

## Document Citation

Title	<b>Films rediscovered : international cinema of the '20s</b>
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Source	<i>Publisher name not available</i>
Date	
Type	program note
Language	English
Pagination	
No. of Pages	2
Subjects	Mayakovsky, Vladimir (1893-1930), Soviet Union Brik, Lili IUrevna (1891-1978) Motion pictures -- Soviet Union Women -- Soviet Union -- Social conditions
Film Subjects	Tretia meshchanskaia (Bed and sofa), Room, Abram Matveevich, 1927

# F · I · L · M · S REDISCOVERED



Western critics struggled to find some framework in which to appraise the newest Soviet film export, BED AND SOFA, when they reviewed it in 1928. Some found it technically sloppy; others praised it as a penetrating psychological study. They could reach a consensus on only one point: it was outside the mainstream of the Soviet cinema of the 1920s. This intimate story of a domestic triangle seemed to have more in common with the German Kammerspiel tradition than the montage style popularly associated with the Russians.

Had these sympathetic critics possessed fuller knowledge of the diversity of the Soviet cinema, they could not have chosen to praise the film by defining it as an anomaly. The 1920s marked Russia's supreme moment of artistic experimentation, and the cinema, under the enlightened direction of the artist-bureaucrat Anatoli Lunacharsky, enjoyed its period of greatest variety. That Western audiences consider Potemkin and Mother the epitome of the Soviet cinema of the 1920s reflects only the selective nature of exportation policies. Russian movie-goers during the 1920s took in their share of slapstick comedies, domestic farces, and even science fiction adventures. BED AND SOFA deserves our serious attention, then, not as a historical curiosity, but as an intelligent treatment of social problems which surfaced in the USSR shortly after the revolution and which never completely disappeared.

Director Abram Room and writer Viktor Shklovsky based their story on the uneasy relationship between poet Vladimir Mayakovsky and Osip and Lily Brik. The hectic living arrangement proved inspiring and torturous for the young Futurist poet. Biographer Vahan Barooshian suggests that "the association with the Briks opened up a new world for [Mayakovsky] both culturally and intellectually and a new source of mission." It is also worth noting that when Mayakovsky committed suicide in 1930 as a result of "a combination of political and personal tensions" he left behind a note that included the words, "Lily, love me." The Mayakovsky-Brik relationship was famous in the Moscow literary world of the 1920s. But when Room and Shklovsky took it as a narrative source they were hardly setting about to create a film a clef. Rather they used it as an opportunity to treat the difficulties of reconciling the need for sexual liberation with the exigencies of domestic life in an economy racked by shortages.

At the most basic level the film addresses the problem of scarce housing in the USSR. The fact that Volodya is forced to live with Lyuda and Kolya because he cannot

find lodging elsewhere speaks to the chronic shortage of living space in Soviet cities. The economic disaster that followed the World War and Russian Civil War resulted in a quantitative and qualitative decline in housing between 1914 and 1924. The situation was aggravated by an increase in the urban population; people fled the poverty of the countryside, thus putting an additional strain on city facilities. The problem was felt most acutely in Moscow which had to absorb the largest influx of new residents. The population of the city rose by 7.5 percent between 1924 and 1925, while apartment facilities increased by only .6 percent.

Of greater consequence to us, however, might be the decision of Shklovsky and Room to focus on the female character as deserving the fullest, most sympathetic treatment. In doing so, they fashion an incisive study of sexual and domestic relations in the emerging Soviet system. The early twentieth century saw the first effort of Russian artists to deal frankly with sexuality, and that effort of Russian artists to deal frankly with sexuality, and that effort was a clear reaction to centuries of moralism and ascetism in Russian culture.

As a matter of policy, the Bolsheviks instituted numerous measures to liberalize sexual relations and relieve women of the oppressive vestiges of the old patriarchal system. Marriage and divorce procedures were made simple; both were removed from the domain of the church and were made easy matters of registration in an administrative office. Abortions were made available, and in 1926, the year *BED AND SOFA* was produced, the state decided to assume the responsibility of raising children from broken homes.

It is unclear how such liberal measures were received by the conservative Russian population, long conditioned by Orthodox morality. The Bolsheviks themselves occasionally expressed concern lest their measures result in "decadence and hedonism." Lenin's personal instincts in such matters were notoriously conservative, and the spectre of a system based on "free love" rather than political commitment nagged at Party officials. In 1925 the Party's Commission for Health advised young men and women that "if you want to solve the sexual problem, be a public worker, a Party member, not a stallion or a brood mare." Presumably one was to sublimate sexual longing through political work.

Had the original Western reviewers examined the background of *BED AND SOFA* they would have noted that these social contradictions provided the best context in which to discuss *BED AND SOFA*. The issues raised in the film are as important to us today as they were to the USSR in the 1920s. When Room and Shklovsky first decided to address the roles women would play in the Soviet system, they were no doubt thinking only of their immediate audience. Yet is one were to point to a summary of the lessons of this film, it would not be in Mayakovsky's anguished, impossible request to Lily Brik. It would be rather in the measured words of Gail Lapidus' admirable book Women in Soviet Society when she concludes; "And it is the Western feminist movement that is likely to provide the inspiration and the theoretical rationale for a truly fundamental reassessment of women's roles in modern society, including the USSR itself."

-- Vissarion Djughashvili

*BED AND SOFA* (Third Meshchanskaya) (1927) Directed by Abram Room; written by Victor Shklovsky and Room; art design by Sergei Yutkevich; cinematography by Grigori Giber and Vasili Rakhals. Nikolai Batalov (the husband); Ludmila Semyonova (the wife); Vladimir Fogor (the printer).