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D. Tyurin (Director). (2017). *Love with challenges*. Russia. IMDB ID 4731132

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To laugh “at” or to laugh “with” disabled people? Constructive humour on the basis of an example from one modern Russian comedy film.

Abstract

There are not that many films in Russia with disabled characters. Even when these characters appear on the screen, their depiction is stereotyped in the majority of the cases and they are represented as either as a burden or as a victim. The genre of these movies is often dramatic. Against such a stigmatizing and pessimistic image of disabled people, the 2017 film by D. Tyurin “Love with Challenges” stands out. This article analyses how the filmmakers turned society's attention to the challenges disabled people face through humour and the genre of comedy, which tricks they used for making the audience see the disabled people as normal instead of isolated and inferior and how the audience perceived it.

Keywords: movies, disability humour, disability in Russia, stigma

It is a known fact that nowadays television and cinema are not only for entertainment but are also ways to form public opinion, norms of behaviour, and perceptions of the world. It is often only through the “blue screen” that a person learns about the life and customs of people from other countries; in another word, about people with whom they do not come into contact in their daily life. However, it is not necessary to be separated by distance, language, and culture in order to be unfamiliar and alien to each other. A certain group of people can live in the same country, speak the same language, be brought up under the same norms and traditions, and yet, at

the same time, be excluded from the social imaginary. Very often, those who are excluded are members of marginalized groups, such as disabled people.

Often, mainstream understandings about an excluded group are based on representations in film and television. As Colin Barnes said, “the most serious obstacle to the full inclusion of people with disabilities in the public life is the negative attitude of the public towards them” (Barnes, 1997, p. 3). One could assume that television and cinema, as states’ institutions, could be held responsible for the fact that people with disabilities are consistently viewed as the “poorest and most helpless” group of the population (Charlton, 2000, p.13). This conclusion necessitates a thorough analysis and critical assessment of how people with disabilities are represented in the cinema.

Despite the existence of such programs as “barrier-free environment” and “inclusive education”, which are dedicated to involving people with disabilities in public life, it is enough to visit Russia at least once to notice that disabled people can rarely be seen on the streets of the main cities like Moscow or Saint-Petersburg. Also, Russian art rarely focuses its attention on the issue of disability. However, more and more films that deal with the problems people with disabilities face have begun to appear over the past decade. Notable examples include: “Corrections Class” (2014), “KostyaNika”(2007), “Temporary Difficulties” (2018), and “How Viktor 'The Garlic' Took Alexey 'The Stud' to the Nursing Home” (2018).

The introduction of the topic of disability in Russian cinema is a new phenomenon and should be praised - it is known that in the Soviet and early post-Soviet period disability was practically absent in cultural representations. However, the fact that disability is being discussed does not mean these films are effecting positive change as most of them are still based on a stereotypical view of people with disabilities. According to Gray (2008), television not only

forms the public's view of the world around it, but also dictates "which people, ideas, and behaviours are 'normal', and which are decidedly abnormal" (p.157). In other words, it provides normative guidelines. In this regard, it is possible to characterize the image of people with disabilities in each of the mentioned films as the root of historically formed opinions about them as "others", abnormal, and inferior. A detailed examination of all the techniques used by the filmmakers of these movies, as well as the reasons that prompted them to resort to such strategies, is beyond the scope of this article. However, it should be noted that all these films show the lives of people with disabilities as an endless "undesirable tragedy that should be cured" (Rodan & Ellis, 1994, p. 23). Through these images, the most terrible fears of non-disabled people such as "tragedy, loss, dark, and the unknown" are associated with disabled people (Hunt, 1966, p. 155). It is worth adding that the generalized list of clichés compiled by Nelson (2000) is applicable to the image of a disabled person in each of the listed films. Against the background of such a stigmatized, pessimistic image of disabled people, the film by D. Tyurin "Love with challenges" stands out. Its authors were the first in modern Russian cinema to address the topic of people with disabilities in the comedy genre. This article is devoted to the analysis of humour in this movie with disabled characters and its reception by the audience.

Before turning to one specific film, it is worth recalling how the representation of disabled people through humour has historically developed. The image of the "cripple" as a hero of the comedy genre has deep roots and is a well-known archetype (Rodan & Ellis, 1994, p.82). In the history books of jesters and clowns, William Willeford claims that most of the clowns that have been known since the Roman Empire were blind or physically disabled (Beauchamp et al., 2015, p.157). Later, in the 18th and 19th centuries, people with disabilities were also part of the entertainment industry, being participants in all kinds of traveling circuses, booths, or freak

shows. With the advent of the silent cinema, the image of a disabled person as a funny, ridiculous hero has become a kind of cliché. For example, Berger (2013) gives a large number of examples from various films of the silent film era, in each of which the hero with a disability was the subject of ridicule precisely because of their physiological characteristics (pp. 198-203). After the era of silent cinema in connection with the two World Wars, this approach practically disappeared. Laughing at disabled people became indecent and insulting; jokes about disability began to be perceived as discrimination and oppression. The question arises: how, almost a hundred years later, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, first abroad in the West, and then in Russia, was it possible that comedies with characters with disabilities appeared? How is it possible that these films include jokes related to the physical illness of a character, their wheelchair, prosthesis, cane, or a hearing aid?

Scholars studying disability explain this phenomenon by making a distinction between the idea of “laughing at” people with disabilities that existed in the past, and a more modern “laughing with” people with disabilities, between “humour that denigrates and humour that enlightens” (Berger, 2013, p. 198). If previously disabled people themselves were ridiculed, now the focus has shifted to ridicule the inability of modern world of high technologies to meet the basic needs of disabled people. Thus, Beth Haller, a professor at Towson University, argues that “whereas once disability humour- was destructive, it now has the potential to expose the diversity of people with disabilities” (Haller, 2010, p. 171). In her opinion, the cartoonist John Callahan, who himself was a wheelchair user, played a huge role in this. After the appearance of his work, “people with disability took control of their own image. As a result, disability humour entered a new phase whereby society’s disabling barriers are laughed at rather than people’s individual limitations”. Haller argues that nowadays this type of humour creates “bridges of

understanding” between non-disabled and disabled people. The humour gives the possibility to see the disability as “another feature about human beings” (Haller, 2010, p.171). Exactly this type of constructive humour, which does not denigrate but enlightens and helps non-disabled people to understand people with disabilities, is used by the filmmakers of “Love with Challenges”. The plot of the film is based on the fact that a young man Mikhail pretends to be a disabled person - wheelchair user - in order to get a lawyer’s position in the company “Our Gas”. Mikhail has to portray his ailment not only in front of colleagues and superiors but also in the society of real people with disabilities.

Probably the funniest scene, covering an issue disabled people commonly experience in modern cities, such as Moscow, is an attempt by Mikhail to get home on his own. In this humorous scene, both the physical barriers created by the state system (lack of a ramp to the bus, a narrow turnstile for access to the metro station, many stairs in front of the entrance) and the attitude of society are precisely shown. As one subway worker says to Mikhail, “if you are disabled, then you should stay at home, and not roam the subway” (Tyurin, 2017). This short phrase of a subway worker correctly conveys the stereotypical opinion about disabled people by many non-disabled people in Russia; that they should stay at home. Although in this case, it is just the expression of a rude metro worker, non-disabled designers of new buildings, officials, teachers, and doctors are inclined to the same stigmatizing view of people with disabilities in the design and implementation of their solution. Here the film’s humour performs an enlightening, constructive function. Through a mockery of the system and the underground worker, the author of the film encourages the viewers to think and to change their own point of view on the question of accessibility and attitude towards people with disabilities and makes visible the necessity of infrastructure the supports disabled peoples’ presence in all public arenas.

Not only this scene, but also the entire humour of the film “Love with Challenges” can be divided into three types: 1) jokes about the imperfection of the state system, 2) the attitude of society towards the disabled, and 3) jokes about disability itself. The novelty of filmmakers lies in the choice to ridicule people’s attitude towards those with disabilities and the city’s inability to meet their needs. They do this not through people with disabilities themselves, but through a non-disabled con-man named Mikhail. This technique pursues the following two goals.

Firstly, if all the barriers and problems in the life of a wheelchair user would have been shown from the perspective of a disabled person, then this would have most likely transformed the film from the comedy genre into drama. In this case, the audience would have felt pity for what was shown on screen, which would have led, in its turn, to a stereotypical image of a disabled “victim”. One of the users of the Otvovik.com site emphasized precisely this moment in the film: “I liked very much that there was no pity in “Love with challenges“, that is, the director did not put pressure on me to feel pity nor did he make me feel this unpleasant feeling” (Olga 84, 2017).

Secondly, because the audience initially perceives the main character of the film Mikhail as a non-disabled person, the audience identifies with this hero. Jonathan Cohen claims that the moment of identification comes when the audience shares the character’s point of view and begins to participate in his experiences (Cohen, 2001). Since many non-disabled people are unfamiliar with the world of disabilities, they do not fully understand the experiences of a character with disabilities. However, due to the awareness that Mikhail is not disabled, each viewer can easily project what is happening with the film’s hero and through this projection, the viewer can imagine what it is like to be disabled for a while.

In addition to the scenes listed that demonstrate the impossibility for Mikhail to get on the bus or enter the metro etc., the authors included many more humorous moments in the film related to the first type of humour. With these types of jokes, they ridicule the inability of the Russian capital to meet the needs of people with disabilities. On a walk with a disabled girl Marina, Mikhail constantly gets his wheels stuck in the uneven surfaces of the road, almost falls out of the wheelchair, and with difficulty, after numerous attempts, he overcomes a steep ramp. The last scene is so comical that Marina could not restrain herself and laughed at Mikhail's struggle. The constant smiles on the face of this heroine and other characters with disabilities, the ability to joke at their physical disabilities, and the ability to enjoy life all largely distinguish the image of a disabled person created by Tyurin from the stereotyped portrayal imposed on viewers by the authors of other Russian films with disabled characters.

The second type of humour consists of the attitude of society towards people with disabilities. It is also a rather rare but interesting phenomenon. This attitude is presented in “Love with Challenges” ranging from indifference to hostility. In the film, it does not occur to non-disabled Mikhail that he and his disabled friends may not be allowed to go to a nightclub. He does not realize that people with disabilities cannot easily be admitted to a club and only the confident behaviour of Mikhail and the recital of fictional articles of the law make the bouncers change their minds. In this scene, a secondary character named Zhorik, who has cerebral palsy and limited mobility, goes to fight with a security guard to get into a nightclub. While this episode is really comical, it clearly demonstrates a typical attitude towards disabled people by non-disabled people. It is worth noting that some viewers change their attitudes while watching the film, as evidenced by the views of the audience in forums: “In the first half of the film, I felt so strange about the plot concerning the disabled [...] but then I changed my mind. This is not

ridiculing the disabled, but the support of them, the explanation that they, like ordinary, healthy people, can communicate with everyone, have fun, create fun, have common interests and even love” (Svetlanka5, 2017).

A more hidden hostility, or rather irritation of society towards a disabled person, can be seen in the office of "Our Gas", where everyone seems to be friendly towards Mikhail, a newcomer in a wheelchair. However, when he enters a manager's office through a narrow door, no one allows him the necessary space to access the office. Some complain that he is bothering them, others apologize, but absolutely everyone continues to squeeze into the narrow doorway, crowding and pushing the disabled person.

Another characteristic moment is the indifference of society in the scene where few homeless people try to steal Mikhail’s wheelchair. In the background, not only ordinary passers-by are visible, but also men in uniform. None of them, unlike the homeless, knows about Mikhail’s scam. For them, he is a real disabled person, but no one even tries to intervene. In this particular case, all this looks ridiculous because the viewer knows that the hero is a non-disabled con-man. However, through the humour of this and previous scenes, the director conveys to the viewer the lack of empathy in non-disabled people regarding people with disabilities.

Moreover, society's point of view of disabled people changes their opinion of themselves. This is illustrated by the episode of Mikhail's speech in the organization of disabled people. According to Colin Barnes, each person with disabilities is not only ascribed (involuntarily) the label of a disabled person but is also “taught how to act out their ascribed role” and how to behave in accordance with this label and the expectations of society (Barnes & Mercer, 2003, pp. 4-5). That is why, Mikhail, having forgotten that he is only depicting a wheelchair-user, talks about how he likes to go to the club "where they dance" and to go camping in Taiga. During his

speech, each person with disabilities looks at him strangely. None of them can imagine how it is possible to go camping or go to a nightclub in a wheelchair. After all, many of these activities are unimaginable for them because non-disabled people, for the most part, think that “a disabled person should stay at home”. Each of the disabled people is aware of this, and each has learned to behave in accordance with the expectations of society. At first, Michael does not understand the surprise of those present, as he is reasoning from the perspective of a non-disabled person. As a non-disabled person who has never encountered inaccessibility, he forgets that such seemingly simple things as visiting a nightclub or going camping are often not accessible to people with disabilities. However, while trying to lie his way out of this embarrassing situation which he created himself, Mikhail, who no longer thinks like a typical non-disabled person either, comes up with creative explanations. For example, he says, he was lowered into the forest by helicopter and then sailed down the river in the forest with friends. This moment is distinguished not only by the comical situation but also by the fact that for every situation that seemed absolutely insurmountable for a wheelchair user, Mikhail, through lying, unexpectedly offers a way to improve accessibility. It turns out that in the presence of friends, money, and, the opportunity to break society’s expectations, a disabled person can go beyond artificially created boundaries, thus changing the way society views them.

Finally, the third type of humour in the comedy “Love with challenges” is represented by jokes about disability itself, which concerns two minor characters of the film - Tolik and Zhorik. Although this recalls the times of silent cinema, when disabilities were ridiculed, in this case, the goal of the authors of the film is not to mock but to demonstrate various aspects of the daily life of a disabled person through such examples as automatic urine collectors and a hand-gripper in a shape of a woman's breast. At the same time, although due to Tolik's low vision, the duo (Tolik

and Zhorik) constantly gets into funny situations, they do not look pathetic at all. One of the spectators of the film writes about this: "...the theme of disability is perceived somehow easily, and the heroes of comedy do not seem flawed" (Nikita83, 2017). Moreover, the role of Zhorik is played by real disabled actor Sergey Kutegin, a man with a speech and gait difference, whose dance Mikhail perceives as a seizure. However, in reality, these aspects of a person's life with cerebral palsy represent the background knowledge necessary for the audience of the film, and not a mockery of people with disabilities. The same background knowledge function is used in the film by other actors who use wheelchairs in real life. Perhaps it was precisely the participation of disabled people themselves in the development of the film's plot that leads the film crew to never cross the line of the permissible and laugh not at the disabled, but with them.

Pavel Priluchny, who plays Mikhail, emphasized an essential delicate proportionality used in "Love with Challenges," when speaking about the purpose of the film and the function of the comic. He explained, "[w]e tried to make it funny, but at the same time harmless and sharp. Everything is built on trifles here, the humour is right and very subtle" (World Podium, 2017). He is echoed by the actress who plays Marina, Anna Strashenbaum, who states, "I can't say that we are not joking at all with these things, but the line that the screenwriter found is very thin, delicate" (WeiT Media, 2017).

I will try to interpret the reception of the film by viewers who have left their ratings, opinions, reviews on social networks. Otvovik.com was selected for this analysis. As of autumn of 2019, out of 189 reviews received, only 25 users rated the movie with three or less out of five. The final average rating is 4.39.

However, the low scores of 25 commentators are not necessarily related to thematic humour; in reality, only eight people criticized it. A user with the name "Lacrimosa7002" argues

against using just the comedy genre for telling stories about people with disabilities, believing that “people with disabilities are not a reason for jokes” (Lacrimosa7002, 2017). The same consideration was given by another user, "Iragelik". This category of viewers perceives what is happening on the screen in a straightforward manner. For example, the commentator under the nickname “Sigmachka” writes, “[i]t seems to me that performing as people with disabilities, they ridiculed them” (Sigmachka, 2017). Nevertheless, we could note that even those who reacted negatively to humour, for the most part, praised the filmmakers of "Love with Challenges" for the very decision to make a film on such a sensitive topic. As one viewer stated, “I don’t know how to relate to the idea of the author to present the problem of people with disabilities in an exaggerated-comedic form. However, I am grateful to him for raising this topic” (Fillona, 2017).

Judging by the statements of the remaining 165 users, they showed an understanding of the aspirations of scriptwriter D. Kaymakov and director D. Tyurin and perceived humour as an organic part of the image of people with disabilities and their problems. For example, a Criolla user notes that “I never thought about how people with disabilities travel in transport; it turns out that this is difficult and even impossible without an accompanying person”. Moreover, she admits that the filmmakers diversified both topics related to people with disabilities and the images of these people, offering a new context for this: “And in general, my eyes opened up to a lot” (Criolla, 2017). The user, “Bsvbsvsvetka”, positively evaluating the choice of the film’s problem, also considers it a positive thing - “the creators of the film clothed their product in a form convenient for the mass audience - comedy. Even though the genre of a film with such a serious theme is comedy, I will confidently declare that it is not disabled people who are ridiculed in it, but our society, our state, which stubbornly pretends that there are no disabled people in it” (Bsvbsvsvetka, 2017). In addition, another commentator rightly notes that the main

idea of the film is not only to pay attention to Moscow's inability to meet the needs of people with disabilities but also "that you cannot treat such people as inferior" (nomill, 2017). Another aspect that the audience notes in their comments is the ease of the film. "This is amazing, because we are talking about people with disabilities. Such films, as a rule, are watched with pain and heaviness in the heart. But this is a different story" (Waynona, 2017).

Thanks to the humour, the authors managed to show disability not as a tragedy, a pain to overcome, or only a constant fight for rights, but also as ordinary life with its simple joys and sorrows. The depiction of a walk in the park, a wheelchair dance, love, friendship, and jealousy allow the film to make way for a reception where disability is perceived as part of life and not as something foreign, alien, or associated with people's inner fears.

Unfortunately, it was not possible to find any specific sites with reviews from people with disabilities themselves, therefore, as the "voice" of people with disabilities, it would be appropriate to mention the opinion of D. Kuznetsova, head of the Integration Club for Persons with Disabilities "Overcoming", where the film premiered: "For me "Love with Challenges" is an attempt to talk about complex things in the language of comedy. This film should change the perception of those who are not familiar with disability issues" (World Podium, 2017).

This article, although based on one film and its reception by the audience, nevertheless allows us to draw some important conclusions. First of all, Russian cinema in its development reached a point when it is possible to create movies about disabled characters without their stigmatized depiction. Further, we can conclude that the choice of genre played a constructive role in the film. The humour helped to implement the intention of screenwriter Denis Kaimakov and director Dmitry Tyurin to show the life of people with disabilities in the film "Love with

Challenges” in a way that “bring these two parallel worlds together” (World Podium, 2017), i.e., the world of disabled and non-disabled people.

It is interesting that after “Love with Challenges” came out, more movies about disabilities were made through the prism of humour – e.g. the comedy “Ice” (2018) and TV-series “Tolya-robot” (2019). Finally, this film is made in such a way, that through humour and tricks of the filmmakers, the majority of the audience were able to identify themselves with the disabled people and understand that they are not so different from non-disabled people.

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