HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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LOOK, HOW SMOOTH / Fijate Que Suave (1948)

Juan Bustillo Oro

Genre : Comedy
Link to video: https://youtu.be/kOawAA0GZkw

OVERVIEW

Fíjate Qué Suave (Look, How Smooth) is one of two comedic farces released within a year (1948) that features the wildly popular duo, Manolín and Shilinsky. Like many of Bustillo Oro's films that served as showcases for a popular artist or musical genre (mariachis from Jalisco, marimba "son" of Chiapas), much of the film includes performances from the artists. In this case, Manolín and Shilinsky perform their comedy act, which included singing, dancing, and playing Russian folk tunes, dances, and instruments (the balalaika), which derived from Shilinsky's heritage (Lithuania / Russia), and the fact that he was a part of the "carpas" (tent shows), which had been established by Russians, and which carried on the tradition of Russian traveling variety shows. In *Fíjate Qué Suave,* the comedic farce rises to a higher level than in Bustillo Oro's other films as the "naif" (Manolin) is persuaded to masquerade as Shilinsky's love interest's hyper-protective godmother. The scenes in which Manolin (as Manolita, the godmother), glides about in her elaborate turn-of-the-century dresses, and raps (rather, whacks) the knuckles of the groping suitors, is pure comedy gold, as are the scenes in which "Manolita" embraces the nubile, innocent heiresses in lascivious shows of affection, and instructs them how to dance, to optimize "her" opportunities for groping. In the meantime, Shilinsky is dismayed by the miscarriage of his scheme to find a way to protect his girlfriend from the attentions of gold-digging suitors, as Manolín uses his position as godmother to fondle the girls, and to inadvertently divert their attention, as they both suddenly find the godmother a much meatier and lucrative target than the thin, bland sisters.

PRIMARY CHARACTERS

Manolín	Goofball naif half of the comedic duo
Shilinsky	Quick-witted "brains" / smooth operator half of the comedic duo
Chayito	Shilinsky's girlfriend, an heiress
Gracia	Chayito's sister
Don Cayetano	Gold-digging uncle
Panchito	Gold-digging suitor
Doña Mañuelita	Chayito's godmother

SYNOPSIS

In *Fíjate, Qué Suave (Look, How Smooth)* the quick-witted Shilinsky convinces his gullible friend and partner in a musical comedy act, Manolín,to impersonate the godmother of the wealthy heiress he is trying to convince to marry him. Shilinksy believes such desperate acts are necessary in order to block the suitors who are already competing for her hand, and who are visiting the ranch where the lovely heiress, Chayita, is staying. Manolín is not enthusiastic at first, but once he assumes the role of the "madrina," he embraces it with relish and with hilarious results. In the end, the two suitors, Don Cayetano and Panchito, are competing for the hand of "Manolita" (Manolín in disguise). When the authentic godmother arrives and reveals the truth, Manolin and Shilinsky have to scramble to escape with their lives, and to return to where they started: broke, but eternally optimistic.

THE STORY

A worried godmother: The movie opens as Doña Manuelita and her assistant are visiting an attorney expressing their concern that her god-daughters, who have just reached the age of majority, will be targeted by gold-diggers.

A comedy act: Manolín and Shilinsky, a singer / musician comedy act are performing in a theater that echoes the "carpas" or tent theaters. Shilinsky, who is Russian, plays the balalaika and performs Russian folk songs and dances. He is accompanied by his "menso" companion – a "goofball" character, Manolín, who acts rather goofy, but who is actually quite intelligent.

Visiting Chayito: Shilinsky is smitten – he adores Chayito, one of the god-daughters of Doña Mañuelita. It is not clear whether or not he has genuine affection for her, or if he is a gold-digger. They keep their love concealed.

A designing suitor: A distant relative of Doña Mañuelita, Don Cayetano, has indicated that he would be very interested in marrying one of the heiresses, specifically Chayito. Don Cayetano snores, drinks all the time, and fires his pistols at imagined menaces. He is not attractive to Chayito – she is worried she will be compelled to marry him.

Don Cayetano and Panchito – Gold-Diggers, Unite: Don Cayetano and Panchito decide that they will pursue the heiresses, Chayito and her sister.

Once you marry the heiress, we'll be set and won't have to work again, ever! In case of counting their chickens before they hatch, Manolin describes how posh their life will be once Shilinsky marries the heiress.

An upcoming visit. "Our godmother will visit us in a few weeks," announces Chayito to Shilinsky. She also lets them know that Doña Mañuelita is sending Don Cayetano and Panchito as possible suitors. Shilinsky cooks up a plan and convinces Manolin to dress up as Doña Mañuelita and to put herself between Don Cayetano and Chayito.

Don Cayetano arrives: Wearing a Mexican sombrero and wearing a typical vaquero (cowboy) outfit, Don Cayetano arrives at the rancho. In the meantime, Panchito sizes up the heiresses to see the best manner of attack. They look at him, utterly revolted, and comment that he is a big drunk.

Arrival of La Madrina (Manolin): Manolin makes a wonderful "madrina" (godmother) – she dresses in long dresses (as in the time of President Porfirio Diaz), and enters absolutely dominates the scene.

"You stinky, filthy drunks!" – La madrina / Manolita does not hold back on expressing her opinion of the pretenders to the hand of the heiresses. She insults them, but the just look a bit disconcerted.

Meet Manolita, your Godmother!: Taking advantage of their naturally expressive nature, the "Madrina," Manolita, embraces and caresses the two lovely heiresses at every opportunity, much to the disgust of Shilinsky, who knows exactly what is happening.

Subverting Panchito and Don Cayetano: In a very long scene that takes place in the living room / main sala of the hacienda, "Manolita" gives godmotherly advice to the young women, and continues making barbed comments about Don Cayetano and Panchito. Shilinsky see how Manolita totally dominates and captivates the young women and he boils with rage.

Getting ready for bed: Manolita dons an expansive dressing gown. In the meantime, Cayetano and Panchito talk about how they find themselves falling for her charms. Don Cayetano brings coffee to Manolita – and when he makes gestures of affection, she slaps him – hard – with her fan. He likes it.

Drunk Mariachi: Panchito, the drunk, appears with a group of mariachis, and he shouts, "grito mexicano" and wallows in his drunkenness – and declares his love, and demands that everyone stop their courtships. He drinks tequila, pulls out his gun, and shoots vertiginously. The drunk ramblings go on, and Panchito insists that Manolita is all his, and Don Cayetano has no chance.

I recommend a duel, you drunks! Manolita stomps out of her bedroom to the patio and smacks both with her fan and insists that they go back to bed, but not after suggesting they take out their rifles and shoot each other in a duel.

You love her for her money; I love for her pretty face! In the morning, the madness continues. Don Cayetano and Panchito continue vying for the affection of Manolita. In the meantime, Doña Mañuelita and her assistant have arrived and they witness the faux madrina in a copse of trees, fending off the attentions of the suitors. The "real" Madrina has arrived, and she catches Shilinsky and Chayito seated, embracing each other.

If you don't obey my every word, you'll go to jail! Doña Mañuelita is serious – putting Don Cayetano and Panchito in their place, and insisting that Manolin return to his regular clothing, and Shilinsky be revealed for his mercenary intentions.

Photos of the future husbands: Doña Mañuelita shows photos of two millionaires who are interested in the young women.

Chayito! Chayito! The girls enter a sedan with their godmother, leaving Shilinsky and Manolin holding their suitcases in the street. At precisely that moment, the highly indignant Don Cayetano and Panchito take their pistols and chase them down the street, firing in the air and at their feet.

THEMES

Gender Roles: In a holdover from colonial times and Spanish influence, young women of marriageable age were considered to be vulnerable, defenseless, and easy prey for men with vile motives (marriage for money, physical satisfaction, etc.). The Spanish dueña was the constant companion for a young woman of a certain class, and without the dueña's presence, the young woman could even find her reputation impugned. When Chayito, the young, slender, implicitly nubile heiress is seen to live alone with her equally innocent sister, the lack of a dueña figure is, if not explicitly stated, a phenomenon that the Mexican audience would have immediately perceived. Thus, when the godmother expresses her desire to stay with Chayito, it is viewed as the correct thing for an older woman to do, and an even more powerful barrier than the paid companion of colonial times, the dueña. Because the godmother is female, she is not viewed as a predator or threat, and because she is of grandmotherly age, she is not viewed as a rival. Thus, there is a gender neutrality which makes her a force to be reckoned with. In the film, both the legitimate madrina / godmother and Manolita dress in the early-20th century attire (long skirts, elaborate sleeves, heavy fabrics), popular during the times of Porfirio Díaz (and Queen Victoria and later, Edwardian times). The fact that Manolín is mascarading as a godmother gives him the perfect opportunity for farcical exaggerations of the roles, and a comedic critique of society's views and expectations.

Courtship and Marriage: Courtship is portrayed as an insincere display of drunken bathos (calling in the mariachis for a serenade) or Machiavellian suaveness (which gives more irony to Manolín's favorite exclamation, "Look, how smooth!"), which both attempt to seduce through romance rather than real friendship. When Panchito tries to impress Gracia by bringing mariachis, and he grotesquely performs a Mexican "grito" – a yelp of pain, exultation, and emotion – he

renders the entire process farcical because he totally subverts the values it is supposed to represent – sincerity, intensity, and love. Further, when Shilinsky smoothly yet surreptitiously approaches Chayita by sneaking to her gates under the cover of darkness, or insinuating himself into her home as her godmother's distant relative, his entire pursuit is built on misrepresentation and dissembling. When Manolín muses about how wonderful their life will be if Shilinsky manages to bag the heiress, it is clear that there is no real affection or meeting of the minds, much less anything resembling love with a soulmate. Shilinsky is simply shamelessly opportunistic.

Cross-Dressing: Almost at every turn, someone is donning the costume of something they are not, or are not quite. In *Dos de la Vida Airada* (Two from the Criminal Life), Manolín and Shilinsky are first introduced as entertainers dressed up in Russian folk costumes, as they play the balalaika, sing, and dance using Russian folk dancing moves. It is part of their comedy routine, and the fact that Shilinsky is an emigrant from Lithuania gives some authenticity to it, but not much, considering that their song and dance are rather cartoonish, and fall into the category of "camp." After being chased off the stage where they were performing, the duo stop by a suit rental store from which they emerge, completely outfitted as mariachis. With that identity, revered to the point of almost being sacred in the Mexican culture, Manolin and Shilinsky amble from bar to bar where they proceed to work for tips, which is potentially a good idea, except that they have no command whatsoever of genuine mariachi music or "rancheras." In *Fíjate Qué Suave (Look, How Smooth),* when Manolin and Shilinsky perform at night club, they wear suits, but Manolin's pants are short and baggy, as though he were a boy and not a man. Once convinced to masquerade as a maiden aunt godmother, Manolin becomes "Manolita" as he impersonates Doña Mañuelita. His cross-dressing impersonation is exaggerated and campy, which results in a personality that completely overwhelms and upstages the authentically female characters, the rather retiring Chayito and her sister, Gloria. Chayito, Gloria, and Shilinsky serve as foils for those who are cross-dressing or otherwise self-costuming. The self-costuming (as self-actualization) applies to Don Cayetano and Panchito as well, given that they are nothing close to actual patrones of ranches, although they dress as though they were "churros" (expert horsemen) and patrones (ranch owners).

Friendship: True friendship is portrayed as something that endures adversity, hard times, challenges, and even star-gazing and dreaming. Manolín and Shilinsky have a kind of "bubble" relationship that keeps them encapsulated in the picaresque world they have created, where they inadvertently offend or self-sabotage as they reach for goals they should probably not aspire to. Their "partners in crime" intimacy is one that gives the duo extraordinary resilience, so that even as Manolín spontaneously erupts in what amounts to a blasphemous parody of Mexican mariachi music and is chased out of the theatre, and they then go from bar to bar in rented "charro" suits and play songs from their comedy act while dressed as performers of mariachi music, their failures only serve to inspire them to even more absurd costuming and fraudulent representations (from faux mariachis to cross-dressing as a godmother).

The "Fool": With *Fíjate Qué Suave (Look, How Smooth)* director Juan Bustillo Oro brings on the enormously popular madcap comic duo Manolín and Shilinsky, whose comedy routine was perfected in the "carpas" (tent shows) and in nightclubs, and who moved into films that incorporated and preserved their unique routines. Shilinsky, who was born in Lithuania but emigrated with his family to Mexico, to work in the tent shows, many of which were owned by Russians who had fled political and economic turmoil. In Manuel Palacios (known as Manolín), Shilinsky found the perfect foil for his persona of the quick-witted "operator." Manolín played the role of the "dummy" (or Shakespeare's "fool") with high-pitched voice, intrusive behavior and questions. Far from an actual "dummy," and like Shakespearian "fool" characters, Manolín was actually quite observant and quick-witted, with both physical comedy and repartee that were both entertaining and subversive. The style of humor was in the same vein as Cantinflas, which was no accident, given that Shilinsky actually coached Cantinflas when they were in the tent shows, and also appeared in several films with him. In an interesting aside, Cantinflas was married to a Russian who managed aspects of the carpas. The influence of the Russian emigrees and their tradition of traveling tent shows is analogous to the influence of vaudeville on Hollywood, but

perhaps not as well recognized in the case of Mexican cinema. Juan Bustillo Oro, whose cinematographic style lent itself to comedic exaggeration and farce, was quite successful with the Manolín and Shilinsky duo, although he did not direct the bulk of their work, just as he only directed one (albeit the universally recognized as Cantinflas's establishing masterwork), *Ahí Está El Detalle.* Bustillo Oro's expressionistic lighting, cross-genre blends (horror, farce, "battle of the sexes" screwball comedy, hard-boiled detective), make both *Fíjate Qué Suave (Look, How Smooth),* brings an inter-textuality to the film that serves as a subversive commentary not only on other works of films (the referents), but also to the culture and cultural values at large. When Shilinsky attempts to seduce an heiress, he and Manolín fantasize that all the riches will make it possible for them to not have to work another day in their lives, a statement that not only reflected the cultural belief that people married only for money, but also that the bonds of friendship were infinitely tighter than those of connubial bliss. When Shilinsky cooks up the plan for Manolín to dress up as an elderly woman and impersonate the heiress's protective godmother, Manolín embraces his role with true inventive glee, to the point that the aspiring suitors begin to compete for the affections of "Manolita" (the faux godmother) instead of Chayito, the tremendously bland (in comparison) heiress. As a comedic farce, the film repeats many of Bustillo Oro's favorite themes: designing and mercenary men and women, the role of women (particularly the powerful matriarch), and the comeuppance of the rascally con artist. In the meantime, he critiques the hubris and arrogance of the rich, and shows a social fabric frayed by the enduring presence of useless, parasitical elites, and their congenital dishonesty.

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

Shilinsky: The "brains" and the "smooth operator" of the Manolin and Shilinsky comedy duo, Shilinsky is a Russian-speaking immigrant who emigrated from Russia. In reality, the actor was born in Lithuania, and he was raised in the "tent show" or "carpa" environment. In the film, he performs with his immature goofball character, Manolín, who looks and acts simple, but is, in reality, very clever.

Entertainer: Shilinsky is a born entertainer. His background is with the tent shows, or "carpas" which provide entertainment for the masses. His background includes experience with the tent shows with the traveling circuses, of which there were several in Russia as well as in Mexico. As a tent show performer, Shilinsky had to learn to think quickly on his feet and to get a laugh or strong reaction from the crowd, or otherwise be booed and abused by the audience.

Scheming: Shilinsky is a smooth operator. He works with Manolín in a theatre act they've perfected. However, he would prefer not to work. For that reason, he has targeted the lovely, but innocent Chayita, who has just been identified as being an heiress who will come into a fortune when she turns 21.

Optimistic: Like any good con artist, Shilinsky is optimistic. The fact that his sidekick, Manolin will go along with even his most absurd inspirations (such as dressing up and impersonating Chayita's godmother) give him confidence that he can successfully execute his silly plans.

Iconoclastic: Shilinsky's performances with Manolín look like classic "carpa (tent) act," but in reality they are most subtle and subversive, perhaps because they are performing for an elite crowd, not just those whose goal is to attend a "carpa / tent act" and have a great time laughing at parodies and political skits. What makes Shilinsky iconoclastic is that their act can be seen as an extended metaphor for their actual relationship, with all its challenges but finally totally in step with each other.

QUESTIONS FOR REVIEW

1. Chayita and Gloria live relatively unprotected lives until it becomes clear that they will inherit a great deal of money. Then, become targets for opportunistic suitors. Describe the ways in which

one knows that Shilinsky is merely another of potential opportunistic suitors, although he is loathe to express it that way.

2. Costuming becomes a kind of self-fashioning activity for Manolin and Shilinsky. Describe in detail how Manolin masquerades as "Manolina" or "La madrina." How does each article of her costume parody or exaggerate an actual outfit worn by an authentic godmother, such as Doña Mañuelita?

3. Describe the song and dance routine by Manolin and Shilinsky. How does each aspect of it become a metaphor for their friendship? How do they dance together? How do they sing? What are some of the ways that they play their instruments?

4. In what ways is *Look, How Smooth* subversive? What are some of the values that are being parodied and made absurd? How? What are some of the ways in which the culture is being critiqued?

5. Describe Panchito and Don Cayetano. Each is repulsive in his own way. Go into detail about the repulsive aspects of the character, appearance, or behavior of each, and explain how they deviate from the ideal suitor. What is this saying about courtship and marriage in Mexico?

ILLUSTRATIVE SCENES

One of two films by the comedy duo Manolin and Shilinsky, with Juan Bustillo Oro as the director.

Doña Mañuelita visits her attorney, quite concerned about her niece, Chayita, who will inherit a great deal of money.

As a part of their comedy act, Shilinsky and Manolin dance and sing while together playing a single guitar. Manolin is dressed as a young lad, while Shilinsky is dressed as a suave “smooth operator” adult.

Shilinsky is the dignified "straight man" to Manolin's goofball, high-pitched "naïf," a role popularized later in the U.S. by Jerry Lewis (with Dean Martin), but very much out of favor in the 21st century as it could be construed as mocking those with cognitive impairment.

Manolín and Shilinsky are performing at a small theatre or perhaps club. The setting is formal, even elegant, and definitely a step up from the informal tent theatres. However, the performance is the same – the performers had to get laughs or a positive response almost immediately or meet with jeers and other disapproval of the audience.

Under the clock of darkness, Shilinsky sneaks a visit to Chayito, the young heiress he would like to have as his own to wed, and to manage her money.

Shilinsky hatches a plan to fend off any possible suitors as he speaks to Chayito on the phone and learns that her godmother is planning a visit. Manolín looks on with alarm.

Shilinsky catches Manolin and shaves off his moustache so that the plan can be implemented. Shilinsky thinks it would be a fabulous idea to impersonate Doña Mañuelita, Chayito's godmother, plans to visit Chayito and her sister, Gracia.

A snappily dressed Shilinsky arrives at the hacienda where he hopes to become engaged to the heiress, Chayito. He accompanies Manolita (Manolin in costume), who claims to be paying Chayito a visit. An employee of the hacienda is not convinced.

Another employee of the hacienda demands to know what Shilinsky and the strange woman are doing on hacienda property.

Gun abound on the hacienda. Don Cayetano replaces his gun in his holster as Panchito asks him incoherent questions, having started drinking already. Both would like to wed an heiress.

Manolita slaps Don Cayetano as he gets a little to “fresh” with his behavior. He startles a bit because when Manolita smacks one with her fan, she smacks hard.

Another case of hand-smacking with her “ostrich feathers of iron” fan. Don Cayetano and Panchito have gotten a little too intimate with Manolita, and she has rewarded their attempts to caress her with well-placed knuckle-rapping.

More knuckle-rapping as Don Cayetano takes liberty with Manolita, the godmother. Instead of being discouraged by her stern enforcement of limits, he becomes captivated by her.

Shilinsky looks on with disgust and frustration as the lovely Chayito and Gracia show affection to their dear "Godmother Manolita," and Manolín, costumed as the godmother, encourages the young women in their warmth and affection.

In a lovely moment of familial bonding (or at least what appears to be), Godmother Manolita holds her godchildren around the waist and walks toward the orchard for a little stroll with them. Don Cayetano and Panchito, the young women's suitors, look on with frustration.

With a powerful personal presence, Godmother Manolita keeps herself in the center of attention. Shilinsky admits to himself that his plan to pull Chayito and Gracia away from Don Cayetano and Panchito has worked. However, he realizes that they have been pulled away from him, as well.

Chayito and Gracia look at photos of handsome, young millionaires, whom the real godmother, Doña Mañuelita, has selected for them. Shilinsky looks on with a pained expression as he realizes his fantasy has slipped out of his hands. Manolin has ruefully returned to his regular costuming and has left his glorious satin long dresses in the past.

After finding out that Godmother Manolita was, in reality, the rascally Manolín, Panchito and Don Cayetano grab their pistols and chase Shilinsky and Manolin down the street.