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Document Citation

Title	**The perils of overcrowding**
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Source	*Village Voice*
Date	1972 Nov 30
Type	review
Language	English English
Pagination	75
No. of Pages	1
Subjects	Sex role in motion pictures Sex role in motion pictures
Film Subjects	Tretia meshchanskaia (Bed and sofa), Room, Abram Matveevich, 1927

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FILM:

The perils of overcrowding

by Molly Haskell

The all-male or two-male buddy film is getting to be a joke. After the success of "Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid" Robert Redford and Paul Newman are scheduled to co-star in another western. The Myrna Loy and William Powell of the '70s. Gene Hackman is abandoning Roy Scheider to make his next French connection with Jean-Paul Belmondo. Of course, given the choice between Redford and Newman and Redford and Barbra Streisand . . . or between Hackman and the bitches and 14-year-old bunnies of "Prime Cut" and Hackman and Belmondo, well . . . I guess the all-male love story is preferable to female tokenism, or to the humiliations of films like "The King of Marvin Gardens," where Ellen Burstyn becomes an inchoate mother-figure witness to the fraternal passions of Jack Nicholson and Bruce Dern. By all means let us have a separate but equal cinema, but where is the separate but equal female cinema? Where are today's equivalents of the gold diggers or the stage door actresses who banded together to beat the odds against them? And where is the woman who will walk away, like the actress in the Russian film "**BED AND SOFA**," from the sorry spectacle of male childishness masquerading as camaraderie?

This 1926 film by Abram Room, with its unusually casual treatment of abortion, surfaced about a year ago to the surprise of historians and critics. While the film had been praised for its psychological realism, in contrast to the political didacticism of Room's contemporaries, no mention was made in the official histories of what, precisely, was so daring about the film and why it had been banned in Britain. Typically, the good old Victorian film historians applauded a film for dealing with a taboo subject which they couldn't bring themselves to mention!

The film—which, incidentally, came out the same year as Carl Dreyer's "Master of the House," another feminist film "avant la lettre"—deals with a sexual triangle not for the lure of glamour and Freudian perversion it has held for most European directors but as the retrogressive (and no less Freudian) arrangement it is.

Ludmilla Semyonova, a sophisticated and sensual woman who obviously demands more than her husband, a hail-fellow type (Nikolai Batalov), is giving her, becomes the center of a menage a trois that has as its ostensible raison d'etre the Moscow housing shortage. Batalov's old—and more attractive—friend (Vladimir Fogel) arrives in the city for a job and, unable to find lodgings, comes to live with them. While Batalov is away on a business trip, Fogel and the wife fall in love and have an affair. When the husband returns and discovers what has happened he is appropriately enraged, turns Fogel to the door, but then relents (the housing shortage being what it is) and insists his friend stay on. Not only is the initial awkwardness quickly dissipated, but the two men relax into a perfect adolescent living arrangement, playing chess each evening, telling stories, and being waited on hand and foot. They have—in what is not an alteration but merely a multiplication of the usual domestic set-up—succeeded in transforming the wife-mistress into a mother and in reverting quite happily to infancy.

Semyonova, thoroughly exasperated, now discovers she is pregnant, whereupon she goes to an abortion clinic, a step that is treated with as little fanfare and emotionalism as a visit to a dentist (perhaps less). While waiting in the antechamber, she hears a baby crying on the street and abruptly changes her mind, a reversal that has been viewed as a palliative to producers, but might be seen more charitably as an understandable change of heart. The denouement is certainly uncompromising enough, as she goes home, packs her things, and is last seen, a vision of lonely, moral triumph, on board a train riding off into the unknown—preferring the one baby in her belly to the two grown ones left behind!

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