

This Is Not a Melodrama

Reviewed by Susan Welsh

Chagall-Malevich, 2014

119 minutes, in Russian with English subtitles, available at apple.com/itunes
(3.5 GB – long download)

Director: Aleksandr Mitta

Screenplay: Aleksandr Mitta and Kristina Schneidermann



This film was one of a dozen competitors in the Dubl' dv@ Online Film Festival (<http://d2.ru/>), held on April 11-22, 2016, and sponsored by *Rossiiskaya gazeta*. Originally released to theaters in April 2014, it was panned by many reviewers as melodramatic, lacking in depth of character, and plagued by mediocre acting. But I liked it, especially because it introduced me to a fascinating artist, Marc Chagall, about whom I was quite ignorant. Having long preferred the art of the classical masters – Leonardo, Rembrandt – I had little interest in modern art. If you'd asked me, I probably would have said Chagall was French (he did live most of his long life in France, and the *Great Soviet Encyclopedia*, among others, called him a “French artist”). I saw no point in paintings of blue cows flying through the air or people with their heads on upside down. I certainly had (and have) no interest in Kasimir Malevich's famous “Black Square.”



But Chagall-Malevich is not a documentary, a biopic, or a psychodrama. It is not intended to be “realistic” – indeed, Chagall rebelled against realism in art, while also repudiating suprematism, surrealism, cubism, symbolism, and many other abstract “isms” of the day, insisting upon his own unique figurative art, the depiction of living creatures. It is a fictional story, loosely based on a very small slice of the lives of (mostly) real people, starting literally with a bang, with Chagall's birth in 1887, and covering principally the period from 1911 to 1920 in Vitebsk (now in Belarus), Paris, and Petrograd (now St. Petersburg). Chagall left the USSR in 1922, returned only once for a short visit in 1973, and died in France in 1985 at the age of 97. Culturally he was equal parts Jewish, Russian, and French, and remained so throughout his life. His love of all three cultures infused his work.

In broad brushstrokes, the film portrays the revolutionary fervor and excitement of those years, as well as their brutality. Artists and intellectuals, especially Jews, initially supported the Revolution. Jews were for the first time granted the same legal rights as the Russian Empire's other ethnic groups, and looked to the future with hope and enthusiasm – until they came to realize that neither they nor anybody else would be free under the new system.

The film brings the paintings of both Chagall and Malevich to life. The cinematographer filtered the colors to give the film the brilliant hues of Chagall's works, and the actors indeed fly through the air. (Austrian actress Kristina Schneidermann, who plays Marc's wife Bella, said that one “difficult thing was that they actually did hang us up in the air; we were hanging for two hours, together with the goat.”) (awfj.org, interview by Dana Knight.)

In one particularly memorable image, Bella, who has been waiting in Vitebsk for four years for her fiancé to return from Paris, hears that he has arrived and runs home, where she looks through the window and finds him there, looking out at her. Her beaming face is reflected in the pane alongside his, in an image

of the doubled faces of lovers that Chagall would paint hundreds of times.

Aleksandr Mitta, in his director's statement, wrote that "all the characters of the film convey different ideas. Chagall symbolizes one idea. Malevich, another one. My film represents the struggle of these ideas in a tangle of emotions and desires at a moment when life is worth nothing and art means everything." The result is what some reviewers disliked as didactic or cartoonish. I disagree; I think Leonid Bichevin was perfectly cast as the young Marc, and Schneidermann looks so much like the young Bella that when the actress met Chagall's granddaughter in Paris, the latter insisted on calling her "Grandma Bella." The cast conveyed with zest what the director wanted them to convey.

"Don't Ask Me Why"

So why all the cows, goats, roosters, people floating through the air, detached heads? (Some have pointed to Yiddish proverbs and idioms as a source of Chagall's humorous images, such as the phrase "the man turned the girl's head," which takes shape on the artist's canvas. Ziva Amishai-Maisels wrote an article titled "Chagall's Jewish In-Jokes" [Journal of Jewish Art, 1978, 76-93]. Others take a Freudian approach, or note that roosters and goats are symbols of the Jewish Day of Atonement. But Chagall himself made light of such attempts to trace story-lines behind his images, saying that he just painted as his imagination dictated, and naturally his work reflects his biography, since "every painter is born somewhere.")

Chagall's *My Life*, written at the age of 35, gives his own answer. He describes a sort of job interview with Anatoly Lunacharsky, the Soviet People's Commissar of Education, who had encouraged Chagall and secured work for him on occasion:

"I said to Lunacharsky:

'Above all, don't ask me why I painted blue or green and why a calf is visible in the cow's belly, etc. Anyway, let Marx, if he's so wise, come to life and explain it to you.'

That short and finely written autobiography, in the style of some of Sholem Aleichem's stories, is highly recommended. Some of the narrative in the film is taken from it.

The book clarified for me, for example, that in Vitebsk people really did play fiddles on rooftops and fly through the air, in the imagination of the young boy growing up in a poor family in the town's Jewish quarter. He did paint in the nude, as the film shows him in his Paris studio before World War I. His wedding to Bella in Vitebsk, in the Hasidic tradition, was

"I felt that if I stayed much longer in Vitebsk, I would be covered with hair and moss.

"I roamed about the streets, I searched and prayed:

'God, Thou who hidest in the clouds or behind the shoemaker's house, grant that my soul may be revealed, the sorrowful soul of a stammering boy. Show me my way. I do not want to be like the others; I want to see a new world.'

"As if in reply, the town seems to snap apart, like the strings of a violin, and all the inhabitants, leaving their usual places, begin to walk above the earth. People I know well settle down on roofs and rest there."

"All the colors turn upside down, dissolve into wine and my canvases gush it forth."

—Marc Chagall, *My Life*, translated from French by Elisabeth Abbott (New York: Da Capo Press, 1994; originally 1960). Bella Chagall translated the original Russian into French.

more or less as the film portrays it ("I arrived very late at my fiancée's house to find a whole synhedrion already gathered there..."), in an exuberant and lovely scene with only a few fictional touches.

When have filmgoers ever seen a traditional Jewish wedding celebration in a Soviet or Russian film? If there are any, I don't know of them. That alone makes the film a delight.

Chagall's bitter fight with Malevich for control of the Vitebsk Arts College, which Chagall had founded on Lunacharsky's orders, is historically correct in broad outline. The character of Naum, a Commissar who is in love with Bella, and the drama surrounding him, is totally fictional. Another striking vignette is based in fact: banker Izrail Vishnyak, who had attended the Chagalls' wedding (1915), was then expropriated by the Bolsheviks and his estate was seized to house the new Arts College. When Vishnyak and his wife come to beg to be allowed to have a place to lay their heads in their former home, "even a closet," Chagall refuses: The space is needed for the young artists of the new socialist society, he says, dismissing Bella's anguished protest.

That brief scene hints at the complexity of a man who would live through World War I, the Russian Revolution and Civil War, emigration, World War II and the Holocaust, and nearly to the end of the 20th century. Of course the filmgoer who does not know Chagall's life story will not know all this, but Chagall could be both sweet and cruel, loving and stingy, playful and utterly self-centered.

My only real complaint with the film is with the silly and romantic ending, which I will not reveal here. The chapters of Chagall's life that actually follow his departure from Vitebsk, and ultimately from the Soviet Union, are of a quite different and more harrowing nature. Here is how he put it in *My Life*:

"When I heard someone shout 'I don't give a damn about your soul. I need your legs, not your head,' I hesitated no longer.

"Enough! I want to keep my soul.

"And I think that the revolution can be great, while at the same time retaining respect for others....

"Neither Imperial Russia, nor the Russia of the Soviets needs me.

"They don't understand me. I am a stranger to them.

"I'm certain Rembrandt loves me."

Postscript: As I was finishing this article, I learned that Emma Rice, the new artistic director of Shakespeare's Globe Theatre in London, has produced, with writer Daniel Jamieson, a play called *The Flying Lovers of Vitebsk*. It was on stage at the Globe June 16-July 2, and then went on tour in the UK.

FROM SOUTH SLAVIC EDITOR PAUL MAKINEN

I noticed an interesting news item at <http://www.portalnovosti.com/prirucnik-za-prevodioce-sa-srpskog-na-hrvatski> (dated 18 February 2016), which I have summarized below:

The South Slavic Linguistics Club at the University of Zagreb Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences has published a number of guides for translation between Croatian and other South Slavic languages. Since 2013, they have published guides for Macedonian, Bulgarian, and Slovenian, and two members of the group, Viktorija Škoručak and Valentina Bedi, recently (Spring 2016) published a *Mali priručnik za srpski jezik - razlike u odnosu na hrvatski standardni jezik (Small Handbook of the Serbian Language—Differences Compared with Standard Croatian)*. They also publish a journal called *Balkan Express*.

Note by Paul: A copy of the guide can be downloaded from Škoručak's page at <https://ffzg.academia.edu/Viktorija%C5%Aokoru%C4%87ak> (academia.edu membership required).

I also found a collection of unofficial translations of Croatian laws into English at the Supreme Court of the Republic of Croatia: <http://www.vsrh.hr/easyweb.asp?pcpid=286>