

Document Citation

Title	Bed and sofa
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Source	<i>Museum of Modern Art (New York, N.Y.)</i>
Date	
Type	program note
Language	English
Pagination	
No. of Pages	3
Subjects	Room, Abram Matveevich (1894-1976)
Film Subjects	Tretia meshchanskaia (Bed and sofa), Room, Abram Matveevich, 1927

Bed and Sofas

THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART DEPARTMENT OF FILM

THE SOVIET FILM

(September 25 - November 11, 1969)

Friday, October 3, 1969 (2:00 and 5:30)

recorded

BED AND SOFA (TRETYA MESHCHANSKAYA)* 1927. Produced by Sovkino, Moscow.
Directed by Abram Room. Scenario by Victor Shklovsky and Abram Room.
Photography by Grigori Giber. Design by Vasili Rakhals and Sergei Yutkevich.

CAST: Nikolai Batalov Kolya
Vladimir Fogel Volodya
Ludmilla Semyonova Liuba

2:00 ENGLISH TITLES Ca. 90 minutes.
5:30 NO ENGLISH TITLES Ca. 90 minutes.

) what was real diff.

BED AND SOFA is theatrically distributed in the U.S.A. by Artkino Pictures, Inc., and is distributed non-theatrically by Brandon Films, and The Department of Film of The Museum of Modern Art.

*Silent film, piano accompaniment by Charles Hofmann.

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BED AND SOFA, the film by which Abram Room "will always be remembered," was a masterpiece of intimate relations, minutely observed. Many good people collaborated on TRETYA MESHCHANSKAYA (BED AND SOFA) -- the scenarist Shklovsky, Room's assistant and designer, Yutkevich, the cameraman Giber, the excellent cast of three: Semyonova, Batalov, Fogel -- but history must give the chief credit for the result to Abram Room, despite the absence of comparable films by him before or after BED AND SOFA. Bryher's synopsis of the 'plot' of BED AND SOFA is unusually helpful in pointing to its crowded implications in every glance and gesture. The film begins:

BED AND SOFA:

'It opens in a room: a quite familiar room, not completely of the slums, but top crowded with things to be comfortable. Moscow, we are reminded, suffers from a housing shortage. A husband and wife are in bed together. It is morning. A cat stirs them. The husband (Nikolai Batalov) snatches it up, he is young but settled, seeing his wife now as something stable like the chair, not as something alive and full of movement like the animal. And the wife (played by Ludmilla Semyonova) is aware of this. She is brooding and resentful. Bored with the constant nagging succession of household duties, cooking in the tiny room, keeping it clean when so encumbered and having nowhere to put her clothes. Hundreds of daily trifles that prick like pins. The husband rushes out to his work on a building high above Moscow. There are trams in the distance and a sense of work and space.

'A printer (Vladimir Fogel) sits on a train coming towards Moscow. 'His bundle of belongings is beside him. Work is easily got, they say, but they cannot give him a room...until he gets tired and his bundle heavy, he wanders about, asking for a room without result, but examining everything with interest. Suddenly he and the husband meet; they used to know each other. "No room, but we have a sofa", the husband says. So there are to be three now in the tiny room that has scarcely been wide enough for himself, his wife and the cat.'

The wife is naturally resentful of this intrusion, another symptom of her husband's lack of regard for her and for their relationship. The printer, more sensitive, tries to make up for his invasion with assistance and gifts. The husband is called away from Moscow, the printer wishes to leave, but the husband won't hear of it. As Bryher says, 'the inevitable happens', and when the husband returns the wife is so changed that it is clear to him what has happened. He leaves, looking for another room, unsuccessfully; when it rains, he goes back to their room for his coat, and his wife, pityingly, suggests that he stay -- on the sofa. Room gets the most out of the subsequent involvements until the wife realizes she is pregnant, without being sure which is the father. Though she goes for an abortion, she changes her mind and, instead, leaves both men without a woman to 'wash and cook for them'.

Even without an opportunity to see this film, the reader may judge what a delicately balanced combination of comedy and drama it is built upon. And how rarely such a combination works! Such material, and in such realistic surroundings, has no comparable sequel in Soviet films, or elsewhere, for that matter. Soviet critics and historians have taken little pride in this offshoot of Soviet film tradition, and its contemporary reception was one of resentment rather than of satisfaction. In writing of Room's 'enemies', Tretyakov gave this reason for their bitter antagonism:

'Room works with many realistic objects, and his realism is all to the good, because with its anti-aesthetic effect, he routs the canonized formulas of movie romance out of their fortified positions....

'In his film (BED AND SOFA) not one of the men or women is handsome or beautiful. Woman is not even romantically displayed, and Love no longer has the look of a courtesan with polished, powdered skin, but more like a tired washerwoman with a grey, sad face -- which is what love is in most cases.'

After one more realistic film Room seems to have experienced some revulsion against that style, for thereafter he indulged in extremely handsome, almost stylized film-manners. Sad to say, his positive contribution to the Soviet film ended a little more than two years after it began. His fate almost makes one take seriously the doctrine of 'formalism as artistic poison' -- but I have always wondered how much help was offered him in his dilemma. Room's last realistic film, RUTS (released January 10, 1928), attacked a psychological problem as serious as that in BED AND SOFA -- how a marriage can be broken by the difficulties that a new child brings into a home.

-- Jay Leyda, Kino, A History of the Russian and Soviet Film.

....The sociological theme of this film was in sympathy with the general movement to raise the social level of women by the frank realisation of masculine selfishness. Room took the narrative of a husband, his wife, and another man, of universal consequence, and placed it in an environment of Moscow during the housing shortage problem. Out of the peculiar circumstances arising from the nature of the environment, he contrived situations that lent themselves to an expression of his motive. He carried the first two-thirds of his treatment of the eternal triangle with almost perfect direction, until at that point at which a decision had to be made in order to carry the moral content, he descended to a sentimental and banal motherhood feeling on the part of the wife, thereby destroying the intensity of the drama, but achieving his sociological motive. Moreover, it was apparent that this sudden discrepancy, providing a weak conclusion to an otherwise brilliant film, was due to a concession to the policy of the producers, to wit the discouragement of abortion in the U.S.S.R. Aesthetically speaking, it was neither the logical nor natural ending for the first two-thirds of the film. Had BED AND SOFA been finished from the opposite point of view, I believe that it would have been one of the greatest films yet made. The mental understanding that controlled the direction of the earlier portions was amazing. The emphasis of contrasted moods, of space and compression, of sense of humor and depression, was conveyed to the spectator with tremendous psychological knowledge. There was no gesture, however small, which had not supreme significance in revealing the inner workings of their minds. The construction of the situations was perfectly contrived, the continuity having a smooth fluidity that enveloped the spectator. The balance of the scenario and the arrangement of the alternating incidents were masterly. Technically, the cutting was so good as to be almost unnoticeable. I suggest that despite the failure of the concluding sequences, BED AND SOFA was an unequalled instance of pure psychological, intimate, cinematic representation of human character.

-- Paul Rotha, The Film Till Now.