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SOVIET SILENT CINEMA

Part 2: 1926-1927

2 Films by Abram Room

DEATH BAY

(BED AND SOFA)

By special arrangement with Gosfilmofond, the Soviet State Film Archive, and the Pacific Film Archive of the University Art Museum at Berkeley, the Department of Film will present the second of a three-part retrospective of Soviet cinema in its silent period. This program is the most comprehensive ever mounted outside the U.S.S.R. of the classic and revolutionary films of the Soviet Union. Part I, comprising 29 titles, covered the years from 1918 through 1925, and was presented in 1974 from March 7th through April 15th. Part 2 limits itself to the two peak years, 1926 and 1927, and will include forty titles to be exhibited from October 2nd through November 18th. Part 3, completing the silent years of Soviet filmmaking, will be announced in the future.

The works in the retrospective were selected from a list of surviving Soviet silents in the Gosfilmofond Archive by Professor Jay Leyda in consultation with Victor Privato, Director of Gosfilmofond, and Tom Luddy, Program Director of the Pacific Film Archive. Professor Leyda is the author of the definitive text in English on the history of Russian and Soviet cinema, Kino.

The majority of the prints in Part 2 will contain only the original Russian intertitles. Some of the films which will complement the program will be from the Museum's own collection, and many of these will have English intertitles. Almost all the films will be in 35mm.

Synopses and detailed information will be distributed at each screening. The documentation for the notes has been supplied through the generosity of Gosfilmofond, Jay Leyda, the Pacific Film Archive, Jacques Ledoux of the Cinémathèque Royale de Belgique (Brussels), Vlada Petric and Andy McKay. Additional information is also drawn from the Museum's own Study Center files. The Department of Film owes a special thanks to Sonia Volochova who is not only translating from original Russian sources but who is assisting in the compiling of these notes as well.

~~Monday, November 3 at 2:00 DEATH BAY~~

Monday, November 3 at 5:30 BED AND SOFA

Sunday, November 9 at 5:30 DEATH BAY

DEATH BAY (BUKHTA SMERTI) . 1926. Released February 16, 1926. Adaptation of Alexei Novikov-Priboy's story "V Bukhte Otryada" ("In Consolation Bay"). 7 reels. Goskino (First Studio). Russian intertitles. ca. 95 minutes. Alternate English titles: THE DEATH SHIP; THE DEATH BOAT.

Scenario: Boris Leonidov. Direction: Abram Room. Photography: Yevgeni Slavinsky. Design: Dmitri Kolupayev, Vasili Rakhals. Intertitles: Victor Shklovsky.

Cast: N. Saltykov (engineer Surkov, a bolshevik); L. Yurenev (stoker Masloboyev, a spy); V. Yaroslavtsev (Ivan Razdolny, mechanical engineer); A. Ravich (Yelizaveta, his wife); A. Matsevich (Nikolai, their eldest son); Vasya Lyudvinsky (Pavlik their younger son); E. Kartasheva (Anna Kuznetsova); A. Kharlamov (ship's captain); A. Ai-Artyan (Saim, a partisan); O. Golneva (woman with child); Nikolai Okhlopov (a sailor); B. Zagorsky (a spy); A. Fait (Alibekov, head of counter-intelligence); Yura Zimin, A. Karpov.

DEATH BAY Synopsis (based on material in Winifred Bryher's Film Problems of Soviet Russia and the Russian catalogue Soviet Fiction Films).

Like Pudovkin's MOTHER (shown October 13) and Stabovoi's TWO DAYS (shown October 16 and 20) DEATH BAY is concerned with the awakening of social consciousness in a member of the older generation. The action is located in a town on the shores of the Black Sea.

To the old engineer of the S.S. Lebed (Swan) only two things matter, his family and his engines. A strictly apolitical man, he is highly displeased with his elder son for joining the Reds. He himself serves the Whites.

The town is controlled by the Whites. But in a small room on its outskirts an underground group of Red partisans works against them. Their job is to pass fugitives and ammunition to the opposite shore. The engineer's son, a soldier, is a member of this group. It is his task to steal ammunition from the barracks. The girl in charge of passing on the ammunition is engaged to him. As dissatisfaction in the town grows and ammunition disappears from the barracks, the Whites suspect that the trouble stems from the engineer's ship and put a spy aboard. The scheme works. The engineer's son's attempt to steal the ammunition fails and the partisans' Mohammedan go-between is waylaid and shot. The engineer, his son's fiancée, men, women, and children, all the suspects the Whites can gather, are flung into the hold of the ship. Each day some of them are dragged up and flung overboard.

But some fugitives, the engineer's son among them, escape to the lighthouse, where they fortify themselves. The Whites decide to send the engineer's ship against the lighthouse. Since they have no one to work the engines, they order the engineer to resume his old duties. The Lebed reaches the lighthouse, and a battle ensues. Its outcome is decided by the old engineer. No longer apolitical, he opens the seacocks, sinking the ship. He himself is rescued, and finds refuge with the partisans.

N.B. The ending given by Bryher in her synopsis of the film differs from the one above, taken from Soviet Fiction Films, as follows: "The ship approaches the lighthouse. Well armed, the soldiers form into a landing party. The spy, drunk and lazy, refuses to attend to the engines. From a chance word, the engineer realizes he is directing the boat against his own son. But if the machinery is not looked after there will be an explosion. An idea strikes him, and he does not force the spy to continue work.

Meantime the girl has been questioned and tortured and flung back into a cabin. An explosion shakes the boat. It lurches, settles for sinking. Men jump into the sea. Waist high in water, the engineer struggles along a corridor, banging on doors till he finds and drags the girl to the upper deck. The lighthouse watchers crowd to the sea edge, watching the boat sink. There are no survivors. Only the engineer is washed ashore. He has just consciousness enough to realise that his son is safe before he dies."

However, Bryher saw a German print, which may have been tampered with.

—Sonia Volochova

"The Death Ship is perhaps a succession of flashes, of great but loosely-knit moments rather than one coherent film; the drive of the idea loses impetus between moments so that the final impression leaves one feeling that it is a good film instead of being great comparing it, say with Bed and Sofa, or Ten Days. Yet to write this may be over-critical, for much of it is excellent, particularly the treatment of the landscape, the lonely sheepskin figure watching the sea, the fugitives scattered about the lighthouse wall, or the sensation of

sunlight in the engineer's garden. Room has the capacity perhaps to deal with a small, rather than with a large group. He is excellent again on the ship, where the spy and the sailors quarrel, fight suddenly, and go back in a flash to drinking and playing cards. The scenes with the girl, on the other hand, are less successful; one is almost afraid that she will slide over into the conventional Hollywood torture-and-sudden-rescue, though again the shot of her caught in the water-filling cabin and the struggle of the engineer up the steps with her is realistic and full of power. But on the whole this film is full of the beginnings of cinema; it has not the sure direction back of it that made Bed and Sofa. Between the two films Room's power of direction and conception of film must have widened and changed."

-Winifred Bryher, Film Problems of Soviet Russia, pp. 78-79

BED AND SOFA (TRETYA MESHCHANSKAYA). 1927. Released March 15, 1927. Comedy-drama. 7 reels. Sovkino (Moscow). English intertitles. ca. 90 minutes. Alternate English titles: THREE IN A CELLAR; THREE IN A BASEMENT. Alternate Russian title: LYUBOV VTROYOM (TRIANGLE LOVE).

Scenario: Victor Shklovsky, Abram Room. Direction: Abram Room. Photography: Grigori Biber. Design: Vasili Rakhals, Sergei Yutkevich. Assistant directors: Yutkevich, E, Kuzis.

Cast: Nikolai Batalov (Batalov, the husband); Ludmilla Semyonova (the wife); Vladimir Fogel (the friend); L. Yurenev (janitor); E. Sokolova.

One new director startled the Soviet film world with three original and conspicuously successful films, all made between the summer of 1925 and the winter of 1926. Abram Room's film career had begun in 1924, but his modest films of that year had prepared no one (but himself) for the excitement and melodrama of Death Bay and Traitor, or even less, for the completely fresh 'chamber-work', Tnira meshchanskaya, more familiar to the world as Bed and Sofa. Within this same period Room taught at GTK, where he had his own workshop. This turned out to be the most productive period of his entire career. Room had worked in amateur theatres since 1914, including his three years (1915-17) at the Leningrad Institute of Psycho-Neurology, where he had directed the student theatre. After the October Revolution, he had worked in Saratov with Bauer's communist assistant, Bassaligo. His last provincial work, in a children's theatre, was ended in the summer of 1923 by an invitation from Meyerhold to work in the Theatre of the Revolution, on the staging of Faiko's Lake Lul. From Meyerhold to cinema was but a step, quickly taken by Room....

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

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 TRETAYA MESHCHANSKAYA (BED AND SOFA) -- the scenarist Shklovsky, Room's assistant and designer, Yutkevich, the cameraman Giber, the excellent cast of three: Semyonova, Datalov, 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.

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.

Other important films directed by Room include THE GHOST THAT WILL NOT RETURN (PRIVIDENIYE, KOTOROYE NE VOZVRASHCHAYETSYA), 1930 and PLAN OF GREAT WORKS (PLAN VELIKIKH RABOT), 1930. In 1936 his film A STRICT YOUTH (STROGI YUNOSHA) was banned, and he was demoted to assistant director. Reinstated during the war, he directed INVASION (NASHESTVIYE) in 1945. In 1948 he won the Stalin prize for COURT OF HONOR (SUD CHESTI). His latest film of repute is THE GARNET BRACELET (GRANATOVY BRASELET), 1964.

Ludmilla Semyonova, the feminine lead of both THE DEVIL'S WHEEL and S.V.D., is best known as the wife in Abram Room's BED AND SOFA (TRETYA MESHCHANSKAYA), 1927 (to be shown November 3, at 5:30). Her life is a mystery. Though she appears in the credits of sixteen films listed in the Russian catalogue Soviet Fiction Films, there is no record of her in the Soviet film dictionary Kinoslovar, nor, therefore, in the Western reference sources checked. One can only conjecture that at some point in her career she incurred the displeasure of the Soviet authorities, a "crime" punished by the expungement of her name. The fact that no films are credited to her for the years 1934 to 1947 (the Stalin years) tends to corroborate such a conjecture. As partial remedy of this neglect of an important actress we list below some of the more noteworthy films she played in, in addition to the ones indicated above: Kozintsev and Trauberg's THE NEW BABYLON, 1929; Ermler's FRAGMENT OF AN EMPIRE (1929), Alexandra Khokhlova's SASHA (1930), Alexander Zarkhi's and Iosif Heifits' MY NATIVE LAND (MOYA RODINA), 1933, Gerasimov's THE YOUNG GUARD (1948). Her last recorded film is THE GIRLS SOWED FLAX (POSEYALI DEVUSHKI LYON), 1956, directed by a woman, N. Brilliantshchikova.

Batalov (December 6, 1899 -- November 10, 1937), who played the key role of the son in Pudovkin's MOTHER, is, in the West, perhaps even better known for his charismatic performance in Nikolai Ekk's THE ROAD TO LIFE (PUTYOVKA V ZHIZN, 1931. Like so many other Soviet players, he came to films from the Moscow Art Theater. MOTHER was only his second film, the first being Protazanov's AELITA, 1924. Like Baranovskaya, he was reluctant to accept the role of the son, but was talked into it by everyone. MOTHER was followed by another success, Abram Room's BED AND SOFA (TRETYA MESHCHANSKAYA), 1927.

He made only five other films before death ended his career: EARTH IN CHAINS or THE YELLOW PASS (ZEMLYA V PLENU), 1928, directed by Fyodor Otsep; HORIZON (GORIZONT), 1933, directed by Lev Kuleshov; THE SHEPHERD AND THE TSAR (PASTUKH I TSAR), 1935; directed by A. Ledashchev; and TREASURES OF A SUNKEN SHIP (SOKROVISHCHA POGIBSHEVO KORABLYA), 1935, directed by A. Braun; and THREE COMRADES (TRI TOVARISHCHA), 1935, directed by Semyon Timoshenko.

Nikolai Batalov should not be confused with his nephew, the actor and director Alexei Batalov, who played the son in Mark Donskoy's 1956 remake of MOTHER, as well as the lead in LADY WITH A DOG (DAMA S. SOBACHKOI), 1960, directed by Iosif Heifits.

-Sonia Volochova