

Art of Olive Green

Towards Art, an Ethics & a Laugh

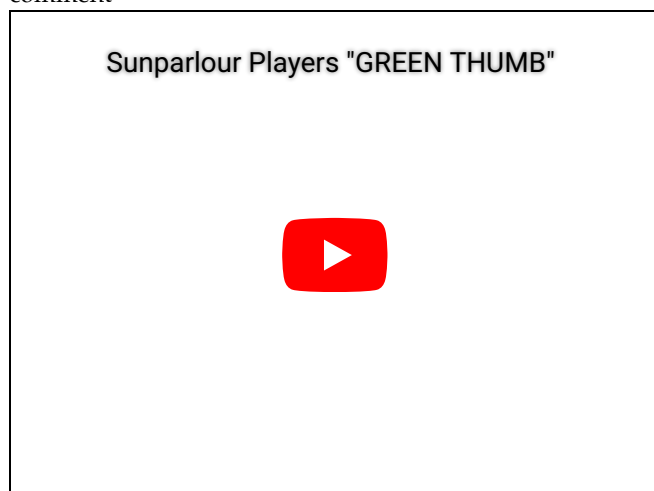
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The Green Movement

Posted by *getraer* on *November 19, 2013*

Posted in: Art, Culture crit, Engaged art, Film. Tagged: Bolsheviks, Green movement, Red Army, Ukraine, USSR, White Army. Leave a comment



The best political art only appears as such when you've already enjoyed its aesthetic merits, and continues to reward appreciation outside of (and sometimes despite) its ideological content. Most enjoyable is the discovery of something half-understood that's only obliquely expressed in two unrelated works.

When these two works are decades apart only heightens the synchronicity. Canada's Sunparlour Players, considered an "alt-country" band, plays a rollicking tune called "Green Thumb." It strikes the listener (<http://ihearthatlilton.tumblr.com/post/26156448828/avis-playlist-june-2012>) as being about a garden, but this garden is just a metaphor.

Band member Andrew Penner's grandparents are from Ukraine, and another of their songs, "Wall Sisters (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cbIIT0o59HA>)," is anecdote set in his grandmother's village. Knowing this, I was listening to the lyrics of "Green Thumb" when they struck me as referring to the Russian Revolution's incursion into the Ukraine:

Your grandfather was a cool cool man
He died years before I was born
He was the mayor of a town in '18
Just before the Red Storm.

Robbers worked the streets of his town

they worked the parks and they took our food
So your grandfather built a garden so big
he made all his neighbors drool.

Vladimir Brovkin writes (http://books.google.com/books?id=S_x7Za0ffUsC&pg=PA12&dq=green%2Bukraine%2Bbolshevik&hl=en&sa=X&ei=j4yLUpioMqrNsQTYhIHQAw&ved=0CF4Q6AEwCA#v=onepage&q=green%2Bukraine%2Bbolshevik&f=false) that the Green Movement was a Ukrainian peasant resistance to the Bolsheviks, particularly in the brutal food requisitions. In 1917 and '18, peasants celebrated the fall of the Tsarist state. By the summer of '18 the peasants had redivided their land and settled down to the new order. The Bolsheviks were still well-regarded as the enablers of landlord expropriation. But that didn't last: no sooner had life in Ukraine calmed than the grain requisition started, followed by establishment of the Committees of the Poor, then in 1919 the introduction of collective farms and agricultural communes.

Brovkin adds that the peasants were nonplussed by the distinction between Bolsheviks and Communists; some thought the two groups were different, or even at war. The upshot was the same as under the Tsar: tribute forced from their villages in food and conscription for the (Red) Army. They quickly turned on both institutions and waged an all out guerrilla war against their representatives in Ukraine from 1919 to 1922.

This open conflict is the scene into which Vladimir Pavlovich stumbles in the nonpareil late Soviet film "[Shine, Shine My Star](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Pu2O5YIwAug)" (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Pu2O5YIwAug>)" (Гори, гори, моя звезда). The name itself is a reference to a romantic song banned by the Soviets (http://arkasha-severnij.narod.ru/gori_zvezda.html). The song appears across a scene transition, and the cinematography suggests the subject of the song is not a love interest, but art, which must be loved unto death. In fact after the transition characters singing the song are interrupted by White Army (anti-Bolshevik, often pro-Tsarist, broadly reactionary) soldiers. Overall the movie is a fine presentation of the tensions between art and politics, illustrated through the Russian Revolution but giving a nod to Ukrainian resistance.

"Why are you harping on the same string, Reds, Whites. There are other colors too," says Green guerrilla Ohrim, who is still incognito when opining thus. Protagonist Vladimir, who leans more Communist, responds, "the Greens are bandits, their power will be a bandits' rule, and their art a bandits' art."

Even the late Soviet Union is not going to present the Greens as heroic—Shine, Shine was made years before *perestroika* and *glasnost* even. But this movie was a surprising introduction to a thread of history often forgotten, especially in the tendency to historically reduce revolutions to only the largest winner and the largest loser...and art is denigrated to a handmaiden or footnote at best. Both Shine and Green Thumb tell a nuanced story of revolution that places the artistic expression at its center.