



Bed and Sofa and the Edge of Domesticity **by Judith Mayne**

Condensed with permission of the author from a chapter in *Kino and the Woman Question: Feminism and Soviet Silent Film*. (Copyright 1989 by the Ohio State University Press, Columbus.)

Bed and Sofa is unlike most of the films considered the "classics" of Soviet silent film in its subject matter as well as its style. A reviewer for *Close-Up* described the film as characterized by "reckless cuts, by unrelated continuity, by every fault that the amateur can make." The reviewer continues: "And yet here was a film that gripped and had genius. Its very unevenness gave it an added power; almost, one might say, created a new technique."

The film tells the story of a woman, Liudmilla, whose life is defined by the tiny one-room apartment in which she spends her days. Her husband, Kolia, a construction supervisor, invites an old friend, a printer, to share their apartment. The friend, Volodia, has arrived recently in Moscow and cannot find a room because of the housing shortage.

Liudmilla is trapped within the confines of private life. While the two men move with ease from private to public space, Liudmilla has no such mobility. Thus *Bed and Sofa* presents the split between private and public life as a feature of everyday life in socialist society. Initially, Liudmilla's and Kolia's domestic life seems to be a function of his economic status as a supervisor. Volodia is a worker, not a supervisor. However, Volodia's emergence as a tyrant on the home front makes clear that sexual politics are not necessarily a simple reflection of class identity as defined by the workplace. Hence, the film refutes the notion that male members of the working class are necessarily more amenable to sexual equality than their petit-bourgeois counterparts.

The relationship between the private and the public is depicted in a variety of ways. From the very outset there is an opposition between motion and stasis. A series of shots reveals the still objects that are central to domestic routine: the sofa, a table and chairs, kitchen utensils. Sharp contrast with all of these still, motionless images is provided by a series of Volodia arriving by train in the city. Volodia is designated as a man identified with a vital society in movement. A sense of harmony between the apartment and the city at large is suggested by a series of shots, beginning with the apartment's basement window. Through it can be seen a hose with which a worker washes the sidewalk. Images of Liudmilla washing at the sink, Kolia taking a shower, and their pet cat cleaning itself are followed by shots of a car being washed. Individual routines of everyday life are thus made part of a larger pattern.

As the film progresses, it becomes apparent that husband and wife have radically different relationships to the outside world. The husband is as comfortable in public space as he is at home, while Liudmilla is enclosed and isolated within the domestic sphere, with the window as her only connection to the public sphere. In other words, Liudmilla's only relation to public space is through watching, through detached observation. Volodia brings Liudmilla a radio and newspaper from the printing factory where he works, thus symbolically breaking down some barriers between home and work. He accompanies Liudmilla outdoors and we see her for the first time in social space. He takes her on a plane ride, she rides on a street car and goes to the movies. With Volodia as mediator, Liudmilla finally takes a step toward mobility between home and city life. Given Volodia's attentiveness to Liudmilla, the sexual relationship between them seems quite inevitable.



Once the three agree to live together in the apartment, the two men spend more time with each other than with Liudmilla, who continues to occupy her place at the window. Volodia's transformation into a version of Kolia is demonstrated by a scene where he orders Liudmilla to make tea and then forbids her to leave the house. In other words, whatever initial identification existed between Liudmilla and Volodia dissipates in the face of the much stronger identification between Volodia and Kolia.

Room's film insists, then, that whether at the petit-bourgeois or the proletarian end of the spectrum, men have a major investment in maintaining traditional sexual relations. *Bed and Sofa* is certainly critical of how women are confined to domestic isolation, but its critique concerns not only how men relate to women, but also how men relate to each other.

Meanwhile, Liudmilla's pregnancy finally inspires her to leave the two men and go off on her own. She does go to an abortion clinic, but changes her mind just before her number is called. She leaves the two men in a situation similar to that of the husband and wife at the beginning of the film. The airplane ride seemed to promise Liudmilla release from the oppressive structures of domestic life, but it was a false promise. To the obvious question of how women's legal and social autonomy is to be achieved, *Bed and Sofa* puts forth a rather pat answer: motherhood. Although the film does not explore the implications, one senses the Liudmilla, who has mothered both of the men in her life, is destined to be more fulfilled by mothering a child. In contemporary feminist terms, such a destiny seems to substitute one idealized view of women (as mother) for another (as wife).

The sudden appearance of motherhood as an answer to Liudmilla's problem relies more on ideological simplicity than does the rest of the film. The most insistent spokesperson for women's equality in the Soviet Union was undoubtedly Alexandra Kollontai, who wrote, "Soviet power realizes that the need for abortion will only disappear on the one hand when Russia has a broad and developed network of institutions protecting motherhood and providing social education, and on the other hand when women understand that childbirth is a moral obligation..." Liudmilla's decision to have the child is the decisive step toward her own socialization. At the conclusion of the film, Liudmilla's claim to autonomy is accentuated by the photograph of herself that she takes with her, leaving a blank frame on the wall.

Liudmilla's departure at the conclusion of *Bed and Sofa* places her decision to have the child by herself – regardless of who the father is – in the space between home and social world. The final image of Liudmilla in the film shows her inside the train compartment, looking eagerly out of the window: the image is like many others of her in the film, but she is no longer trapped within the four walls of domestic life. The men in *Bed and Sofa* are left to deal with the institution of domesticity, and the very fact that they, too, are fast becoming passive homebodies suggests that the contours of private and public life are as historically determined as the relationship between male and female identities.

[Buy BED AND SOFA on Manufactured-On-Demand \(MOD\) DVD.](#)

**Produced for DVD by David Shepard
From the Blackhawk Films® Collection
Presented by Flicker Alley**