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Author(s)	Jack Pickford
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The Museum of Modern Art Department of Film

11 West 53 Street, New York, N. Y. 10019 Tel. 956-6100 Cable: Modernart

THE SOVIET FILM

(September 25 - November 11, 1969)

Tuesday, October 7, 1969 (2:00 ONLY)

BY THE LAW (PO ZAKONU) ** 1925-26. Produced by the First Studio of Goskino, Moscow. Directed by Lev Kuleshov. Scenario by Victor Shklovsky and Lev Kuleshov, based on "The Unexpected" by Jack London. Photography by Konstantin Kuznetsov, supervised by Alexander Levitsky. Designed by Isaac Makhlis. Assistant director: B. Sveshnikov.

CAST: Alexandra Khokhlova, Sergei Komarov, Vladimir Fogel, Piotr Galadzhev, Porfiri Podobed.

ENGLISH TITLES.

Ca. 90 minutes.

BY THE LAW is distributed theatrically in the U.S.A. by Artkino Pictures, Inc., and is distributed non-theatrically by The Department of Film of The Museum of Modern Art.

** Silent film, no piano accompaniment.

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BY THE LAW (also known as DURA LEX; EXPIATION; SÜHNE)

Kuleshov and his literary advisor, Victor Shklovsky, sought a subject that would offer an opportunity for serious experiment but would require a minimum of expense. It had to be done cheaply and quickly -- with few actors, few sets, and no sumptuous costumes. A cast of three characters offered the cheapest dramatic possibilities, but there had to be some reason for isolating the three -- they had to be in a desert, or snow-bound, or flood-bound, making the unsalaried elements play roles. They chose Jack London's grim Alaskan story, "The Unexpected," in which three people, related by murder, are isolated from civilization by winter storms and spring floods. The Alaskan atmosphere was understandably of less importance to Kuleshov than the essential drama of Jack London's story. Although the finished film shows faithful respect for the work of London, its visualization seems to us peculiarly Russian. Incidentally, Shklovsky has told how he drew one of the added episodes -- the birthday party -- from a scene in Dostoyevsky. The writing team finished the adaptation and shooting-script in one night and submitted it to the studio, which rejected its subject and its proposed heroine, Alexandra Khokhlova, as "not attractive enough." These obstacles were overcome by placing the production in the category of experiment, on a restricted budget.

Only one interior set was built, in the courtyard of the studio. Three actors were put on salary: the other two, being former members of the Workshop, helped out by taking time off from their regular jobs. As the studio had placed Levitzky on another film, he supervised a younger cameraman, Kuznetsov. Evenings were used for rehearsals of the action and camera set-ups for the next morning's shooting -- a great economy of time and raw film. BY THE LAW is still the least expensive feature film ever produced in Russia.

When finished and exported, the studio was amazed at its critical reception abroad. The absence of all orthodox film devices (no hero, no villain, no variety of locale, no parallel action, etc.) surprised and attracted advance-guard film-goers. Above all, its physiological tension was unique on European screens. A record of its unusual effect is provided by H.D.'s review in Close Up (May 1928) communicating the sensations of catalepsy and hysteria she experienced on seeing it in a little Lausanne theatre. It is interesting that no effort was made to analyze the experience or understand the technique that produced it, although its influence abroad can, perhaps, be detected in Carl Dreyer's PASSION OF JOAN OF ARC (1928).

-- Steven P. Hill, University of Illinois
Film Society program note.

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BY THE LAW is very untypical of Kuleshov's early film theories but it is an excellent psychological drama. Unlike Kuleshov's first pictures, BY THE LAW uses only two or three settings, takes place almost entirely in interiors, and has very little action, instead emphasizing psychology and internal dynamism. This was necessitated by the circumstances of its production: by 1926 Kuleshov was practically persona non grata with the Sovkino Studio No. 1, and was allowed to make a film only on a C-picture budget of around 15,000 rubles (big Soviet films at that time cost 50,000 - 100,000 rubles). Kuleshov and writer-critic Victor Shklovsky deliberately chose a story whose location and climate would isolate a very small group of characters whose drama could be photographed in one interior setting. They settled on London's "The Unexpected," originally published in McClure's Magazine (Aug. '06), a story itself inspired by a similar tragedy that actually happened in the Klondike in 1900.