

Could Love Be Communalized? Communal Apartment Life in Early Soviet Films

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My research has focused on architectural images in Soviet cinema and their ideological functions. In this paper I am going to analyze images of communal apartments in early Soviet films. Communal apartments (or in slang, *kommunalka*) were, no doubt, the most representative socialist housing type, and also Bolshevik's ideal home (or 'anti-home') policy of the early Soviet regime. However, not only was there a huge gap between the ideal and the reality, but also, even in fictional stories, the ideal communalized life was rarely demonstrated. This paper will discuss where these difficulties come from, shedding the light on love conflict plots between communal residents in early Soviet films.

1. The Birth of *Kommunalka* and Collective Way of Life

After the October Revolution, the Central Executive Committee declared the abolition of private property. The Soviet government began the requisition of bourgeois residential properties and started resettling laborers into them. In huge cities, such as Moscow and Petrograd, more than three-quarters of residential properties were requisitioned and converted into the *kommunalka*.¹

In principle, each family in these communal apartments was allotted one room. However, sometimes it was a simple section of corridors, a former storeroom, or even a bathroom. The hall was often divided using plywood walls and furniture with one family occupying each section. The residents shared a communal kitchen and toilet. These facilities were originally designed for one family only, and as a result, they were always overcrowded. People from various backgrounds and class origins were suddenly packed into the communal apartments and forced to live together without privacy. Although Bolshevik leaders justified these communal apartments as a basis of a new collective society² and espoused communal living as a new-socialist way of life (*быт*), the Soviet housing crisis was never solved. The residents often suffered from overcrowding, defective infrastructure, and everyday friction with neighbors.³

On the other hand, some elites who were considered "valuable" to the Soviet government were exempt from the requisition, such as Prof. Preobrazhensky in Mikhail Bulgakov's novella *Heart of a Dog*. Even in such cases, residents were expected to "voluntarily" provide rooms for homeless laborers

¹ Lynne Attwood, *Gender and Housing in Soviet Russia: Private Life in a Public Space* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2010), p. 34.

² Дома-коммуна в Москве // Оганек. 1923. №7. С. 16.

³ Attwood, *Gender and Housing in Soviet Russia*, p. 35.

according to the governmental policy “consolidation (уплотнение).”⁴ In 1918, the same title film *Consolidation* (Уплотнение) directed by Aleksandr Panteleev was released to promote the excellence of communal living.⁵

This film contrasts two different families and houses. An upper middleclass professor’s family lives in a luxurious flat, and, on the other hand, a poor locksmith father and his daughter live in a semi basement one-room flat in the same building, neither family knowing the other. One day the professor invites the poor family into his flat. While living together, the locksmith’s daughter and the professor’s younger son cultivate a love relationship despite their class difference. In the film, communal living promotes the romantic relationship between the residents which symbolizes the unification of the different classes.

2. House and Wife

For married couples, however, a communal apartment could sometimes become a potential threat to their relationship. In his *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* (1884) Friedrich Engels assumed that if private property was eliminated completely under communism, then the patriarchal family system and private houses would also disappear. After the October Revolution the dissolution of family (transition to civil marriage, legalization of de facto marriage, etc.) and collectivization of way of life (introduction of public dining, nursery, etc.) were actively promoted. Also an argument on new love and sexual relationships received wide public attention in mid 1920s. For example, Soviet politician and feminist theoretician Alexandra Kollontai, denying both exclusive patriarchal marriage and egoistic sexual desire, approved the importance of libido (sex drive) as motive for comradeship, contrary to Russian orthodox asceticism, or Freudian sublimation theory.⁶

In modern Europe, women in the middle class were especially restricted to the private sphere of their home. On the contrary, in soviet society, both the family system and private houses were demolished, and, instead of them, the kommunalka and collective lifestyle were introduced. However, repressed fear and anxiety over communalization of private property, was often reflected in the soviet cinema, particularly, in adultery plots.

For instance, in Yakov Protazanov's *Aelita: Queen of Mars* (Аэлита, 1924), known as an outstanding SF film in 1920s, the main protagonist Los suffers from doubt about a suspected adulterous relationship between his wife and a new neighbor in their communal apartment. At the beginning, the engineer Los and his wife Natasha live in a communal apartment, exceptionally

⁴ This policy was based on Lenin’s remarks before the October Revolution. Cf. Лебина Н.Б. Советская повседневность: нормы и аномалии от военного коммунизма к большому стилю. М., 2015. С. 90.

⁵ Anatoli Lunacharsky, the first People's Commissariat for Education (Narkompros), participated in this film as a scenario writer.

⁶ Cf. Коллонтай А.М. Дорогу крылатому Эросу! (Письмо к трудящейся молодежи) // Молодая гвардия. 1923. № 3. С. 111-124.

occupying two rooms: one room for their living space, and the other for Los' laboratory. One day Los notices a business card printed with an unknown male name "Erlikh" which had found its way into Natasha's luggage. This triggers Los's jealousy. Then, Erlikh himself appears at their communal apartment and Los is evicted from his laboratory room for Erlikh. This intruder soon starts to seduce Natasha. Witnessing close conversation between them, Los' doubt intensifies, and, eventually he shoots his wife. Natasha in fact remained faithful to her husband.

Natasha is, actually, a new type of soviet working woman. However, when she is at home, she is always doing household chores or just waiting for her husband. That is, the pre-revolutionary image of house and wife remain unchanged in this film. And, from the viewpoint of a husband like Los, who unconsciously considers his house and wife to be his private property, sharing a private space leads to sharing one's own wife with other residents. In other words, particularly, for pre-revolutionary sensibilities, a conflict between communal life and a couple's private relationship is inevitable.

3. Leaving Woman, Remaining Men

Although, the adultery plot in *Aelita* is just Los's delusion, Abram Room's *Bed and Sofa* (Третья Мещанская, 1927)⁷ literally depicted how two men share a flat and a wife in a communal apartment.

A young couple, a foreman Kolia and a housewife Liuda, living in a one-room semi basement flat at the Third Meshchanskaia Street. One day Kolia invites his fellow soldier Volodia into their flat, since Volodia has just arrived at Moscow but he couldn't find any place to stay due to serious housing shortage. In the narrow room the couple sleeps in a bed, Volodia sleeps on a sofa and only a screen separates them (Accordingly, the couple's sex life may be entirely noticeable to Volodia). Soon Liuda has an affection for Volodia, who treats her more gently than her husband does. He also gives her presents, a radio and a monthly journal *New World* (Новый мир), which both tell her about the world outside. During Kolia's business trip, Volodia even literally takes her outside the home: first to a film theater, then, to an air-show. At the end of the day, their relation becomes more intimate and finally they have sexual intercourse in bed. After Kolia's return from his business trip, Volodia confesses to him about the affair with Liuda. Kolia angrily leaves home, however, he can't find a new room just like Volodia, so Liuda, feeling pity, takes him back.

Then, their new communal life starts. On the contrary to the beginning, now Volodia and Liuda sleep in the bed, and Kolia sleeps on the sofa. Kolia and Volodia make amends, however, on the other hand, Volodia's attitude toward Liuda becomes rude. Consequently, Liuda's affection for Volodia is fading, and, at the same time, her love towards Kolia revives. One day Volodia finds Liuda is pregnant. But even Liuda doesn't know who the father is. The two men compel her to have an abortion. At first

⁷ The screenplay was written by Abram Room and Viktor Shklovsky. They got this 'love of three' theme from actual examples such as an experiment of communal living by Vladimir Mayakovsky, Osip Brik, and Lilya Brik. Cf. Гращенкова И.Н. Абрам Роом, М., 1977. С. 107., Шкловский В. За сорок лет. М., 1965. С. 104.

she complies, but at the clinic she suddenly changes her mind when she sees a playing baby. She packs her belongings and leaves the flat for somewhere far away by train.

As many researchers have already mentioned, the two men Kolia and Volodia can freely move throughout the outside world. On the contrary, Liuda is restricted to their flat and doing housework.⁸ She is isolated not only from her neighbors, but also from society as a whole. Only a low-positioned window in the semi-basement flat shows the world outside, but she can only see the legs of passers-by. In other words, her life is completely limited within this private sphere. And, sharing the bed – no doubt, the most private space in the flat – means sharing Liuda in this story. It can be considered as ultimate communalization in a sense. This communalization realized by objectification of women is, of course, completely different from the ideals of Engels, Chernyshevsky or Kollontai. Eric Naiman pointed out that such homo-social male community originated in the civil war period (1918-1922). According to him, motifs of sexual assaults against a woman by the male collective often appeared in literature works under the War Communism, for instance, in poems and novels written by Boris Pil'niak or Sergei Esenin. These assaults were symbolic of attack against the corrupted, Europeanized, and feminized Russian society dominated by privileged classes. This violent but revolutionary act reforms the old world, strengthening solidarity among equal male members.⁹ Naiman also indicates that such models of utopic male-dominated community led to a series of actual gang rape cases during the NEP era such as the Chubarov Case in 1926.¹⁰ These crimes deeply shocked the soviet society, since these criminals were not class enemies, but young laborers, including.

Kolia and Volodia are depicted negatively in the film, however they are former soldiers of the Red Army and have honorable occupations, constructor, and printer, which were ordinary considered as a representative of a new socialist society. Furthermore, from the Freudian viewpoint of Oedipus complex, this male homosocial body can be considered as a group of sons who killed their symbolic father, that is, the Russian Czar. They were different from men under patriarchy who objectified female family members and exchanged them to inherit their property from one generation to the next. But these revolutionists didn't have any private property, therefore they didn't need their own heir. This is why they forced Liuda to have an abortion (Certainly, as already referred by many researchers, the soviet government criticized a drastic increase of abortion rate in the 1920s and such an official opinion was also reflected in Liuda's escape).¹¹ Also, it is worth mentioning that Liuda decides to leave not due to socialist consciousness, but because of motherhood. She is so isolated from society, that she doesn't rely on the neighborhood of their communal apartment nor social welfare to protect her baby.¹² Actually, the film never shows other neighbors except for a caretaker (дворник) and

⁸ Rimgaila Salys, *Life into Art: Laying Bare the Theme in Bed and Sofa*. In an Early Version of the Script for Abram Room's 1927 film *Bed and Sofa*, in *Russian Language Journal*, 2005, Vol. 52, p.296.

⁹ Eric Naiman, *Sex in Public: The Incarnation of Early Soviet Ideology* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019), p. 62.

¹⁰ *Ibid.* pp. 280-285.

¹¹ Julian Graffy, *Bed and Sofa: The Film Companion* (London and N.Y.: I. B. Tauris, 2001), pp. 63-64.

¹² *Ibid.*, pp. 73-74.

Liuda's life is limited within their flat (she doesn't even use the communal kitchen), regardless the story is staged in the communal apartment. In other words, this film doesn't show (or fails to show) new sustainable socialist community which replaces patriarchal families.

Conclusion

A utopian socialist Nikolay Chernyshevsky dreamed of ideal communal housing and its collective life in his novel *What Is to Be Done?* (1863). He expected that such an environment freed housewives from subordination to their husbands and transformed them into laborers and equal members of the society. However, soviet films staged in a communal apartment often couldn't show such a new, ideal collective lifestyle.

If a protagonist couple was unmarried, kommunalka and its communal life often united them such as in *Consolidation*. On the other hand, similar living conditions often endangered traditional marriage relationships like in *Aelita*. From a viewpoint of an old-fashioned husband, such as Los, communalization of living spaces meant intrusion by neighbors into his property, including his wife. On the contrary, Room's *Bed and Sofa* tried to describe the new Soviet men and their love relationships. Their 'love of three' destroyed the traditional family system, but its new male-dominated homosocial community subordinated women the same as the patriarchy and had no sustainability. Overall, the problem of depicting ideal communal life obviously resulted in difficulties portraying married women, and avoiding their objectification, without relying on traditional love plots. Namely, both Soviet films and housing conditions in the real kommunalka in the 1920s were still inadequate to demonstrate communal life which should have freed women from the restriction of family and home.