussion focused on the contextual concept of the Soviet apartment, and the role it plays in the creation of the romantic chronotope in the three films.

Further attention was paid to the aspects of the three Soviet films that could be said to relate to certain elements of specific genre cycles of the 1930s and 1940s, what have been dubbed screwball comedies and comedies of remarriage and divorce, and how those aspects are used to delineate the romantic chronotope.

Finally, I discussed the self-aware and self-reflexive way the three films dealt with their place both in a tradition of romantic narrative, and in a Soviet context. They use explicit and implicit discourse on the nature of love, and the nature of men and women, coupled with an awareness of the absurdity of love and their own premises. They also comment on the state of the Soviet Union, both according to ideological convention and with criticism of varying subtlety.

Using examples from my films, I have discussed these ways in which the films create their romantic narrative, and how they relate – implicitly and overtly – to a Hollywood tradition of romantic comedy, and the idea of a Western, capitalist tradition of romance. I have found that the Soviet films use many similar conventions and ideas, while simultaneously fashioning contextually and culturally specific narratives and meanings. They also express some societal
and ideological ideas more explicitly than Hollywood films might, in order to be acceptable for the contemporary political climate, both when it comes to romance and society in general.

The overall conclusion of this study is that the Soviet films are not as removed from a Western cultural tradition as one might imagine – and by extension, neither is necessarily Soviet film itself. The films in question employ many of the same types of devices to express ideas of love and romance. More interesting, both here and for future inquiry, is the way the details are different but the same over culture boundaries – for instance, Hollywood and Soviet love stories both tend to view marriage and family as the ultimate goal, but for disparate reasons. The specific features of gender problematics and how they are handled are different, but there is still the aspect of a struggle for power and equality in both Hollywood and Soviet films, from different eras. Sometimes it is visible in the film, and sometimes it appears only through external analysis and discussion, but the battle of the sexes clearly rages on, regardless of communist or capitalist values. There is an additional point where there is perhaps even more opportunity for further exploration of transnational genre relations – the Soviet films discussed use conventions from early Hollywood genre cycles, but in their self-reflexive relationship to romance and romantic tradition, they are more like the later films of the late 1980s and 90s, and the romantic comedies of the early 21st century, the new and nervous romances, which also were and are more cynical and self-aware.

The study is by no means exhaustive on any of these points. There are many questions and suggestions raised in the text that can provide opportunity for extensive further research and discussion. Despite this, I hope that it has point to some of the possibilities for cross-cultural genre analysis, both with the specific examples discussed and on a wider scale.
FILMS – production details

_Ironiya sudby, ili S lyogkim parom_
Soviet Union, 1975, 184 minutes
Directed by Eldar Ryazanov
Written by Emil Braginsky and Eldar Ryazanov
Edited by Valeriya Belova
Starring Andrei Myagkov, Barbara Brylska, Yuri Yakovlev

_Moskva slezam ne verit_
Soviet Union, 1979, 140 minutes
Directed by Vladimir Menshov
Written by Valentin Chernykh
Edited by Yelena Mikhailova
Starring Vera Alentova, Aleksei Batalov, Irina Muravyova

_Osenniy marafon_
Soviet Union, 1979, 90 minutes
Directed by Georgi Daneliya
Written by Aleksandr Volodin
Edited by Tatyana Yegorycheva
Starring Oleg Basilashvili, Natalya Gundareva, Marina Neyolova
REFERENCES


Neale, Steve ”The Big romance or Something Wild?: romantic comedy today” (*Screen* 33:3, 1992)


