http://dx.doi.org/10.7592/EJHR2021.9.1.Vorobyeva

The European Journal of Humour Research 9 (1) 155–174
www.europeanjournalofhumour.org

Soviet policy in the sphere of humour and comedy: the case of satirical cinemagazine *Fitil*

Maria Vorobyeva
Ural Branch of the Russian Academy of Sciences, Ekaterinburg, Russia
vorobyova-mariya@yandex.ru

Abstract

Satirical cinemagazine Fitil (The Fuse), one of the final products of the Thaw, the time of liberalization in both foreign and domestic policy of the Soviet Union, appeared in 1962 and was produced under the supervision of Sergei Mikhalkov, a prominent public and literary figure in the USSR. Vivid and engaging, the cinemagazine starred many famous theatre and cinema actors and soon became an important part of mainstream satire, which was aimed at reinforcing the Soviet regime by criticizing some of its flaws. The significance attached to Fitil by Soviet authorities can be illustrated by the fact that its episodes were shown before films in cinemas, that is, it was officially promoted and was seen by the mass public across the Union. Fitil was expected not only to relieve social tension, but also marked the boundaries of the permissible in public criticism and satire. The agenda of Fitil was heterogeneous and dynamic: apart from a number of permanent themes, such as bureaucracy and red tape, bad management, poor service in retail and catering, alcohol abuse, morals, and manners, there were variations in the choice of themes and subjects of satire in different periods. The changes also affected the degree of generalization, the scale of the problems discussed and characteristics of the comic itself. This article analyses Fitil issues of 1962-1991 and outlines the cinemagazine's agenda and its changes in time. It is shown that Fitil was a part of mainstream satire, determined by the state policy in the sphere of humour and comedy.

Keywords: Soviet satire, cinemagazine Fitil, themes and subjects of satire, comicality.

1. Introduction

Satirical cinemagazine *Fitil* (*The Fuse*) was one of the final products of the Thaw period: this project was launched in 1962 (Satirical Magazine Fitil 2012). From its very beginning and until the end of the Soviet period, the project had a high status and was considered extremely significant by the government. Its chief editor and curator was Sergei Mikhalkov, a renowned writer and satirist, co-author of the Soviet national anthem, honoured and loved by the country's rulers, a triple laureate of the State Stalin Prize of Second Degree and the Chairman of the Union of RSFSR Writers. Throughout the project's life, it employed famous film directors,

screenwriters and prominent cinema and theatre actors.[1] *Fitil's* importance for the government is also emphasized by the fact that its episodes were shown in cinemas before the feature presentation. Because cinema was one of the few generally available public leisure activities in the Soviet period, this presentation slot meant that *Fitil* reached mass audiences across the Union[2].

What made this cinemagazine so significant? What made it worthy of all the effort and expense in the government's eyes? The reason might lie in the fact that *Fitil* belonged to the heavily censored mainstream satire aimed at reinforcing the Soviet state system while denouncing some of its flaws. *Fitil* not only helped relieve social tension, but also contributed to setting standards in society by creating clear distinctions between the appropriate and inappropriate subjects and themes of criticism as well as determining the acceptable degree of criticism. It can be also supposed that *Fitil* diverted the attention of the mass audience from major social problems to local, less significant ones and to their fake solutions.

The content of the cinemagazine was heterogeneous: even the most persistent themes in its agenda were given different attention in different periods of *Fitil's* existence. During the Soviet period, some themes disappeared and were replaced by others. Moreover, there were certain changes in the nature of the comic itself. Our analysis covers the issues of *Fitil* released between the 1960s and 1990s and identifies the themes explored in different decades as well as the changes in the agenda – in the choice of themes and subjects of satire, characteristics of the comic. Thus, the purpose of this study is to show how *Fitil* reflected the state policy in the sphere of humour and comedy. Similarly to other studies of cinematographic materials, the methodological framework of this study is primarily based on discourse analysis (Turovets 2011). The discourse analysis method was supplemented by the method of semantic analysis and the hermeneutic method.

To conclude, it seems necessary to clarify the concepts we are going to use further: the comic is understood here as the quality with which the human mind endows things when it observes a contradiction between reality and aesthetic ideal and this observation engenders amusement; satire, as the use of ridicule to expose or denounce negative aspects of reality; comedy, as a genre that uses different forms of mockery (e.g. humour or satire); humour, as a form of mockery over specific weaknesses and wrongdoings; irony, as another form of mockery that arises when intended meaning (disapproval) is implicitly communicated through the overtly positive literal meaning; grotesque, as a form of mockery that uses hyperbolization of certain flaws; and, finally, absurdization, as a technique based on taking to the extreme the meaninglessness and irrationality of certain phenomena in order to draw attention to them.

2. Origins of *Fitil*: the development of Soviet satire until the 1960s

Cinemagazine *Fitil* was a part of Soviet mainstream satire. In order to understand the nature of this phenomenon, we need to trace its history from its very beginning in the 1920s until the 1960s and describe its characteristic features.

[1] Among them were film directors L. Gaiday, G. Danelia, A. Mitta; screenwriters E. Uspensky, M. Zhvanetsky, S. Altov; actors I. Ilyinsky, S. Filippov, Y. Nikulin, G. Vitsin, F. Ranevskaya, O. Aroseva, T. Peltzer, E. Leonov, A. Shirvindt, Z. Gerdt, R. Bykov, V. Etush, G. Burkov, L. Kuravlev, M. Pugovkin, S. Kramarov, I. Yasulovich, T. Dogileva, N. Krachkovskaya, and, of course, two stars of the show N. Panferov, and Y. Volynstev.

[2] After the demise of the USSR, in the 1990s and early 2000s, various Russian TV channels showed Soviet episodes of *Fitil*, thus making them familiar to the post-Soviet public, including the author of this article.

The 1920s had an ambivalent effect on Soviet satire – on the one hand, satire flourished in this period, which sparked the satirical talent of many writers and painters.[3] There was a variety of comic genres (opinion article, short story, novel, review, variety show, propaganda concert, slapstick comedy, operetta, and parody). On the other hand, since the early 1920s, Soviet leaders and ideologists questioned the appropriateness of laughter in the new social conditions, in particular the appropriateness of satire and comedy as comedic forms (Oushakine 2013; Kalinin 2013). Participants of the debate about laughter, which lasted throughout the 1920s, set rather narrow boundaries for various forms of the comic. In particular, satire was expected to serve as a weapon in class struggle and 'social disinfection'; the only acceptable target of satire was the Soviet bureaucrat while the forms of critical representation of typical flaws had to be as grotesque and unrecognizable as possible. The emotions of the public were to be kept under control while laughter, as an end in itself, devoid of its performative component, was deemed unnecessary. The end of the debate was marked by the discussion about satire in 1929-1931, when opposing views were given on the role of satire in Soviet society. In the end, some 'middle ground' was established – satire is necessary but not any kind of satire, only satire that exists within clearly prescribed limits (Kalinin 2013; Oushakine 2013).

In the 1930s, clear limits to the freedom of satire were established: satire was expected to be 'positive' and 'constructive', to challenge only certain aspects of the social environment, which otherwise was to be portrayed in an uplifting tone. Satire was to perform an educational rather than entertaining function for the masses; to hyperbolise the drawbacks of Soviet life and those who embody it through grotesque beyond recognition, making these characters as unlikeable as possible. This conclusion can be extrapolated to all types of satire – both in literature and fine arts (Golubev 2008; Oushakine 2013).

Such policy resulted in what researchers commonly describe as a decline of satire, that is, marginalization of satirical genres as a part of the general trend towards more 'conflict-free' art. Folklore comic genres such as *chastushki* (satirical or ironic rural folk verses) and proverbs were also 'tamed' by mainstream discourse (Skradol 2011, 2013; Dobrenko 2013). In fact, it is enough to compare the number of satirical magazines in the 1920-1940s: in the 1920s, there was a variety of satirical magazines, based in capital cities and regions; by the early 1930s, the number of satirical magazines dropped to six or seven for the whole country; and by the late 1940s, only three or four magazines were left (Golubev 2008). Satire was supposed to help the government convey its perspective on certain questions by condemning presumptuous bureaucrats or the beliefs, behaviour patterns and views of Soviet citizens that were considered as 'relics of the past'. Making fun of 'systemic' flaws of the Soviet state or criticizing it was not seen as satire's primary tasks.

In his analysis of post-war Soviet satire, Dobrenko, an expert on the culture of the Stalin period, identifies several characteristics which are crucial for our understanding of this phenomenon. In the early 1950s, satire in literature was a kind of occupational drama (plays focused on problems within specific professional spheres or sectors of economy with relationships between the characters as a background) 'spiced up' by dashes of vaudeville. Criticism was usually targeted at post-war Soviet managers and administrators, representatives of the middle and lower ranks of the *nomenklatura*. Satire was predominantly seen as a way of reinforcing the Soviet regime and, therefore, it had to address only a limited range of issues – "formal and bureaucratic attitude to one's responsibilities, unwillingness to heed the criticism coming from below, suppression of this criticism, arrogance, duplicity in the face of the Party, eyewash and window-dressing, insensitivity to people's needs, nepotism and cronyism, immoral behaviour in everyday life and so on" (cit.ex Dobrenko 2013).

[3] Such writers as V. Mayakovsky, M. Zoschenko, D. Kharms, V. Kataev, M. Bulgakov, E. Zamyatin, Y. Olesha, I. Ilf, and E. Petrov, and such painters as B. Efimov, D. Moor, V. Deni, and M. Cheremnykh.

The paradox of mainstream Soviet satire was that it was prone to certain types of generalization while its characters were presented as embodiments of typical features but, at the same time, were specific rather than general. In other words, the characters of Soviet satirical plays were not shown as typical representatives of the state system, their faults and flaws were emphatically depicted as exceptions from the general rule. Thus, the comic effect was largely created not through generalization (e.g. bureaucracy as a whole) but through depiction of individual bureaucrats.

Satire exposed bureaucrats' wrongdoing by showing how the faults of this or that character stemmed from their individual traits rather than from the system of public administration. If generalizations were drawn, they usually followed one of the three principles: 1) 'degeneration of the bureaucratic apparatus'; 2) criticism of individual bureaucrat's negative traits, such as cynicism, hypocrisy, and conceit; 3) criticism of the excesses in state government resulting from the faults of specific administrators (formalism, insensitivity, and eyewash). Satirical plays were often a product of large-scale political campaigns (Dobrenko 2013). As for the visual satire in the period, it mostly shared the same features with literary satire, especially regarding the choice of themes and targets, their presentation and devices used to create a comic effect (Klinova & Trofimov 2017).

The principal task of post-war satire, according to Dobrenko, was to form a publicly acceptable discourse of social criticism. In other words, Soviet satire represented public discontent in such a way as the Soviet power elite wanted it to be articulated. Soviet satire responded to the government's call for bolder criticism of specific flaws, which in practice boiled down to the selection of specific flaws, presented in isolation from the wider systemic context, and eventually substituting the former for the latter. Thus, satire became similar to the genre of opinion article, which used facts but did not make generalizations. Soviet satire adhered to the key principle of 'mimesis', which underpinned the art of socialist realism – simulation of problem-solving by offering only superficial, symptomatic solutions and substituting imaginary problems for real ones. As a result, the goal of satire was not to discuss thorny social questions but to prevent the public from raising them. The pivotal task for satire was to make false diagnoses (Dobrenko 2013) and, consequently, to prescribe the wrong 'treatment'.

The Thaw period was also characterized by a general increase in interest, including the academic sphere, in laughter, humour and comedy. This interest reached its peak in the mid-1960s, as it is convincingly shown in the seminal work by P. Vail and A. Genis, *In the 1960-s. The World of the Soviet Man* (2001). One of the Soviet scholars who dealt with the problem of humour and comedy in its various manifestations was the aesthetician Y. Borev. His early works on this topic came out in 1955 and 1956. In 1957, he published the book *On Comedy*, which, according to an aesthetician L. Stolovich, was the first Soviet monograph entirely devoted to the question of the comic. The very fact of these publications may be considered as a sign of the times (Vorobyeva 2015). In the 1960s, new formats of humour and satire emerged, such as the TV show 'KVN' (Club of the Merry and Quick-Witted), first released in 1961 (KVN: The History of the Project's Creation and Name 2008).

The cinemagazine *Fitil*, which appeared in 1962, was a part of this trend. In the 1960s, there was a certain revival of traditional journalistic genres and formats – for example, in 1967, 'Literaturnaya gazeta' started a section devoted to humour and satire entitled '12 Chairs Club' (Kudryavtseva 2004). Satire of the Thaw period resembled that of the two previous periods in that, like its predecessors, it strove to present systemic failings as a result of the human factor and to silence real problems by replacing them with artificially contrived ones (see Grinko & Shevtsova 2018). Vail and Genis describe the nature of satire of the Thaw period the following way: "Laughter became the synonym of truth. This truth-laughter had two goals: destruction of the negative and reinvigoration of the positive. Satire, which was not so different from satire of the previous years, dealt with the first task successfully by depicting the same exaggerated

villains, enhancing the belief into the immediate effect of denunciation" (Vail & Genis 2001: 148).

It was in these conditions – with the corresponding starting 'capital' and encumbrances – that the satirical cinemagazine *Fitil* began its life.

3. Results

The Soviet period in the history of *Fitil* lasted from 1962 to 1991. In total, there were 357 issues, with 12 issues per year on average, and over 1,000 episodes. Each issue consisted of three or four episodes, usually one or two documentaries made in the style of investigative journalism, one animated episode and one fiction-film episode. The documentary episodes did not normally include a satirical component because they pursued another aim – to show local problems and to identify those responsible for them. In this case, specific names and job positions were usually given. Animated episodes often contained satirical elements not only in terms of the topics and targets of satire, but also in terms of visual representation.

Due to the large amount of material, we decided to limit the analysis only to fiction-film episodes and exclude documentaries and animated episodes. An additional reason why documentary episodes were not considered is that, for the most part, they were not satirical while the main focus of this study is satire. We also did not include animated episodes because then we would have to analyse the visual representations of the subjects of mockery, which would take us too far beyond the scope of this paper.

Overall, we analysed 322 episodes, that is, one third of the cinemagazine's content in the Soviet period. Some episodes were available from the website https://fitilonline.ru/ and some from YouTube. We faced certain difficulties at the stage of selection since not all fiction-film episodes were available, which means that our conclusions are by no means final.

It should also be noted that there is a similar study by Eremeeva on the dominant themes and problems in the printed satirical magazine 'Perets' (Pepper), although there are some differences in the period covered by the research, the size of the sample and the nature of the material. Eremeeva analysed publications from 1941 to 1991 and her sample accounted for 2% of the total corpus of this magazine's texts (Eremeeva 2013). Nevertheless, 'Perets' and *Fitil* share some of the dominant topics (everyday life and work of Soviet people, social vices, scarcity of food and consumer goods) and the main characters (bureaucrats and ordinary Soviet citizens).

The results of the analysis of fiction-film episodes of *Fitil* released in 1962-1991 are shown in the following tables, listing the themes, their percentage weight, and the total number of episodes in each decade.

Table 1. Themes of *Fitil* in the 1960s (88 episodes)

№	Themes	Proportion of themes in the cinemagazine's content
1.	Morals and manners, daily life behaviour	26 (29,5%)
2.	Bad management	13 (14,7%)
3.	Bureaucracy, red tape	7 (8%)
4.	Alcohol abuse in daily life, struggle with alcoholism	7 (8%)
5.	Bad services (public catering, retail, hospitality industry, public utilities)	6 (6,8%)
6.	Inefficiency in the workplace	5 (4,4%)

7.	Fraud in the workplace and in daily life	4 (4,5%)
8.	Theft in the workplace and in daily life	4 (4,5%)
9.	Poor quality of products	3 (3,4%)
10.	Bribery and extortion	3 (3,4%)
11.	Interaction with foreigners, 'kowtowing to the West'	2 (2,3%)
12.	Socialist realism	2 (2,3%)
13.	Miscellaneous: scarcity of goods, poaching, deficiencies of the education system, over-reporting, abuse of office, employees slacking off at work	6 (6,8%)

The following summaries of the episodes illustrate how the themes listed in Table 1 were presented and explored in *Fitil* (each theme is illustrated with one to four examples).

1. ***Morals and manners, daily life behaviour:***

***Berries*, 1964:** a young man spoke rudely to an elderly woman, jumped the queue to a flower stall, bought all the flowers, stole somebody else's taxi, hurried to his girlfriend, but then it turned out that the elderly woman was his girlfriend's mother.

2. ***Bad management:***

***Irreplaceable*, 1967:** after being discharged from hospital, the manager came to work, disrupted the smooth workings of his brigade, had another fit of illness, and had to be hospitalised again.

3. ***Bureaucracy:***

***Come Tomorrow*, 1966:** a bureaucrat humiliates his visitor demanding that he should bring absurd and unnecessary papers and refusing to approve his application.

4. ***Alcohol abuse and struggle with alcoholism:***

- ***Before the Decree*, 1966:** this episode describes a situation before the decree was signed[4]: the protagonist gets drunk as soon as a shop is open, gets into mischief, harasses a woman, takes an ice-cream away from a child, slaps a young man in the face, a fight ensues, and both of them end up being arrested by the militia.
- ***Out of Joy*, 1969:** the wife is so happy to see her husband come home sober and bring his salary that she buys him vodka herself.

5. ***Bad service (catering, retail and hospitality industries, public utilities):***

- ***Poppy Seed Pastry*, 1965:** restaurant waiters make a point of ignoring the visitor who wants to make a small order; their behaviour changes dramatically when he starts ordering expensive dishes and alcohol.
- ***Business Traveller*, 1965:** the protagonist is surprised at the ideal service in the hotel but later, when he wakes up to find himself at a railway station, he realizes that what he saw was just a dream.
- ***House Painter*, 1967:** a house painter is rude to his customer, who is a fragile, cultured woman. The house painter is unable to do his job properly and delays the completion of the refurbishment she wants him to make.
- ***Way Out*, 1966:** there is a poster on the wall of a store calling for a better quality of service. The shop assistant is polite with her customers but she cannot provide even the basic level of services, such as giving them the paper to wrap their purchases. A resourceful

[4] The Presidium of the USSR Supreme Soviet passed a decree 'On Increasing the Liability for Hooliganism' on 26.07.1966, which increased the severity of punishment for appearing intoxicated in public.

customer uses the poster to wrap his goods. Shop assistants draw their own conclusions from the situation by framing the next poster.

6. ***Inefficiency in the workplace:***

- ***Solid Reason*****, 1967**: even though the task of heating water in a boiler room at a railway station is quite easy, the worker responsible for it is too lazy to perform his duty.

7. ***Fraud in the workplace and in daily life:***

- ***Permanent registration*****, 1964:** the episode describes a scheme of cheating the *propiska* (residence registration) system, in which a son and his wife ask his parents living in the countryside to come and stay with them in the city, then register them in the apartment to apply for a larger one on the grounds that the parents are old and sick. After the application is granted permission, the parents are sent back to the country.
- ***Traineeship*****, 1967:** an experienced shop-assistant teaches a trainee to trick customers into buying unripe watermelons.

8. ***Theft in the workplace and in daily life:***

- ***Victim*****, 1962:** the director of a fabric store is engaged in embezzlement schemes. When his flat is burgled, he tries to conceal the amount of damage, but when the burglar is caught, the amount of property stolen is disclosed and thus the director's affluence is also exposed.
- ***The Birthday Boys*****, 1966:** two boys get birthday gifts from their fathers – one gets a spoon with his name engraved on it and the other, a spoon stolen from the train dining car.

9. ***Low quality of production:***

120%**, 1963:** the factory producing door locks has reported overachievement of the plan by 120%. However, people who are moving into new apartments throw the door locks away because they are of low quality and can be opened with the same key.

10. ***Bribery and extortion:***

- ***The Keys*****, 1962:** a state official in charge of public funds is made more inclined to sign the papers through flattery and bribes such as a lavish dinner and attention of a beautiful woman.
- ***Dear Guest*****, 1969:** when a state inspector comes to a restaurant, he is declared the restaurant's 100th client and is presented with what is considered a luxury gift by Soviet standards – a refrigerator filled with food.

11. ***Foreigners, 'kowtowing to the West':***

- ***It Didn't Work Out*****, 1964:** foreign tourists are offering Soviet children chocolate and cigarettes as a treat but the children refuse, pretending that they already have all this in abundance and of higher quality.
- ***Fashion Shoes*****, 1965:** Soviet shoes are criticized by ladies at a fashion show. However, the same kind of fashion shoes imported from France is later praised by the same ladies as perfect.

12. ***Socialist realism:***

From Life**, 1968**: at an art exhibition, a group of visitors are looking at paintings. The most imposing-looking visitor comments on the pictures showing idealised *kolkhoz* women and women scientists: 'This looks bright and typical!' When the group approaches a painting depicting a female loader carrying a heavy bag, the 'expert' pronounces the verdict: 'It is not typical! It can never happen in real life'. The painting turns out to be a view from the window overlooking a group of working female loaders.

Comedy in *Fitil* of the 1960s is soft and muted, which makes it closer to humour and irony than to satire. Comedic devices do not take grotesque forms. The targets of comic mockery were usually specific individuals, such as incompetent managers, boorish people, and lazy workers. The cinemagazine poked fun at certain individual flaws, such as bad manners, lack of education, insensitivity, abuse of authority, and so on. However, it avoided drawing any final verdicts,

leaving its audience hopeful that the situation would change and that morals and manners would improve. Interestingly enough, the episodes of *Fitil* of the 1960s in our sample devote much attention to people's private lives, their manners and behaviour in daily life, which means that the cinemagazine explicitly pursued an educational purpose – to correct the behaviour seen as undesirable. It appears that those who determined the cinemagazine's agenda felt entitled to regulate their audience's private lives and were confident that it was an efficient way to do so.

It should be noted that the fictional episodes of *Fitil*, unlike documentary parts, normally did not identify specific job titles of the characters being criticized, their institutions or even jobs. Instead, they focused on certain negative traits of managers, such as rampant rudeness, incompetency and slackness. On the one hand, *Fitil* seeks to represent distinctive social types, for instance, an abstract bad manager or an abstract bureaucrat; on the other, it also shows its characters as individuals with the sins and vices of their own. No explicit connections between the negative traits of the characters and the core aspects of the state system were drawn, however. In the first decade of its existence, *Fitil* hinted to the audience that the causes of the difficulties lay in the incompetence and negligence of the people working within the system.

Table 2. Themes of *Fitil* in the 1970s (105 episodes)

№	Themes	Proportion of themes in the cinemagazine's content
1.	Morals and manners, daily life behaviour	18 (17,1%)
2.	Bad services (public catering, retail, hospitality industry, public utilities)	16 (15,2%)
3.	Bureaucracy, red tape	15 (14,3%)
4.	Bad management, suppression of criticism	7 (6,6%)
5.	*Blat* (use of informal networks to gain advantages, e.g. nepotism and cronyism)	7 (6,6%)
6.	Drinking at home and in the workplace	7 (6,6%)
7.	Bad organization of work	7 (6,6%)
8.	Bribery and extortion	5 (4,8%)
9.	Inefficiency in the workplace	5 (4,8%)
10.	Employees slacking off at work	4 (3,8%)
11.	Poor quality of products	3 (2,8%)
12.	Stealing in the workplace	3 (2,8%)
13.	Product shortages	2 (1,9%)
14.	Environmental problems	2 (1,9%)
15.	Miscellaneous: shadow economy, fraud, jokes	4 (3,8%)

The new themes which appeared in this period can be illustrated by the following episodes:

1. *Blat and privileges*

- ***Infiltrator*, 1978:** a journalist comes to a furniture store and pretends to be a 'big shot' by referring to various high-status acquaintances: the higher is the status of his alleged 'friends', the more exclusive commodities the store director offers him to buy, circumventing queueing.
- ***Exam*, 1978:** the examination board are forced to administer an exam for a minister deputy's niece even though she is three hours late for the exam.

2. *Bad organization of work*

***A Fresh Pair of Eyes*, 1976:** a young employee reports to the factory director about a number of flaws he found as well as the bad organization of work in general but the director turns out to be well aware of these facts and is not going to change anything.

3. *Employees slacking off at work*

***Dead Hour*, 1974:** the main character has mistaken a manufacturing organization for a sanatorium because nobody did any work and all the staff were busy with their personal matters.

4. *Product shortages*

***Scientific approach*, 1974:** although there are only suits of one type on sale, shop assistants conduct a customer preference survey.

5. *Environmental problems*

***Modern bait*, 1978:** two fishermen are sitting next to each other. One of them is getting a bite while the other isn't. When the unlucky fisherman asks the other about the bait he is using, the man shows an ordinary-looking flashlight, which enables the fish to see the bait in dirty, polluted water.

6. *Shadow economy:*

***The Price of Fear*, 1975:** the main character comes to the public prosecution office to confess his participation in the shadow economy. It turns out that he has been concealing high income: among other things, he had three mink coats masked as rabbit coats; his *Zaporozhets* car had a Mercedes engine and Cadillac seats; his two-storey dacha was disguised as a cow shed.

3.1. Comparison of *Fitil's* content of the 1960s and 1970s

1. Episodes that criticize various deviations from social norms as well as bad manners and morals in general constitute the largest proportion of our sample. The percentage of these episodes, however, dropped from 29.5 to 17.1 per cent.
2. Bad service in retail, catering, hospitality, public utilities, and transport industries ranks as the second most popular theme and the percentage of such episodes increased from 6.8 to 15.2 per cent.
3. The themes of bad management and bureaucracy have changed places in the ranking: in the 1960s, bad managers were mentioned more frequently (14.7 per cent) than bureaucracy and red tape (8 per cent). In the 1970s, more episodes were devoted to bureaucracy and red tape (14.3 per cent) while the theme of bad management, on the contrary, lost some of its popularity (6.6 per cent).
4. The theme of bribery was given more attention in the 1970s (its proportion increased from 3.4 to 4.8 per cent) while the themes of alcohol abuse and stealing, on the contrary, were discussed less (the proportion reduced from 8 to 6 per cent and from 4.5 to 2.8 per cent respectively). The interpretation of the problems of alcoholism and stealing underwent some changes: in the 1970s, the cinemagazine targeted not only alcohol abuse in private life, but also drinking and theft in the workplace.
5. In the 1970s, the cinemagazine introduced a number of new themes such as *blat* (6.6 per cent), negligence and bad organization of work (6.6 per cent), sloppiness and lack of discipline at work (3.8 per cent), product shortages and environmental problems (1.9 per cent each).
6. There are no episodes devoted to the themes of fraud in the workplace and daily life, art (socialist realism) and anti-Western themes.

The number of themes changed insignificantly: in comparison with the 1960s, in the 1970s, only one theme disappeared from the cinemagazine's agenda. Mild humour of the 1960s was

replaced by harsher satire, bordering on grotesque. One of the typical devices used in this period is taking the situation to the point of absurdity – absurdization, especially in the discussions of such themes as bureaucracy and bad service. As to the actual purpose of this technique, it could be supposed that the late Soviet reality was expected to appear less odious when shown against the backdrop of absurd situations.

Examples of absurdization can be found in the following episodes:

- ***Lightning Rod,* 1977**: after the excellence week had been declared in a restaurant, the waiter could no longer be rude to the customers and had to use a special 'anger room' with a customer-like mannequin to insult.
- ***Decency Curve,* 1979**: a speaker is making a presentation about the decline in the warehouse theft rate. During his presentation, not only his pointer and flip chart are being stolen, but also his glass of water and trousers.

In this period, like in the previous decade, satire exposed the failings of individual people in their private lives and at work. No explicit generalizations were made, however, otherwise the cinemagazine would have had to address the problem of the malfunctioning of the whole system. Therefore, serious systemic problems were depicted as local and/or individual. In this period, *Fitil* only hints at such problems as product shortages, *blat*, bribery and environmental issues, neither denying their existence nor recognizing their seriousness.

Table 3. Themes of *Fitil* in the 1980s (106 episodes)

№	Themes	Proportion of themes in the cinemagazine's content
1.	Morals and manners, daily life behaviour	13 (12,3%)
2.	Bad services (public catering, retail, hospitality industry, public utilities, pay-offices)	11 (10,4%)
3.	Alcohol abuse at home and at work, anti-alcohol campaign	11 (10,4%)
4.	Stealing in the workplace	8 (7,5%)
5.	Inefficiency in the workplace	7 (6,6%)
6.	Bureaucracy, red tape	7 (6,6%)
7.	*Blat* (use of informal networks to gain advantages, e.g. nepotism and cronyism)	6 (5,6%)
8.	Bad organization of work	6 (5,6%)
9.	Bad management, suppression of criticism	5 (4,7%)
10.	Bribery and extortion	5 (4,7%)
11.	Employees slacking off at work	5 (4,7%)
12.	Perestroika campaign, bureaucrats' resistance to the Perestroika	5 (4,7%)
13.	Poor quality of products	5 (4,7%)
14.	Abuse of office, *nomenklatura*	4 (3,7%)
15.	Over-reporting, eyewash	3 (2,8%)
16.	Miscellaneous: shadow economy, women's housework, shortages of consumer goods, entertainment and culture in villages, eyewash and window-dressing	5 (4,7%)

The new themes can be illustrated by the following episodes of the cinemagazine:

1. ***Perestroika, resistance of the state bureaucracy to the Perestroika:***

- ***Swinging Blow*****, 1987:** a senior-ranking official listens to his employee criticizing the work of the institution. Although the boss formally agrees with his subordinate, he masterfully redirects the latter's criticisms from the minister to lower-ranking workers.
- ***Whatever It Takes*****, 1987**: a young head of *glavk* (main committee) is ready to sign a letter to eliminate all the instructions of this committee and thus give more freedom of action to local authorities. His deputy brings him a pile of documents together with the draft letter – all the other papers in the pile are the recommendations on how to work without instructions.

2. ***Abuse of office, nomenklatura:***

- ***Summer*****, 1980:** a state inspector comes to a health resort on an official visit, bringing his wife and two children with him, thus taking advantage of his position. Eventually, he leaves with a free load of food.
- ***Instructive Excursion*****, 1988:** The episode shows a tour of a luxurious palace, which contains collections of porcelain, diamonds. The 'palace' later turns out to be a former apartment of the ex-chairman of *gorispolkom* (executive committee of the city council). The ex-chairman himself is said to be 'placed under state protection' (a humorous euphemism hinting that the official was jailed for corruption).

3. ***Over-reporting, eyewash:***

Optical Illusion**, 1980:** a member of the housing committee is being persuaded to sign the certificate of acceptance although one of the floors seems to be missing as well as windows and balcony doors; he is offered lunch at the restaurant as a bribe.

3.2. Comparison of the content of *Fitil* in the 1970s and 1980s

1. Criticism of bad manners of people in everyday life is still the main theme in the agenda of the cinemagazine although the percentage of episodes discussing this theme keeps decreasing (from 17.1 to 12.3 per cent).
2. After bad manners, the second popular theme remains bad service in retail, catering, hospitality, public utilities, and transport sectors, although in this case the percentage of episodes also diminishes from 15.2 to 10.4 per cent. The theme of drinking at home and at work reinforced by the anti-alcohol campaign rose in popularity and shared the second place with the theme of bad service (10.4 per cent in the 1980s in comparison with 6.6 per cent in the 1970s).
3. Much attention was given to the theme of theft in the workplace (from 2.8 per cent, it rose to 7.5 per cent) and the low quality of goods (from 2.8 to 4.7 per cent). Such themes as absenteeism and lack of work discipline and inefficiency at work also increased their weight (from 3.8 to 4.7 per cent and from 4.8 to 6.6 per cent, respectively). Since the majority of the episodes on these themes were produced after 1982, it can be explained by the effect of Y.Andropov's policy of 'tightening the screws' and the 'anti-pilfering' campaign in particular, and by the Perestroika launched by M.Gorbachev.
4. Such themes as bureaucracy, bad management and suppression of criticism lost their popularity in the 1980s in comparison with the previous decades: the percentage of episodes on bureaucracy dropped from 14.3 to 6.6 per cent; bad management, from 6.6 to 4.7 per cent.
5. *Blat* and negligence lost some of their weight (from 6.6 to 5.6 per cent).
6. As for the theme of bribery, the percentage of episodes remained virtually unchanged – 4.7 per cent in comparison with 4.8 per cent in the previous period.

7. There emerged three new themes, which, however, were not given much attention. These included the Perestroika campaign and hypocrisy of the state officials obstructing its progress (4.7 per cent, 12th position); the *nomenklatura* and abuse of office (3.7 per cent, 14th position); and over-reporting and eyewash (2.8 per cent, 15th position). Environmental problems and product shortages disappeared as distinct themes.

The range of themes got somewhat wider, expanding from 16 to 20. Satire and grotesque prevail, absurdization is also actively used to create a comic effect, especially in the discussion of such themes as red tape, bad management, negligence, and poor quality of production. If we look at the episodes released after the beginning of the Perestroika campaign, the change in the scale of problems becomes apparent: in this period, satire started to target not only individuals, but also groups of people. Specific situations were used to illustrate larger problems and attempts at drawing generalizations were made. In the late 1980s, *Fitil* pushed its satire to the limit of what was considered to be officially acceptable – in this period, criticism was aimed even at industrial ministers.

Table 4. Themes of *Fitil* in 1990-1991 (23 episodes)

№	Themes	Proportion of themes in the cinemagazine's content
1.	Abuse of office, *nomenklatura*	5 (21,7%)
2.	Product shortages	3 (13%)
3.	Alcohol abuse, alcohol shortages	3 (13%)
4.	Morals and manners, daily life behaviour	2 (8,7%)
5.	Disempowerment of ordinary citizens	2 (8,7%)
6.	Racketeering	2 (8,7%)
7.	Miscellaneous: *blat*, bribery, terrorism, problems in health care, military action against civilians, absenteeism and lack of discipline at work	6 (26%)

The new themes can be illustrated by the following episodes of the cinemagazine:

1. *Racketeering:*

***Mistake*, 1990:** a racketeer mistakenly takes a state financial inspector for a rival racketeer. It turns out that the inspector extorts much more money than the racketeer himself.

2. *Disempowerment of ordinary people:*

***A Simple Story*, 1990:** a visitor to a telecommunications centre finds out that his telephone number, address, name, and year of birth have been changed along with some other personal details.

3. *Terrorism:*

***Terrorist*, 1990:** an airplane passenger, after surviving several plane hijackings, threatens to blow up a plane unless it fails to go straight to its destination point rather than to foreign countries.

4. *Health care:*

***Sensitive Issue*, 1991:** a patient is checking into a hospital with his own medications, food and bed linen but it turns out there are no doctors left at the hospital.

5. *Military action against civilians:*

***Stonewall*, 1991:** an army officer explains the reasons for an armed conflict with a local community but refuses to admit neither his own responsibility nor that of the command centre.

3.3. Comparison of the content of *Fitil* in the 1980s and the early 1990s

1. The theme of abuse of power and the *nomenklatura* taking advantage of their privileged positions is at the top of the list as its weight increased from 3.7 to 26 per cent.
2. The theme of product shortages (from 0.94 to 13 per cent) and alcohol abuse together with the related theme of alcohol shortages (from 10.4 to 13 per cent) share the second place.
3. Less attention is paid to the theme of manners and morals (from 12.3 per cent, it drops to 8.7 per cent).
4. The newly emergent themes are those of racketeering and disempowerment of individual citizens (8.7 per cent).
5. Apart from the above-mentioned themes of *blat*, bribery and lack of labour discipline, new themes emerge in this period, such as air terrorism, deterioration of the health care system and military action against civilians. There are also a few indirect references to the growing political activity in society (political rallies are mentioned in two episodes).

Criticism in this period becomes harsher and satire predominantly takes grotesque forms. More generalizations are made and absurdization is used more widely and freely than in the 1970s and 1980s. In this period, the satire of *Fitil* challenges not only individual bureaucrats or private citizens but the *nomenklatura* in general – *Fitil* exposes the enormous material privileges of the elite and their lack of moral scruples. At the same time, the level of criticism in *Fitil* remains moderate. In the period of the collapse of the old political, economic and social systems, the cinemagazine still adhered to the principle of criticizing only individual instances rather than systemic problems.

Table 5. Summary of *Fitil's* themes in 1962-1991 (322 episodes)

№	Themes	Proportion of themes in the cinemagazine's content
1.	Morals and manners, daily life behaviour	59 (19,3%)
2.	Bad service (retail, catering, hospitality industry, public utilities, transport, health care)	33 (10,2%)
3.	Bureaucracy, red tape	29 (8,7%)
4.	Alcohol abuse at home and at work, anti-alcohol campaign	28 (8,7%)
5.	Bad management, suppression of criticism	25 (7,8%)
6.	Inefficiency in the workplace	19 (5,9%)
7.	Stealing in the workplace and in daily life	15 (4,6%)
8.	Bribery and extortion	14 (4,3%)
9.	*Blat* (use of informal networks to gain advantages, e.g. nepotism and cronyism)	14 (4,3%)
10.	Bad organization of work	13 (4%)
11.	Poor quality of products	11 (3,4%)
12.	Abuse of office, *nomenklatura*	10 (3,1%)
13.	Employees slacking off at work	9 (2,8%)
14.	Product shortages	9 (2,8%)
15.	Perestroika campaign, bureaucrats' resistance to the Perestroika	5 (1,5%)
16.	Over-reporting, eyewash	2 (0,6%)

17.	Fraud in the workplace and in daily life	2 (0,6%)
18.	Foreigners, 'kowtowing to the West'	2 (0,6%)
19.	Socialist realism	2 (0,6%)
20.	Environmental problems	2 (0,6%)
21.	Shadow economy	2 (0,6%)
22.	Disempowerment of ordinary citizens	2 (0,6%)
23.	Racketeering	2 (0,6%)
24.	Miscellaneous	11 (3,4%)

The summary table (Table 5), which contains all the themes and plot patterns we identified in our analysis, requires some clarification. It may be unclear, despite the examples provided in the article, how certain themes and plots differ from each other, for instance, based on what features we distinguish between bad service and poor quality of products and why we did not put them in one category. In particular, we would like to clarify the differences between the themes that partially overlap – for example, the themes of bad management and suppression of criticism, inefficiency in the workplace, bureaucracy, bad organization at work, employees slacking off at work, poor quality of products, bad service, over-reporting and eyewash, fraud in the workplace and in daily life.

For example, the episodes dealing with the theme of bad management and suppression of criticism tend to have one main protagonist – it is always the bad manager, whose management skills are severely lacking. The protagonist creates disruption in the workplace, cannot tolerate being criticized, tries to get rid of potential rivals, and is rude to his or her subordinates and supplicants. In the episodes devoted to bureaucracy, there is either no protagonist at all or the protagonist does not occupy a managerial position. Episodes about bureaucracy focus on procedural obstacles or on bureaucrats who deliberately create hurdles for ordinary people, constantly postpone taking necessary decisions and substitute them with formalities. A bad manager is not always a bureaucrat and vice versa, a bureaucrat is not always a manager. Bureaucracy can be shown as an impersonal force that complicates normal life and work.

The theme of inefficiency in the workplace is different from the theme of bad organization at work. In the former case, the episodes make quite clear who the culprit is – these are ordinary workers whose bad personal qualities prevent them from doing their work well or those who are simply unwilling to work. In the latter case, it is the dysfunctional working environment that is the cause of troubles: in other words, the cause is not the bad manager or bad workers but the way the work is organized. Moreover, we identified as a separate theme that of employees slacking off at work: such episodes depict not the ineffective work process that fails to bring desired results and not its bad organization leading to inefficiency but ordinary workers lacking motivation to fulfil their duties. Nothing is said about the quality of work itself or what happens when the characters actually do some work or how their bosses react.

The episodes which discuss poor quality of products usually show goods that are defective in a certain way (malfunctioning electrical transformer, water resistant raincoats which turn out not to be water resistant at all, identical defective door locks in newly built apartments, and so on). What distinguishes these episodes from those about bad service is that the latter criticize inadequate services, for example, in hotels, shops, transport, health care, or in the housing and utility sphere. Typically, the episodes about bad service show how house tenants or clients in shops, restaurants, canteens, and hotels are overcharged, disrespected and mistreated. Moreover, episodes about inefficiency in the workplace depict the working process itself while episodes about bad service or poor quality focus on the results of this process.

Finally, we decided to analyse the episodes dealing with the problem of over-reporting and eyewash separately from those discussing fraud in the workplace and in daily life because the former demonstrate how characters are trying to hide that the work has not been done properly

or has not been done at all (e.g. by writing false reports or over-reporting their performance). The latter show the small tricks people resort to in order to take personal advantage of different situations.

4. *Fitil's* agenda dynamics: changes in the choice of themes and stories

As the tables illustrate, some themes and plots recurred from decade to decade. The themes addressed by *Fitil* most frequently (in three periods out of four) were morals and manners, bad service, alcohol abuse, bureaucracy, abuse of office, bad management, stealing in the workplace, inefficient and lazy workers, bribery, poor quality and shortages of products. This leads us to the logical question, then, what do these themes have in common and why were they so popular? The analysis of attention allocation in *Fitil* in different periods leads us to the question about the factors that determined the choice of different themes and stories, their disappearance from the agenda and emergence of new ones. It may be supposed that the themes chosen by the medium resonated with larger social issues and, therefore, their appearance and disappearance from the agenda of the cinemagazine were determined by the growing or declining significance of these issues in society. It is true but only to a certain extent. It is easy to see why bad customer service and the low quality of Soviet goods kept coming up in *Fitil's* agenda in the Soviet period as these were sensitive topics for the late Soviet Union. Nevertheless, our analysis has not revealed a direct connection between the number of episodes devoted to certain themes and their social relevance. If we look at the number of episodes exploring the themes of bad service and poor quality of goods, we will see that the popularity of the latter grew steadily from the 1960s through the 1970s and until the 1980s, which seems quite logical as the increasing frequency of mentions reflects the deterioration in the quality of industrial goods by the end of the Soviet period. On the other hand, the theme of bad service appears to have been discussed most actively in the 1970s but the interest in this theme somewhat waned in the 1980s. Does it mean that the quality of Soviet service improved? With a high degree of confidence, we can say no. Apart from that, there were other significant themes which attracted little or no attention on the part of *Fitil's* creators (directors and scriptwriters), such as shadow economy, disempowerment of ordinary citizens, environmental problems, over-reporting and eyewash. Thus, social significance was not the only factor that affected the choice of themes and the frequency they recurred in the cinemagazine.

The second factor in the choice of themes was that some problems could be easily blamed on the human factor: such issues as bad service, alcohol abuse or stealing in the workplace might as well have been caused by the faults of individual people – bureaucrats, bribe-takers, thieves, drinkers, slack workers, and so on – not by the flaws of the system itself. Thus, by pointing fingers at incompetent or dishonest individuals, the state could shift the blame from itself.

The last but not least important factor that influenced *Fitil's* agenda was the effect of different ideological campaigns initiated by the government. This is the feature that *Fitil* shared with other forms of mainstream Soviet satire.

Starting from the late 1950s and until the late 1980s and early 1990s, there were several large-scale campaigns which could have affected the choice of themes. One of such campaigns was directed against the Soviet youth subculture of *stilyagi* ('style-chasers'), who followed Western fashion trends, preferred Western music and dance style to Soviet ones. Their flashy clothing, behaviour and manners that deviated from the common social norms seemed to be a challenge to Soviet conventions, which led the government to launch a campaign against them, first in the mass media and then by engaging the forces of militia and *druzhinniks* (volunteer militia brigades). The *stilyagi* were targeted by feuilletons and invectives; they were often caught in the streets by militiamen and *druzhinniks*, who cut off their hair or spoilt their clothes

(Lebina 2015: 324-325; 333-334). The media campaign against the *stilyagi* involved influential magazines and newspapers such as *Krokodil* and *Komsomolskaya pravda* (Kozlov 2015). It can be supposed that this campaign, which started in the late 1940s and the early 1950s, was a part of the campaign against 'rootless cosmopolitans' and 'kowtowing to the West.' Although *Fitil* could be expected to participate in this campaign, we have not found any mentions of *stilyagi* in the 1960s issues. This could be explained by the fact that by the time *Fitil* was launched (1962), the anti-*stilyagi* campaign had subsided together with the decline of this subculture.

The second important state campaign of the 1950s and early 1960s was the anti-religious campaign. After N. Khrushchev came to power, there was a new resurgence of intolerance towards religion. On 7 July 1954, the CPSU Central Committee published the decree 'On Major Shortcomings in Scientific-Atheistic Propaganda and on Measures to Improve It,' which signified a start of the campaign in mass media, cinema, and education. The campaign led to a decline in the number of active churches (Lyubimova et al. 2019; Gorbatov 2014). In those episodes of *Fitil* that we analysed, we have not found any criticism of religion or priests – neither in any episodes of the 1970s and 1980s nor in the earlier episodes of the 1960s, which were chronologically closer to the time of the anti-religious campaign. Apparently, by 1962, the campaign had run its course and, in the following decades, the Soviet government did not see it necessary to pursue its anti-religious agenda as actively and consistently as before. It did not mean, of course, that all the restrictions on religious freedom were lifted and that there were no persecutions of people of faith (Alexeeva 1992).

The third large-scale campaign was the campaign against social parasites, which resulted in persecutions of those who failed to engage in 'socially useful work' (Fitzpatrick 2008). This campaign was launched in the early 1950s and reached its apogee in the mid-1960s. It encompassed such spheres as legislation (Fitzpatrick 2008; Lastovka 2011); ideology (Programme of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union); art and mass media (e.g. magazine *Krokodil*. For more detail see: *Krokodil* Pays a Visit to *Meduza*: May Day Idleness 2015). Since *Fitil* was considered to be a satirical cinemagazine, it would be reasonable to expect that it would actively participate in the anti-parasite campaign. As our analysis has shown, however, this was not the case. The theme of what was then termed as 'parasitic lifestyle' did not come up in any of the episodes we studied. Instead, there are episodes discussing the themes of negligence at work, sloppy and lazy workers and bad organization of work. These themes cannot of course be seen as equivalent to the theme of social parasites. One of the reasons why we found no such episodes could be that we analysed only a third of all the Soviet-period episodes of *Fitil*, so this theme might have been raised in the episodes that escaped our attention.

One of the most significant large-scale long-term campaigns was the anti-alcohol campaign. It started in the late 1950s and intensified in the following decades, particularly in the Perestroika years (Fokin 2014; Kaunova 2013). Cinemagazine *Fitil* reflected all the stages of the struggle for sobriety: there were episodes devoted to home drinking, alcoholism in the workplace and even to specific decrees of the anti-alcohol campaign. This topic was widely discussed throughout the whole Soviet period of the magazine's existence, especially during the Perestroika. It should be noted that the introduction of the *Glasnost* policy (a call for greater openness) affected the way these themes were presented. Some episodes criticize not only alcohol abuse, but also certain mistakes and excesses of the anti-alcohol campaign itself: this can be illustrated by the episode *Gorko!* of 1987 about the newlyweds who had to organize their wedding banquet in a restaurant disguising it as a funeral wake so that they and their guests were allowed to drink alcohol. In the total period under investigation, the number of episodes touching in some way upon the theme of alcohol abuse was 28, that is, 8.7% of the total number.

Another large-scale long-term campaign was the campaign for better labour discipline, which, although it was planned as an independent campaign, relied on the effects of other campaigns, such as the campaign against social parasites and alcoholism, since all of them were

aimed at stimulating people to work for the common good and at minimizing the effects of work-dodging. The government went to great lengths to improve discipline in the workplace and the campaign was much spoken about in the mass media, at party conferences and staff meetings (Smolyak 2012). The campaign also comprised a struggle against '*nesuny*' (pilferers) – those who stole goods, raw materials and spare parts from their enterprises. Enterprises tried to deal with this problem by catching and punishing pilferers; mass media also condemned theft in the workplaces by discussing the process and its implications, although it was never openly denoted as 'pilfering' (Smolyak 2012). This problem was covered extensively by *Fitil*: starting from absenteeism and poor performance in the workplace, bad organization of work and negligence to the low quality of production and services caused by such careless and negligent attitudes as well as the problem of theft in the workplace. It should be noted that, judging by the number of episodes devoted to different aspects of labour discipline and its improvement, this theme seemed of primary importance to the creators of *Fitil* and their government patrons (100 episodes out of 322, that is, 31%).

5. Conclusions

Cinemagazine *Fitil* exhibited genre features of Soviet mainstream satire of the earlier periods and was the product of the state policy in the sphere of humour and comedy.

The main objects of mockery in all the periods of the cinemagazine's existence were corrupt or incompetent state officials and bureaucrats. Therefore, even though *Fitil* paid significant attention to the private sphere, in particular deviations from the social norms, its key focus was work life. Even in the early period of Soviet mainstream satire, bad managers of middle and lower ranks were frequently targeted. Following the traditions of the pre-Thaw period satire, bad management was essentially shown as being caused by the vices of specific people portrayed as hypocritical, cynical, conceited, arrogant, and so on. Thus, the message was conveyed that it was the bad qualities of the managers rather than the flaws of the whole system that caused the problems. Regardless of who was being satirized – state officials or private citizens, the goal of mainstream satire was to set the norms of behaviour in society. In the way similar to the satire of the earlier periods, *Fitil* was expected to perform an educational rather than entertaining function, which is why its issues were played for the mass public before films in cinemas: in other words, the 'educational' part (*Fitil*) preceded the entertainment (film).

The nature of comedy in *Fitil* changed from humour and irony in the 1960s to grotesque and absurdization in the 1970s and 1980s. Grotesque in the post-war satire contributed to the effect of 'estrangement' – the reality depicted was changed beyond recognition and the objects of satire were made as unlikeable as possible. The cinemagazine's agenda included social issues of a different scale. Dealing with the most serious problems, such as product shortages, shadow economy, *blat*, and negligence, *Fitil* used the same strategy as satire of other genres: these problems were generally depicted as local. Much attention was given to morals and manners and bad service. These problems were mostly presented in the light of everyday life – as daily nuisances and annoyances – and their discussion did not grow into criticism of systemic failings of the Soviet state. Until the late 1980s, instead of discussing significant social problems, *Fitil* had predominantly targeted individual flaws and local situations. Only at the end of the Perestroika period, the cinemagazine's creators attempted to make more general statements about the Soviet people, *nomenklatura* and health care system.

Mainstream Soviet satire, which *Fitil* was part and parcel of, targeted specific flaws and failings, which were mere symptoms of the ills, and used them as cover-ups for real problems. In the late Soviet period, mainstream satire continued to perform the key function it inherited from its predecessor, satire of the Stalin period, by making false diagnoses about life in the

country. The majority of *Fitil's* episodes (especially those that resembled journalist investigations, which we did not consider in this article) focused on specific shortcomings and failings, for instance, negative situations and those responsible for them. Similar to the satire of the late Stalin period, which promptly responded to state-initiated political campaigns, *Fitil* was explicitly or implicitly involved in various campaigns such as the anti-alcohol campaign, the campaign for better labour discipline, and also, to some extent, into the campaign against social parasites.

The analysis of the content of *Fitil* brings to light the key characteristics of Soviet satire. For clarity, let us once again look at the differences between satire, humour and the comic that we discussed at the beginning: while satire is understood here as the use of ridicule to expose or denounce negative aspects of reality, humour is seen as milder forms of mockery over specific weaknesses and wrongdoings. Finally, the comic is defined as the quality with which the human mind endows things when it observes a contradiction between reality and an aesthetic ideal and this observation engenders laughter.

Our research of *Fitil's* content (at least the part of the content chosen for the analysis) has shown that the very nature of satire (and *Fitil* claimed to be a satirical cinemagazine) was shaped by the policy pursued by the Soviet state in relation to the comic. In fact, what *Fitil* offered was not satire per se, as it did not aim to expose the flaws and problems of the whole Soviet system. *Fitil's* satire was closer to humour as it targeted specific drawbacks without trying to make any generalized statements about the reality as such. Thus, it would hardly be an exaggeration to say that Soviet satire was more of an imitation rather than real satire and that, in fact, it performed the functions more typical of humour. Moreover, the comic underwent certain transformations under pressure of the state authorities: only certain aspects of reality were selected as appropriate for mockery by those in charge.

If we look at the phenomenon of *Fitil* in a broader cultural context, we cannot but agree with R. Higgie's idea that in order to neutralize criticism and create an illusion of opposition, dominant culture adopts elements of a counterculture or even produces it and, as a result, such 'fake' counterculture can become an organic part of the mainstream (Higgie 2017), which is fully applicable to the case of satire discussed in this article. This supposition appears to be accurate in relation to *Fitil* except for the fact that this cinemagazine was not absorbed by dominant culture but was its part and parcel from the very moment it was created: whatever the show chose to disclose to the public was always pre-approved by the controlling authorities. What *Fitil* presented was not an act of protest or revolt, it was not even an imitation thereof but a form of self-criticism that went in line with the claims the Soviet ideologues had been making since the very beginning of the USSR's existence. The boundaries of such self-criticism were usually quite narrow, as it did not venture beyond exposing individual flaws and inefficiencies of certain people. *Fitil's* criticism was aimed at maintaining the status quo and demonstrating the audience that the government was aware and in control of the current situation, at the same time outlining the limits of what was permissible to criticize and what was not.

Overall, *Fitil* can be seen as a perfect illustration of state policy in the sphere of humour and comedy. The main purpose of the cinemagazine was to set behaviour norms for Soviet citizens and encourage desired behaviour; reinforce the regime by directing the public's attention towards specific flaws and thus prevent them from seeing the whole picture. In other words, the false diagnosis that *Fitil* persistently made was that it was not the vices of the Soviet system that caused the country's problems but the vices of specific people, in particular their inability to maintain labour discipline, their laziness and bad habits.

References

Alexeeva, L. M. (1992). *History of dissidence in the USSR. Contemporary period.* Vilnius – Moscow. Retrieved June 30, 2020 from http://library.khpg.org/files/docs/1314780425.pdf.

Dobrenko, E. (2013). Gogols and Schedrins: lessons of 'positive satire'. *Novoe literaturnoye obozrenie* 121. Retrieved June 30, 2020 from http://www.intelros.ru/readroom/nlo/121-2013/19673-gogoli-i-schedriny-uroki-polozhitelnoy-satiry.html.

Eremeeva, E. A. (2013). Soviet Humorous Discourse: `Content-Analysis of Soviet Political Jokes and Magazine 'Perets'. *Istoricheskaya informatika* 6. Retrieved June 30, 2020 from http://kleio.asu.ru/2013/4/hcsj-42013_14-24.pdf.

Fitzpatrick, S. (2018). Social parasites: How tramps, idle youth, and busy entrepreneurs impeded the Soviet march to communism, in: *Soviet Social Policy: Scenes and Actors, 1940-1985*. Moscow: OOO 'Variant', Center for Social Policy and Gender Studies, pp. 219-254.

Fokin, A. A. (2014). The Decree of the CPSU Central Committee and Council of Ministers of the USSR 'On the Intensification of the Struggle against Alcoholism and Enforcing Order in the Sale of Strong Alcohol Drinks' and the anti-alcohol campaign of the 1960s. *Journal of Chelyabinsk State University* 12 (341). Retrieved June 30, 2020 from https://cyberleninka.ru/article/n/postanovlenie-tsk-kpss-i-soveta-ministrov-sssr-ob-usilenii-borby-s-pyanstvom-i-o-navedenii-poryadka-v-torgovle-krepkimi-spirtnymi-napitkami-i.

Golubev, A. V. (2008). *'If the world crashes down on our republic': Soviet society and external threat in the 1920-1940s.* Moscow: Kuchkovo pole, 2008. Retrieved June 30, 2020 from http://istmat.info/node/47296.

Gorbatov, A. V. (2014). Propaganda and mass media in the period of Khrushchev's anti-religious campaign (1954-1964). *Journal of Kemerovo State University*. 3. Retrieved June 30, 2020 from https://vestnik.kemsu.ru/jour/article/view/1421/1416.

Grinko, I. A. & Shevtsova, A. A. (2018). The 'woodpecker hammering on reports' and other animals: science in the mirror of Soviet caricature. *Istoricheskaya ekspertiza* 2. Retrieved June 30, 2020 from https://istorex.ru/page/grinko_ia_shevtsova_aa_dyatel_dokladodolbyaschiy_i_drugie_zhivotnie.

Higgie, R. (2017). Under the Guise of Humour and Critique: The Political Co-option of Popular Contemporary Satire, in *Milner Davis J. (eds) Satire and Politics. Palgrave Studies in Comedy*. Palgrave Macmillan, Cham, pp. 73-102.

Kalinin, I. (2013). Laughter as labour and laughter as a commercial product (Stakhanovite movement and capitalist conveyor). *Novoe literaturnoye obozrenie* 121. Retrieved June 30, 2020 from http://www.intelros.ru/readroom/nlo/121-2013/19671-smeh-kak-trud-i-smeh-kak-tovar-stahanovskoe-dvizhenie-i-kapitalisticheskiy-konveyer.html.

Kaunova, E. V. (2013). Alcohol industry in the USSR: reforms and consequences. *Analitika kulturologii* 27. Retrieved June 30, 2020 from https://cyberleninka.ru/article/n/piteynaya-industriya-sssr-reformy-i-posledstviya.

KVN: History of the project and its name. *FYI*. (2008). RIA Novosti as of 09:32, 08.11.2008. Retrieved June 30, 2020 from https://ria.ru/20081108/154649576.html.

Klinova, M. A. & Trofimov, A. V. (2017). Administrative practices of regional and local Soviet and party authorities in 1953-1964 (materials of magazine *Krokodil*). *Journal of the South Ural State University*. *Series: Social Sciences and Humanities* 17 (3), pp. 25-29.

Kozlov, V. V. (2015). *Stilyagi. Young, brave, free*. St.Petersburg: Amfora. Retrieved June 30, 2020 from https://culture.wikireading.ru/24677.

Krokodil pays a visit to Meduza: May Day idleness (2015). Meduza as of 15: 17, 01.05.2015. Retrieved June 30, 2020 from https://meduza.io/galleries/2015/05/01/krokodil-v-gostyah-u-meduzy-pervomayskoe-tuneyadstvo.

Kudryavtseva, O. S. (2004). Satirical genres of 'Literaturnaya gazeta' as an object of literary study, in *Laughter in Literature: Semantics, Axeology, Polyfunctionalism*: *Collection of Papers*, Samara: Samara State University. Retrieved June 30, 2020 from http://repo.ssau.ru/bitstream/Smeh-v-literature/Satiricheskie-zhanry-Literaturnoi-gazety-kak-obekt-literaturovedcheskogo-issledovaniya-Smeh-v-literature-semantika-aksiologiya-polifunkcionalnost-Elektronnyi-resurs-mezhvuz-sb-nauch-st-78180/1/%d0%a1%d0%bc%d0%b5%d1%85%20%d0%b2%20%d0%bb%d0%b8%d1%82%d0%b5%d1%80%d0%b0%d1%82%d1%83%d1%80%d0%b5%202004-180-186.pdf.

Lastovka, T. (2011). Sponging in the USSR (1961 - 1991): Legal theory and social practice. *Antropologichesky forum* 14. Retrieved June 30, 2020 from https://cyberleninka.ru/article/n/tuneyadstvo-v-sssr-1961-1991-yuridicheskaya-teoriya-i-sotsialnaya-praktika.

Lebina, N. B. (2015). *Everyday life in the age of space and maize: destruction of the big style. Leningrad, 1950-1960s*. St. Petersburg: Kriga; Pobeda.

Lyubimova, O. V. & Geranina, G. A. (2019). Khruschev anti-religious campaign in cinema. *Nauchny zhurnal* 6 (40). Retrieved June 30, 2020 from https://cyberleninka.ru/article/n/hruschevskaya-antireligioznaya-kampaniya-v-kinematografe.

Oushakine, S. (2013). Fighting horror with laughter: on refined weapons of the proletariat's jesters. *Novoe literaturnoye obozrenie* 121. Retrieved June 30, 2020 from http://www.intelros.ru/readroom/nlo/121-2013/19672-smehom-po-uzhasu-o-tonkom-oruzhii-shutov-proletariata.html.

Program of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. Adopted by the Twenty-Second Communist Party Congress. Retrieved June 30, 2020 from http://aleksandr-kommari.narod.ru/kpss_programma_1961.htm.

Satirical magazine Fitil (2012). RIA Novosti, as of 10:10, 04.06.2012. Retrieved June 30, 2020 from https://ria.ru/20120604/662644732.html.

Skradol, N. (2011). 'Living got sweeter': the Stalin-era chastushka and production of the 'ideal Soviet subject. *Novoe literaturnoye obozrenie* 108. Retrieved June 30, 2020 from https://magazines.gorky.media/nlo/2011/2/zhit-stalo-veselee-stalinskaya-chastushka-i-proizvodstvo-idealnogo-sovetskogo-subekta.html.

Skradol, N. (2013). The gnomes of Stalinism, or an epistemology of Soviet wit. *Novoe literaturnoye obozrenie* 121. Retrieved June 30, 2020 from http://www.intelros.ru/readroom/nlo/121-2013/19674-stalinskie-gnomy-ili-epistemologiya-sovetskogo-ostroumiya.html.

Smolyak, O. (2012). Soviet pilferers. *Otechestvennye zapiski* 1. Retrieved June 30, 2020 from http://www.intelros.ru/readroom/otechestvennye-zapiski/o1-2012/14863-sovetskie-nesuny.html.

Turovets, M. V. (2011). Problems of method and methodology in film analysis. Notes on the margins of Master's thesis, in *Sociology Yesterday, Today, Tomorrow. Fourth Sociological Readings in Memory of Valery Borisovich Golofast*, St. Petersburg: Eidos. Retrieved June 30, 2020 from https://elibrary.ru/download/elibrary_24088953_83867623.pdf.

Vail, P. & Genis, A. (2001). *In the 1960s: the world of the Soviet man*. Moscow: Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie, 2001.

Vorobyeva, M. V. (2015). Vestiges of history in the margins of Soviet aesthetic studies: Yury Borev's concept of the comic and its cultural background, in *Soviet Socio-Cultural Project: Historical Chance or Global Anti-Utopia*: Proceedings of the International Conference 'Tenth Kolosnitsyn Readings. Ekaterinburg, Liberal Arts University, 2015, pp. 29-36.