

Bananas by Woody Allen - satire or something more

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To uncover the truth and make our decision on whether Bananas is just a satire or actually something deeper, we first have to take a look at the historical context behind the movie itself.

The entire thing is not really made up, in reality it is referencing the “banana wars” and the “banana republics” [1] that are very tragic and real stories about Honduras, Guatemala, Hawaii and Colombia. The term “banana republic” is actually derogatory and was first coined in 1901 by an American writer O. Henry, it refers to countries that are completely dependent on exporting goods.

In Honduras the American-owned Cuyamel Fruit Company bought land for banana plantations in 1910. Banana fruit production was at the time dominated by the United Fruit Company, which was exporting bananas to the United States. In 1911 Cuyamel’s founder, Samuel Zemurray, orchestrated a coup d’état with the help of mercenary Lee Christmas. The coup replaced the Honduran government with a military government headed by Manuel Bonilla, who gave concessions to foreign businesses, which in turn acted as de facto rulers of the country. The resulting political instability led to economic stagnation. Honduras’s foreign debt grew, which further undermined Bonilla’s puppet government and gave the corporations more power. In 1933 Zemurray dissolved Cuyamel and took control of United Fruit, which then became the largest employer in Honduras until reforms in the 1940s. And a very similar sequins of events happened in Guatemala.

Over all, the movie seems to be making fun of the colonization of poor countries, for which America is to blame. We could say that it is satire in a sense, there are lots of jokes and exaggerated aspects. But the real question is, are those things even appropriate to be made fun of, as it is obviously a serious topic, but that, I suppose, is a completely different discussion about ethics and boundaries that are permissible. Countries were stranded of their own resources, of their own ability to at least govern their people, its citizens had no sovereignty and could not control the state through representatives, and what government remained was corrupted to its core. When in Guatemala an actual leader, whose values were aimed at making people’s lives better, came to power – he was assassinated by the CIA and replaced with a comfortable for the States leader. The Hawaii that we know now was annexed in the 1990’s by America, before that its indigenous people and the way of life was colonized by businessmen and turned into an oligarchy all because of pineapple and sugarplantations. Of course, not everyone living in the banana republics was murdered by the colonizers, but everyone, except white rich men, suffered.

Bananas, pineapples, plantations – is that an appropriate price for lives of millions of people? That is debatable. And if we can carelessly laugh at Bananas by Woody Allen, we are risking to forget the suffering, the meaning of what actually happened. And now let us take a look at

the contents of the movie.[2]

It starts with an American journalist covering the overturning of the government in a third-world country, San Marcos, it may be a revolution as the former dictator gets shot and a new one comes to replace him. The following scene shows how a character, Fielding Mellish, played by Woody Allen himself, works a minimal paying, and as it is shown, a humiliating job, gets constantly rejected by women and lives what seems like a miserable life in general. All these character traits will turn out to be a pattern typical of the male leads in Allen's movies. But back to the plot, he accidentally meets a smart, educated and beautiful girl, with an active citizenship. He somewhat pursues her by lying to her and pretending to be politically aware, and she, surprisingly so, gives in. They start dating, he falls in love and keeps pressuring her to do things she does not want to. Overall, the entire thing appears to be a harassment attempt and is shown as a light-hearted satire, which surely does not seem humorous. After some time, Nancy leaves him and Fielding Mellish is so deeply upset and hurt that he drops everything and travels to San Marcos in a bid to impress his activist ex- girlfriend. But at his arrival he becomes a target of the new government, who plan to use him as a way to keep pushing their own agenda. Long story short – he ends up within the opposition camp. And without doubt, there is also the opposition (to the new dictator) that is also “evil” and communist. Therefore, in this camp he has a short journey of being once again somewhat helpless, where he comically fails every time he tries to learn a skill, but somehow succeeds in most of his tasks. At the very end of his journey in this camp there is also a cameo of another attractive woman, who likewise feels sympathy towards Woody Allen's character.

The opposition actually overturns the government once again, after a couple of antisemitic jokes, and the new leader gets driven crazy by the power, so Fielding Mellish himself becomes the leader, goes to the US to ask them for some money and gets busted by the US government, followed by a comical court, no real sentence and a reconnection with his girlfriend, that basically started all of that. If we take a quick look at most of Woody Allen's works[3], we will find a not so shocking plethora of coincidences. In almost every one of his works he plays the exact same main character, with similar character traits and behavior patterns. And although his genius might be questioned, it is an undeniably relatable trope. When the main character is relatable to the general public, it's arguably more important than diversity for commercial projects that are aimed at making successful sales such as his movies.

In conclusion, the movie is referencing actual events, that are still influencing many countries, and is filled with humor, that might be seen as insensitive, or perhaps just outdated. It appears to be more of an anecdote than satire, and whether it is appropriate to make fun of such things is still up to debate.

Источники и литература

- 1) <https://www.economist.com/the-economist-explains/2013/11/21/where-did-banana-republics-get-their-name>
- 2) https://www.nauka-dialog.ru/jour/article/view/716?locale=ru_RU
- 3) <https://cyberleninka.ru/article/n/smysloobrazuyuschiy-konflikt-verbalnogo-i-neverbalnogo-kak-osnova-stilistiki-kinematografa-vudi-allena-na-materiale-filma-annie-ha>
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