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Kira Muratova (1934-2018) always stood out. She was unlike anyone else: not concerned with trying to fit in, always questioning rules, undermining routines, eternally innovative. In that, she was a maverick. A solitary and magnificent one.¹

Continually one of a kind, the fact that she was confined to working in isolation in the deep provinces of Soviet cinema – and, after the collapse of the USSR, at a small Ukrainian studio – did not impede on her originality. During Soviet times, her work was regularly censored. Her interest in exploring relationships and feelings was denounced as “bourgeois.” Her films were not sent to international film festivals – which, in turn, deprived her from the opportunity to see what other, similarly avant-garde directors from around the world, were making. It was not until she was in her fifties – in the second half of the 1980s, the time of *perestroika* and *glasnost* – that her work came to be exhibited abroad: first at the women’s film festival in Creteil, and later on at Berlinale, Locarno, Venice where it garnered recognition and brought some secondary awards. Even Cannes organised a catch-up screening for one of her censored films, *Среди серых камней/Among Grey Stones* (1983), duly acknowledging that a major talent had worked locked away as a pearl in the dark – and had been overlooked. It was only in her final years, and posthumously, that brought recognition: with major panoramas of her work organised by the festivals in La Rochelle, Rotterdam, and elsewhere, and with screenings at the South Bank in London.²

In this belated appreciation, Muratova’s fate is not particularly different from the fate of other female filmmakers, whose work is pushed into oblivion and not really integrated in the re-circulation of cinematic material that constitutes our body of knowledge of film history. A woman who is an innovator (such as Muratova) is rarely counted as such. Her oeuvre comes

to be known and valued in narrow circles but remains shut off the mainstream film history. This should change. It needs a massive and conscious effort though.

One example of the influence I discovered whilst watching her films, relates to her *Познавая белый свет/ Getting to Know the Big Wide World* (1978), a film which points at direct lineage to several aspects in Emir Kusturica's cinematic tools and is one of his "pastiche" sources analysed in my book on the director: colour spots, garlands of lamps and crowds, structuring the scenes to an up/down axis, scenes where protagonists are outdoors amidst a pile of household objects that are normally seen indoors, scenes set in trucks.³ I feel I can assert there are influences and restaging of scenes from Muratova's film in Kusturica's *When Father Was Away on Business* (1985), *Time of the Gypsies* (1989) and, most of all, *Black Cat, White Cat* (1999). Kusturica, of course, won major awards at the Cannes film festival; his work is well-known and celebrated internationally – whilst Muratova's is not. This is why I believe we need to see more such linkages in the process of reintegrating Muratova's work in film history. And we need to see this done in regard to the work of other women-directors.



Figure 1: Muratova's *Getting To Know The Big Wide World* (1978) counts amidst the major influences for Emir Kusturica's films, especially his *Black Cat, White Cat* (1999).

If I am to compare Muratova to others, two more solitary cinema mavericks come to mind – Chilean Alejandro Jodorovsky (b. 1929) and Czech Věra Chytilová (1929-2014). Here I want to briefly extend the comparison with this latter one, as Chytilová appears, in many respects, to be Muratova's spiritual and aesthetic twin sister. They probably never crossed paths, yet one cannot help thinking of their films as being in a continuous playful dialogue with one another, especially as feelings and freedom – understood as freedom to express and reinvent oneself as whimsical, sensitive, and perennially novel mavericks – has been of key importance in the works of both directors.

There are many reference points where the work of Chytilová and Muratova can be productively compared, even if the films that one would reference were made completely independently from one another, and sometimes at different points in time. Parallels abound in the visual cornucopia, the recurring baroque motives, the looped renderings of the *mise-en-abyme* dialogues accompanied by minimalistic plots, the theatricality, in the preferential attraction to grotesque and circus, to apples and trees. Muratova's *Getting to Know the Big Wide World* (1978) somehow fluidly compares to Chytilová's *Prefab Story* (1980), both thematically and visually. The films of both directors are eccentric and post-modern; they both use vignettes, tragicomedy, vivid colors. Other films that could be brought in for comparison include *The Fruit of Paradise* (1969), *The Apple Game* (1977) – a lot of which finds parallel with later films by Muratova, especially in the wonderfully crisp black and white baroque aesthetics of her last feature, *Вечное возвращение/ Eternal Homecoming* (2012) that invites a visual comparison with Chytilová's famous *Daisies* (1966).⁴



Figure 2: *Daisies* (1966) cluttered whimsical aesthetics is replicated in Muratova's *Eternal Homecoming* (2012).

Muratova's entire thematic universe is marked by its focus on relationships and feelings. It is inhabited by women and men who need to relate, who reach out to one another, who exchange lines and who undertake actions – often ineptly – in building these relationships. And this persistent focus on relationships is one aspect of her work that never changes; it only intensifies over the years, along with her evolving visual and dramatic style. From the lacklustre bureaucrat wife who accepts to host the love interest of her playfully romantic geologist husband in *Короткие встречи/Brief Encounters* (1967), through the neurotic mother who fears ageing and agonises over losing the affection of her teenage son in *Долгие проводы/Long Farewell* (1971), through to the emotionally exhausted distraught protagonists of *Астенический синдром/Asthenic Syndrome* (1989), all her characters are sensitive people who have bared their emotional neediness and whose defences have weakened. It is precisely Muratova's persistent reminders of people's hurt feelings and their impaired emotional lives

that was unpalatable for the communist censors. Later on, Muratova's films only deepened this focus on sentiments and passions. With the end of the Soviet Union, she was no longer obliged to set her films in any clearly defined historical moment or place – as it was necessary under the “socialist realism” paradigm of the past. Unlike other directors from her generation, she was not interested in chronicling the evolution of the post-Soviet society. In her later films the protagonists move in series of *tableaux vivants* in theatrical settings that could be just anywhere. She now makes films about women and men involved in improbable partnerships, about the struggles in expressing anxieties, about responding to feelings and communicating moods in contexts where devolving it all to a therapist is not an option. It is arduous for Russians and Ukrainians – as it is for everybody, for that matter – to discuss feelings, especially when they are contradictory and strong ones, but also when they are subtle and elusive. So, if Muratova's characters appear eccentric it is not because they are dressed strangely nor because they move amidst extravagant decorations – it is mainly because they dare directly express their sentiments, even where they mechanically deliver their lines not sure if they will be met with understanding or reciprocated. Whilst in the earlier films one can find a gradation of unease, the intensity of the later films is due to the more abrupt and unsettling delivery of messages that point to disquiet and frenzy. They all consist of elaborately set series of *tableaux* where actors are asked to deliver repetitive lines and make assertive utterances in contexts that lay bare the unquiet mind of a neurotic, where it is preliminary clear that in spite the obsessive repeating of “truths” no meaningful or emotionally satisfying communication could take place. Muratova's films are about miscommunicating feelings, about the need of relationships and the failure to have satisfactory ones.

Muratova's life had not been easy, with the war experiences of her early childhood and with the untimely tragic loss of her daughter later on. Being of minority origins (her mother was Romanian and she was born in Bessarabia), being female, and being censored in her creative endeavours from early on, she nonetheless was clearly much more talented than her first husband, the fellow-student Olexandr Muratov, who soon went into obscurity as director. Her creative life bridged the crucial year of 1991 (when the Soviet Union officially wrapped up), with half of her films made before this date – and half, after that, resulting in a total of twenty-two films that are now credited to her as director.⁵ She wrote the scripts for twelve of them and acted in five. And even though she occasionally cast some of the biggest Soviet film stars (Vladimir Vysotsky, Oleg Tabakov, Alla Demidova), she much preferred to work with a steady team of collaborators for most of her films – like actress Renata Litvinova (who became a noted feminist director in her own right)⁶ and her second husband, the painter Evgeny Golubenko, twenty two years her junior, whose ornate sense of style and flamboyant taste in clothes seemed to harmoniously intersect with her sensitivity – all coming together to underwriting Muratova's immediately recognizable cinematic handwriting.

These were the topics of a discussion in the context of the workshop **Kira Muratova @ St Andrews (2020)**, which permitted us to spend time seeing the films of the director and commemorate her properly. At the workshop we heard a formal contribution from independent scholar Giuliano Vivaldi, ("Setting Out on a Voyage into the Realm of Ultra-Realism: Kira Muratova's *Getting to Know the Big Wide World*") but also informal ones, from prominent film scholars who have written on her, such as academics Elena Gorfinkel (King's College London) and Ian Christie (Birkbeck) and film critic Adrian Martin (Melbourne/Barcelona). The other contributions that we had commissioned for the event were resubmitted and appear in this

dossier on Muratova – like the audio essay on *The Asthenic Syndrome* by our colleague **Victoria Donovan** from the Russian department at the University of St Andrews, which directly resonates with the anxieties of the lockdown period during which it was made. **Masha Shpolberg** (UNC-Wilmington), who hails from Odessa, the city where most of Muratova’s films were set or shot – dedicates her beautiful video essay to exploring the representation of socialism in the director’s early films. Two of the essays foreground the analysis of Muratova’s unique haptic visuality. **Irina Schulzki** (Ludwig Maximilian University of Munich) does this through weaving together tactile examples from across her work in the video essay “Touch and Sight in the Films of Kira Muratova: Towards the Notion of a Cinema of Gesture”. **Raymond de Luca’s** (Harvard) essay was commissioned additionally; it brings into the picture yet another facet of Muratova’s extensive oeuvre by offering a close textual analysis of the presence of animals in her monochrome *Chekhovian Motives* (2002).

The workshop that started it all – **Kira Muratova@ St Andrews**, was originally scheduled to take place “live” on 24 February 2020 but we suspended it at the last moment, as we were growing increasingly worried by the increasing number of Covid-19 infections. However, we managed to reschedule it for 8 April 2020, and thus it became one of the first Zoom events to open up what has since become a new trend and that – within the short span of a year – brought about major and possibly enduring shifts in the way scholarly events are held.

The resulting dossier is also representative of another important shift that takes place in film studies – the growing variety of output formats. The contributions presented here include two text-based pieces, one audio and two video essays – and this is the direction in which the discipline is evolving, beyond the standard 7000 word-length research article.

And, whilst we may have been in lockdown, the scholarship on Muratova continued to grow and saw some major developments in the period since our workshop took place: the film

was not available for screening with subtitles at the time of our workshop. The Facebook research group on Kira Muratova, set up and moderated by Irina Schulzki (<https://www.facebook.com/groups/KiraMuratovaSymposium>), went on as a most active research community, and the work culminated in an extensive international conference that took place over two weeks in May 2021, with a wide range of contributions and keynotes by Mikhail Iampolski (NYU) and Eugenie Zvonkine (Paris VIII). There was a panel at the NECS conference in Palermo in June 2021. New documentaries on Muratova were released and a colleague from the USA worked with her students to make available English-language subtitles for *The Long Farewell* (filmed in 1971), Muratova's most accessible masterpiece, so that now it can be widely seen. Hopefully, this interest would lead to a "discovery" of Muratova beyond the Slavic community, by the likes of specialized arthouse film publishers, who may engage in preparing a systematically organized and edited edition of her work. In the meantime, all her films are available on YouTube – just a few with subtitles – and could be seen by those interested to gain exposure to the universe of the magnificent maverick.

Notes

¹The concept of the creative maverick has been the subject of many specific biographies; it has become a fundamental category in creativity studies. See Carn, Billie, "The Maverick Mindset." *Royal Society of the Arts Journal*, Issue 1 (2021) 44-48.

² Even though the writing on Muratova is growing in parallel with the interest in her work, she is still mainly known to Slavic specialists, and there is only one monograph dedicated to the director in the English language, Jane Taubman's *Kira Muratova*, I.B. Tauris, 2004.

³ Kusturica's "pastiche" mixed borrowings from many other famous directors as well, as explored in the chapter on "Artistry." Dina Iordanova, *Emir Kusturica* (London: BFI, 2002), 132-151.

⁴ The work of two important collaborators needs to be brought into this comparison as well, especially as it is evident their imagination is in the roots of the parallels – for Chytilova it is the collaboration with Ester Krumbachova who designed sets and costumes for Vera Chytilova's *Daisies* (1966) and *Fruit of Paradise* (1970) and for Muratova, her second husband, Evgeniy Golubenko, who was a major aesthetic influence and designed the sets for most of her later films.

⁵ Several of the early films were co-directed with her then husband, Oleksandr Muratov; tellingly, do not bear the signs of her original style.

⁶ In the fall of 2020, Litvinova, posted a video essay in which she commemorates her collaborations with Muratova (<https://www.facebook.com/renatalitvinova/videos/2872834809662103>) and, later on, a short tribute for her birthday in November (<https://www.facebook.com/renatalitvinova/videos/372379047335714>).

Author Biography

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