



Adventures of Half a Ruble

Dir. Aksel Lundin | USSR | 1929 | N/C PG | 1h 9m | Russian intertitles with English surtitles

Performing live: John Sweeney (piano)

8pm on Thursday 21 March 2024

Screening material courtesy of Olexsandr Dovzhenko National Centre, Kyiv

A small flock of kids in ragged patched-up clothes are sitting on a fence, watching the gentry and the bourgeoisie enjoy the skating rink on a sunny day. This opening scene, idyllic in spite of the obvious presence of social inequality and injustice, ends predictably and dramatically, as Fedko, the leader of the children's gang and the principal character of the film, takes a beating for daring to laugh at a clumsy 'gentleman'. Set in imperial Russia and made in Soviet Ukraine, *Adventures of Half a Ruble* is in essence a film intended to educate children about class struggle, an account of the violence of the rich through the eyes of a child. This may sound straightforward, trivial even, but the people involved in making this film, as well as their place in the turbulent political context of the time, reflect the spirit of that historical period and add layers to our modern understanding of it.

The script of the film is based on two short stories, *Fedko*, *A Tearaway* (1911) and *The Grandma's Present* (1923), both written by Volodymyr Vynnychenko, a prominent Ukrainian writer and political activist who would eventually become the first Prime Minister of the short-lived Ukrainian People's Republic. Coming from a Ukrainian-speaking peasant family, Vynnychenko was an ardent socialist and a notable ideologue supporting Ukrainian national independence and the country's cultural liberation from Russian imperialism. The juxtaposition of the character of Fedko in the short story – mischievous and disobedient, but honest and good-hearted – with a spoiled, cowardly, and conniving landlord's son Tolya ('The Angel') might be a metaphor for the struggle of not just the poor against the rich, but also a subjugated Ukraine against the domineering, colonial Russia. By the time of making

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the film, Vynnychenko, disillusioned with the Soviet approach to communism and the imposed superiority of Russians it inherited from the empire, was living in exile in Europe.



Let us briefly look at the men who filmed *Adventures of Half a Ruble* – director Axel Lundin and scriptwriter Mykola Bazhan. Lundin moved to the Russian empire from Sweden in 1905, possibly inspired by the democratic revolution, and was hired by a Kharkiv theatre in 1919. Almost immediately he began working in propagandist cinema, first for the counter-revolutionary monarchist forces, and then – immediately after the Red Army took over Ukraine – for the Bolsheviks. Quite quickly Lundin became an acknowledged master of film for children, working at Odessa and Kyiv film studios, honoured with the duty to teach the young generation about patriotism and loyalty. Quite an ironic turn of events.

Today it seems pointless to pass judgement on an outsider who switched sides so rapidly in a war that was not his; however the story of Mykola Bazhan, flesh and blood of the new post-imperial Ukrainian literature is truly disheartening. An active member of the Ukrainian Futurist poetry movement, Bazhan was one of the very few people from the group who survived Stalinism and continued working in Ukraine. *Adventures of Half a Ruble* was released at a breaking point in his career, when it became palpable that remaining a Futurist and associating with the Futurists – ‘too Ukrainian’ in their phonetics and aesthetics and ‘too Western’ in their inspirations and influences – was quite risky. Switching to the

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children's cinema and literature for the sake of safety was a common practice. Later, in the 1930s, Bazhan wrote odes to Stalinism, distancing himself even further from his artistic past.

Retold in Russian and having thus lost its decolonial subtext, the story of Fedko was played up on screen to be more explicit with regards to its illustration of class struggle, thanks to its emphatically comedic portrayal of the gentry and graphic depictions of inequality. Context and content intertwine in an interesting way here, as the film naturally, almost unintentionally, strikes a curious balance between staginess and realism. While the theatricality of performance, dramatic make-up, slapstick gags, and other characteristic features of silent cinema already too alien to a contemporary spectator make the film's depiction of class struggle almost impossible to take seriously, the bare and genuine faces of child actors, some of whom are real homeless orphans, bring it back to reality. Close-ups of laughter, tears, anger, and fear form the visual rhythm of the film, preventing the spectator from losing their empathy. The scene of Fedko's fever dream is especially worthy of attention, due not only to its realism, but also to the expressionistic editing of the flashback sequences (radical for its time), and an almost Vertov-like kaleidoscopic exposure, where Tolya's face multiplies and rotates, amplifying the pain of betrayal. Here is a tiny yet beautiful and meaningful detail that you will not find in the subtitles: the writing on the ribbon decorating the cap of the cowardly antagonist actually reads 'hero'.

At the time of its release, *Adventures of Half a Ruble* was acknowledged by various committees and congresses to be the best film to have been made in the young USSR for the new generation – a work whose artistry far exceeded its didactical purpose. Today it is an eloquent historical document, which sometimes hints towards, and sometimes directly addresses, a history of violence and oppression.

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