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The Diamond Arm. Brilliantovaia ruka

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THE DIAMOND ARM

Brilliantovaia ruka

1969

100 minutes

Director: **Leonid Gaidai**

Screenplay: **Moris Slobodskoi, Iakov Kostiukskii,**

Leonid Gaidai

Cinematography: **Igor' Chernykh**

Art Design: **Feliks Iasiukevich**

Composer: **Aleksandr Zatsepin, lyrics: Leonid Derbenev**

Sound: **Evgeniia Indlina**

Production Company: **Mosfilm**

Cast: **Iurii Nikulin (Semen Gorbunkov), Nina Grebeshkova (Gorbunkov's wife), Andrei Mironov (The Count), Anatolii Papanov (The Mechanic), Stanislav Chekan (Mikhail Ivanovich), Nonna Mordiukova (House Manager Varvara Pliushch), Svetlana Svetlichnaia (Anna Sergeevna)**

When Leonid Gaidai's *Brilliantovaia ruka* (*The Diamond Arm*) was released in 1969, it became a box office leader and drew almost 77 million viewers. Since then the film has acquired cult status and is screened several times a year on Russian television. The film's enduring success among Soviet and post-Soviet spectators alike has puzzled many critics. The reasons for the film's success are, on the one hand, the themes of paranoia and ubiquitous fear of persecution, and, on the other, its emphasis on physical humor. In the Soviet Union, viewers could easily identify with a protagonist obsessed with fear, while physical humor and slapstick provided a breath of fresh air in the ideologically repressive culture.



Gaidai (1923-1993) is one of the few Soviet directors whose films outlived his time and remained popular after the end of the Soviet Union. In the 1960s he made slapstick comedies that Russian viewers had not seen since the 1920s experiments of Lev Kuleshov. The short film *Pes Barbos i neobychnyi kross* (*Dog Barbos and the Unusual Race*, 1960), had launched the director's popularity overnight: it introduced the Soviet version of the Three Stooges—Georgii Vitsin, Iurii Nikulin and Evgenii Morgunov (in short, ViNiMor)—who captured Soviet mass audiences for decades. They were known by their telling nicknames: Vitsin as *Trus* (“Coward”), Nikulin as *Balbes* (“Dumb Ass”) and Morgunov as *Byvalyi* (“the Experienced One”). Gaidai's subsequent comedies with ViNiMor, *Operatsiia Y i drugie prikliucheniia Shurika* (*Operation Y and Other Adventures of Shurik*) and *Kavkazskaia plennitsa, ili novye prikliucheniia Shurika* (*Kidnapping Caucasian Style, or New Adventures of Shurik*), were the biggest box office successes of 1965 and 1966 respectively. After the dizzying triumph of *The Diamond Arm*, Gaidai shot three screen adaptations based on the satirical works of Il'ia Il'f and Evgenii Petrov, Mikhail Bulgakov, and Mikhail Zoshchenko: *Dvenadtsat' stul'ev* (*Twelve Chairs*, 1971), *Ivan Vasil'evich meniaet professiiu* (*Ivan Vasil'evich Changes Profession*, 1973), and *Ne mozhet byt'!* (*It Can't Be!*, 1975) at Mosfilm's Experimental Film Unit. Although the films were well received, they were less popular than Gaidai's comedies of the 1960s. Like Gaidai's idol, Charlie Chaplin, who could never adjust to the advent of sound, Gaidai never adjusted to the narrative constraints of the genre of screen adaptation.

In the late 1980s and early 1990s Gaidai attempted to reinvent himself and return to the genre of slapstick comedy. In 1992 he released his last film, a US-Russian co-production, *Na Deribasovskoi khoroshaia pogoda, na Braiton-Bich opiat' idut dozhdi* (*The Weather is Good on Deribasovskaia, It's Raining Again on Brighton Beach*, 1992). While the film looks cheap (a testimony to the death of the Soviet film industry), it is a visionary picture, the testament of a great filmmaker to post-Soviet Russian directors. *Weather is Good* parodies the conventions of Hollywood cinema and anticipates Aleksandr Rogozhkin's anarchic comedies about the peculiarities of Russian

identity and Aleksei Balabanov's provocative exploitations of global genre models.

The Diamond Arm starts with the modest Soviet clerk Semen Semenovitch Gorbunkov going on vacation abroad. In a country like the USSR of the 1960s—behind the Iron Curtain—a story about a trip abroad sufficed to make the film a blockbuster. Nevertheless, Gaidai complicated the travel story with the elements of a comedy of errors: when Semen arrives in Istanbul, he is mistaken for a diamond smuggler. The local accomplices of the smugglers take Semen for their Russian connection and put a fake cast on his arm, in which they hide diamonds to be brought into the Soviet Union. Intimidated by the foreign environment, Semen does not resist the medical procedure but reports the incident to the proper Soviet authorities. For the rest of the film, the Russian smugglers try to remove surreptitiously the cast from Semen's arm. In order to do this, they try to knock him out by hitting him on the head, by making him drunk, and by seducing him with a prostitute, but each time they fail to accomplish their goal. The attempt to remove the valuable cast turns, again and again, into a cascade of slapstick scenes.

By choosing physical comedy, Gaidai inadvertently made body politics central to his films. In Stalinist culture, the body controlled by the individual had virtually disappeared from the screen: the human body was important either as a synecdoche for the ideological message, or as a fragment of the communal, machine-like body. Human bodies participated in ritualistic reenactments of the Utopian project, such as parades and organized rallies accompanied by mass songs. Gaidai's comedy reinvented the individual human body in his slapstick routines. In his films he created a zone for the physical joke, where the body stopped being a representation of Soviet ideology and became a comic body *par excellence*. This comic body was anarchic and profane, thus defying the collective discipline of Soviet ideology.

While Semen's body contributes to many slapstick scenes, Gaidai also allows Semen's plaster cast arm to act independently as a comic hero. In a dream sequence, the plaster cast fights with the smuggler "Count" (Andrei Mironov, 1941-1987), as he attempts to



remove it from Semen's arm. Throughout the film, the arm-in-a-cast acts as Semen's sidekick, often beating Semen on the head when he says or does something outrageously stupid. Gaidai also introduces the entire gang of smugglers through close-ups of their hands at the beginning of the film in a scene that unfolds as a rhythmic sequence of shots depicting a comic skirmish among the smugglers' greedy hands passing, counting, hiding and stealing gold coins from each other. One of Gaidai's favorite comic devices is the close-up of a body part in an unusual function (a cast arm fighting on its own with a smuggler) or in an unusual garb (an arm in a cast decorated with jewels). While most directors favor the close-up of a performer's face, Gaidai—following his favorite filmmaker, Chaplin—deploys the close-up to fetishize a body part in order to produce maximal comic effect. But if in the first part of the film visual gags involve characters' arms, in the second part of the film, the gags engage the characters' lower bodies, above all, their legs, feet and—occasionally—rear ends. In the finale the protagonist appears with his leg in a cast, immobile, moving only with the assistance of a construction crane and surrounded by his family. The film's title, *The Diamond Arm*, epitomizes the body part as the film's fully-fledged character competing with human characters for the role of the film's protagonist.

The gender politics of body representation in Gaidai's films deserves special attention. Because of numerous images of semi-dressed females, it is tempting to assume that Gaidai's films embrace the scopic regime of classical Hollywood cinema, with the woman serving as "the signifier for the male other," to use Laura Mulvey's term. But as a Soviet filmmaker Gaidai remained beyond the gender politics of American cinema. In his films the female body exists not as a visualized commodity circulated within the visual market; instead, nudity is a female garb that serves to carnivalize the uniformed body characteristic of Stalinist culture. The individual body, male or female, is turned into a grotesque body when set against the militarized norm of the Soviet collective body.

While the female body turns comic when it becomes mobile and aggressive, the male body becomes comic when it loses mobility. The main cause for the paralysis of the male body is fear: when

Semen is abroad, he is afraid of walking around a foreign city alone without his group of Soviet tourists; when he returns to the Soviet border, he is worried about crossing without being guided by the Soviet police, and goes through the customs twice, awaiting special instructions for his life after his trip abroad. Moreover, Semen's will and body are completely paralyzed by his fear that either the smugglers will attack him or he will inadvertently do something adverse to the Soviet police's instructions.

In fact, Semen is unable to act upon his own free will. His trip abroad comes about only because his wife has decided to send him on a holiday rather than buy a fur coat. The film evokes a grotesque Gogolian relationship between man losing his animate nature and inanimate objects acquiring a (human) life of their own. The relationship between the inert, almost inanimate Semen and his wife's fur coat recalls the relationship between the human copying machine, Akakii Akakievich, and his animated overcoat in Gogol's eponymous Petersburg tale. Moreover, Semen moves only when instructed either by the smugglers or by the police. When both cops and robbers order him to do something at the same time, Semen gets confused and hears a strange, paranoid humming in his head that puts him in a state of mental and physical paralysis. Semen turns into a broken social machine, whose elasticity is impeded by contradictory social constraints imposed on him by others. His arm in a plaster cast provides a humorous synecdoche of Semen's social and psychological condition. The laughter evoked by this character originates from the viewers' sense of superiority over the protagonist's comatose body and mind, and is therefore liberating.

Semen's body is so grotesquely dehumanized that his part could only be performed by an actor with a talent for overtly physical comedy. Gaidai and his co-authors Iakov Kostjukovskii and Moris Slobodskoi wrote the screenplay with one actor in mind: the clown Iurii Nikulin (1921-1997). In his rendition of Semen Gorbunkov, Nikulin combined histrionic acting with a stone-face expression that turned out to be the most precise comic image of the "Soviet man." Nikulin's performance solidified the success of the character conceived by Gaidai, and Semen Semenovich has been imprinted in Russian popular consciousness as the comic icon of repressed



humanity, a carnivalistic inversion of the ideal Soviet man visualized by filmmakers in the Stalin era.

The focus on physical humor also determined the remaining cast list for *The Diamond Arm*. Apart from Nikulin, Gaidai invited Andrei Mironov and Anatolii Papanov (1922-1987), both actors at the Moscow Satire Theatre led by Vsevolod Meyerhold's disciple, Valentin Pluchek. For the part of the blonde he chose an actress capable of playing a seduction scene in a comically exaggerated style, whilst rejecting in the process actresses with excessive sex appeal. The Artistic Council of Mosfilm Studio eventually confirmed Svetlana Svetlichnaia (b. 1940) for the part, over the Estonian actress Eeve Kivi, who was deemed to be too "Western" and erotic.

Fear and danger, followed by an escape through a comic turn, are common components of slapstick comedies. While fear paralyzes the protagonist of *The Diamond Arm*, vodka liberates him. Hence, vodka as freedom agent becomes the key ingredient of the film's mise-en-scène. As an exemplary citizen, Semen does not drink at all before his trip abroad. When he tells the Soviet authorities how he inadvertently became involved in the smuggling scheme and offers his cooperation, they suggest that he might consider loosening up and drink at least a little bit to fight his paranoia. This therapeutic advice brings most unexpected results: every time he gets drunk Semen discovers a totally different self. Vodka liberates Semen from all his fears: he becomes agile, free and even aggressive, but only for the time of intoxication; as soon as he sobers up, Semen lapses back into his Soviet coma.

In preparing his films, Gaidai emulated the work of Charlie Chaplin. Before each new film project Gaidai would watch two Chaplin films: *City Lights* (1931) and *Modern Times* (1936). Surprisingly, Gaidai eschewed the most obvious route of social satire, which was common for Chaplin's features as well as for Soviet cinema of the time, *Daite zhalobnuiu knigu* (*Give Me a Complaints Book*, 1964), *Dobro pozhalovat', ili postoronnim vkhod vospreshchen* (*Welcome, or No Trespassing*, 1964), *Tridtsat' tri* (33, 1965), and preferred slapstick comedy instead. In the long run such a choice proved more destructive for the ideological foundation of Soviet film, because Gaidai's films of the 1960s deconstructed the fundamental

discursive mechanisms underlying Soviet cinema as an ideological institution. For example, in *The Diamond Arm* Gaidai parodied the role of sound in Soviet comedy, which—as ideological anchor for the visual image—had remained unchanged since the advent of talkies under Stalin. The film’s opening credits are accompanied by the sound of mysterious steps of invisible characters, their hard breathing, and a terrifying scream. This blood-curdling soundtrack provides a backdrop for humorous intertitles, such as, “The film has been shot by a half-hidden camera.” Gaidai parodies the guiding role of sound in Soviet film, where the word with its ideological weight always controlled the possible ambiguity of the cinematic image. In *The Diamond Arm*, the horrific scream misleads and confuses the viewer, who is not sure what to expect next: a mystery, a comedy or a horror film. The scream also becomes a red herring, a parody of Stalinist mass song that had conveyed the meaning of the narrative to the viewer.

Audiences were even confused about some of the film’s narrative turns because of the sound. For example, one of the joking intertitles thanked private citizens and state organizations for providing genuine diamonds and gold for the film’s shooting. Whenever viewers met with the film crew, one of the most common requests was to say who had provided the diamonds and gold. Soviet viewers were accustomed to transparent narratives with sound providing continuity of the narrative. The written word, such as credits or intertitles, was supposed to convey the absolute, *pravda*-like, truth. Gaidai’s interplay between the soundtrack and the frame, therefore, led to the viewer’s utter confusion. Thus, Gaidai not only parodies the function of sound as established in Stalinist cinema, but also returns to sound as “the element of montage” proposed by Eisenstein, Pudovkin and Aleksandrov in their famous “Statement on Sound.”

Furthermore, Gaidai’s films redefine the role of songs in Soviet film. Song had played a special role in Soviet cinema, because of its potential to convey a clear ideological message. Grigorii Aleksandrov’s *Veselye rebiata* (*The Happy Guys*, 1934) established the canon of musical comedy, in which mass song provided the foundation of the ideological narrative. The musical comedies’ positive heroes



were in charge of such songs that were later broadcast around the country and recommended for communal singing as an indispensable aural manifestation of Soviet identity. While Gaidai also made song a key part of his comedies, he had the villains, not the positive heroes, perform these songs. Villains could sing about prohibited topics and were free to express unconventional opinions. Their songs neither controlled the images nor did they convey an ideological message, but rather served as ironic parables of Soviet life. Gaidai thus replaced the mass song with the carnivalesque song, the musical and verbal structure of which was in tune with the clownish bodies of his characters.

In *The Diamond Arm* songs underscore the key aspects of modern individual agency, which the Soviet state denied its citizens: freedom of movement, freedom from fear, and last but not least bodily and sexual freedom. Mikhail Brashinskii notes that *The Diamond Arm* set the tone for permissible dissidence against the Soviet regime in the late 1960s with its Aesopian language, its parables with political underpinnings and its absurdist humor. The film's songs played a crucial role in articulating the perception of Soviet life as "normalized absurdity" that had replaced the Stalin-era atmosphere of total terror. The composer Aleksandr Zatsepin (b. 1926) and poet Leonid Derbenev (1931-1995) wrote three songs for *The Diamond Arm* dealing with the major taboos of Soviet paradise: mobility, individual freedom and the right to live without fear.

First is the song of the smuggler, "The Island of Bad Luck." It is a parody of "The Song of the Motherland," the unofficial Soviet anthem that glorified Stalin's new Constitution of 1936 and praised the USSR as a land of free and happy people. "The Song of the Motherland" had been composed by Isaak Dunaevskii for Aleksandrov's *Tsirk* (*The Circus*, 1936), hailing the vastness of Soviet Russia at the height of Stalin's purges, when Soviet citizens had lost all opportunity to travel abroad; "The Island of Bad Luck" talks of a land of savages, who work hard but cannot be happy on their island where there is no calendar, so that the savages lost track of time. The place of the song in the film's diegesis reinforces the allusion to Soviet Utopia: when the heroes leave the Soviet port *en route* to foreign lands, the Count offers to sing a "topical" song. The

Soviet Union, isolated behind the Iron Curtain, is portrayed in the lyrics as a dystopian island of bad luck separated from the rest of the world.

The second song, “The Song About Hares,” is performed by Semen himself. It is the centrepiece of the film and deals with hares, the most cowardly creatures of Russian folklore, who learn nevertheless to overcome their fear. The episode that culminates in this song parodies the battle-council scene from the well-known Stalin-era film about the Civil War, *Chapaev* (1934); instead of Red Army commanders, gangsters surround a ludicrously detailed map of the restaurant and its restroom, where they hope to ambush Semen and remove his precious cast. Only one thing goes according to the smugglers’ plan: Semen gets drunk. As his state of inebriation increases, so does his courage and, instead of a planned visit to the restroom, Semen gets on stage and starts singing about the cowardly hares who live in a dark and dangerous forest, but who get out of their hiding places every night and sing the same refrain: “We couldn’t care less/We couldn’t care less/Bolder we’ll be/Than the lion, king of beasts.” While this innocent song has no direct political agenda, the rejection of fear—even by a hare in a fairytale song performed by a drunkard—could be interpreted as an act of dissidence in a country built on terror. Indeed, when the cultural authorities previewed the film’s final cut, they demanded a reworking of the song, firstly because it was too macabre for a comedy, and secondly because the personages, even though they were animals, should not proclaim complete indifference to authority. Ironically, the paranoid censors themselves voiced the anti-Soviet interpretation of the song. The song was nearly omitted from the film, but as often happened in Soviet cultural politics, it was vodka that resolved the conflict and cleared the clouds hanging over the controversial comedy. When the then Minister of Culture, Ekaterina Furtseva, heard the song, she became incensed at the filmmaker and yelled at her minions: “Who ‘couldn’t care less’? The working class couldn’t care less?” Only after she was assured that the song was harmless because it was performed by a drunken clown, that is to say the drunken character played by the professional clown Iurii Nikulin, the song received Furtseva’s imprimatur.





Fig. 88. Failure to Perform

The third song, “Help Me!” is a parodic tango about love in a tropical city performed by a passionate female voice. The aggressive blonde, Anna (Svetlana Svetlichnaia), plays the song on her tape recorder before getting undressed and launching her sexual offensive on Semen. On the one hand, the woman attacks and attempts to seduce Semen; on the other hand, Semen is a good Soviet citizen who knows that under no circumstances must he get entangled in extramarital sex. Instead of playing along with Anna, Semen crawls into a corner of the hotel room, hides his face behind his cast, and crouches before the topless temptress, petrified like a rabbit in front of a snake. Similar to the screams at the film’s beginning, the tango serves as a red herring: a potentially erotic scene turns into a comic episode about Semen’s fears and sexual repression (Fig. 88). The only erotic joke possible on the Soviet screen was the protagonist’s failure to perform.

When the censorship committee, led by the chairman of the State Committee for Cinematography (Goskino), Aleksei Romanov, watched the final cut of the film, they suggested numerous changes: among them, to enhance the positive image of Soviet police, to improve Semen’s role as an exemplary Soviet citizen and, obviously, to cut all nudity. Above all, the Committee was petrified and puzzled by the film’s ending, comprised of documentary footage of a nuclear explosion. When the Committee gave Gaidai their comments, he said that he would not make any changes and would understand if the film were banned.

By the late 1960s Soviet cinema was no longer a purely ideological institution; instead it had become the most profitable branch of the Soviet culture industry. A ban would have hurt, above all, the Committee's annual report and the finance department at Mosfilm, required to account for expenditure. The censors gave Gaidai three days to consider what changes he would agree to make in order for the film to get released. Gaidai answered that he would remove the documentary footage of the nuclear explosion. The Committee, relieved to achieve at least one concession, immediately released the film after the "radioactive" ending had been cut.

The circumstances of the film's approval by Goskino reflect important shifts in cultural politics during this period. Firstly, financial concerns had become as important as ideological ones. Secondly, compromise was a more acceptable cultural strategy than an inflexible ideological stance for both cultural authorities and the artist. Finally, the inclusion of multiple endings was increasingly deployed in order to negotiate with the censors: the ending that satisfied the authorities usually differed from the ending that satisfied the artist. With the "unclear" ending, Gaidai had thrown out a red herring for the censors in order to save the rest of his film from massive changes.

Perhaps Mikhail Brashinskii found the key to Gaidai's art of comedy when he wrote that Gaidai did not create slapstick but sought its manifestations in Soviet life and transposed them onto the screen. By means of lighthearted physical comedy, Gaidai explored the changing role of the individual and the collective in Soviet culture after Stalin's death, and commented indirectly on the repressive nature of the Soviet regime. Serving as one of the few safety valves in a culture based primarily on terror, Gaidai's comedies have remained popular with post-Soviet viewers who rated his 1960s films still among as their favorites—forty years after they were released.

Alexander Prokhorov



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