

INTERVIEW

Interview with Kira Muratova

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Alexey Artamonov met with Kira Muratova in 2016 to interview her for the “Seance” magazine in Russia. During the interview, Muratova spoke about the ongoing lives of her artistic products, her relationship to her own work, and current cinema. We are republishing the piece, which originally appeared in Russian on May 13th 2016, on the occasion of our special issue on Muratova’s work.

Have you read Mikhail Iampolski’s book?¹ Has it been easy to read another person’s book about your films?

I read it when it was first published but it’s been a while now. It’s hard for me, I must say. In general, an interview or a discussion with a director is so weird. With any director, I think. You see, I’m inside the house, and you’re on the street, and we’re talking about the house through the window. Do you understand? What I mean by “house” and what you mean by “house”, you having never actually entered it, having only seen it from the outside, and me, let’s say, only from the inside – those are two different things. A person makes a film. Then another person writes a book or an article about this film. And then the person also says something about this article or book. There’s something of intelligentsia silliness in all that. Here’s how I see it: I’ve made a film – good-bye, that’s all. Say what you want, do what you want, think what you want. You have your right. And I have my right to turn away and be silent. Besides, I just can’t understand some of what this book says. I don’t say that it’s good or bad. I guess it’s good because an intelligent man wrote an intelligent book. But it doesn’t always have something to do with me, sitting inside this house.

But it does have some sort of relationship to your films, which have their own lives.

Sure, that’s the thing. Otherwise, I could protest. They’re like kids, they’re separate from me. I can die or go crazy, anything, and they will remain themselves. I would say

this feeling is the biggest pleasure. No, the biggest pleasure is to make them. And the second is to make something that exists on its own. Great, I can go now. Does it matter that I didn't want anyone to talk about the films I made before *Brief Encounters*, but that he still did? Well, so be it. I'm kind of dead in relation to all that. I can move my lips, articulate something, but it has no relation to reality, not anymore.

And what about you, do you often go back to your own films?

No, not often. I may rewatch one of them on occasion. If they ask me, "Which of your films do you like most?", I always name different ones. My attitude towards them changes, and not only when I rewatch them, it changes by itself - because of memories. Some of them I like less, some I would criticize, some I would shorten. I haven't lived that long a life.

Your films make it seem like you have reconsidered things you've done before. That they guide you, leaving traces on subsequent works.

Do you think so? Maybe. If you see it like that. It's not mathematics, it's clearer from the outside.

Take your last film for example. It seems like there is a certain irony regarding some of your first films, there's an element of parody. About *Brief Encounters*, in particular.

I guess it all comes from what they write about some specific kind of humor. I don't aim for this, I don't make this connection. But it doesn't mean others can't find it there. This is normal.

At least it concerns the space you leave for the viewers...

What space? I leave them no space.

If they can identify with characters...

Oh, if I cared about that, I would earn so much more money.

You talk as if you didn't care at all whether anyone sees your films or not. Whereas this seems to be the nature of cinema.

In Soviet times, after *Long Farewells*, it became crystal clear that whatever film I made, it would be lambasted. And I started to dream... "Let me shoot, and you can just put it on the shelf. Don't show it, don't watch it, just let me make it. My films are so cheap, they'll cost you nothing." I lived for a long time with this belief that my films should gather dust in some cellar, and no one should watch them. This way of existence satisfied me entirely. But at some point, they just stopped letting me do it, they fired me and the repression started. Well, that upset me. But not the thought of my films stored somewhere on the shelf, that's just... Well. Sure, I'd like to show them to my friends, to please someone, to have a kind of life circling around them. But if there's no such life - this isn't important. What matters is that we've made it, something's been finished, there's been this rounded-up, ready, pretty thing. I have to say I have always worked to be satisfied with myself.

Starting from *Getting to Know the Big, Wide World*, with several exceptions, your films are constructed very differently, there is no linear narrative in which the viewers could take refuge, they are more eccentric, they have different modes of narration...

It's not about the viewer, I just loved *Getting to Know the Big, Wide World*. First of all, that's my first color film, it was so exciting, I was completely blown away. Then, it's a film about construction work. I liked it very much, that's an altogether different aesthetic milieu that was barely present and is still barely present in the cinema. It was so little aestheticized, except for Dziga Vertov maybe. The aesthetics are in embryo there, there are no rules - look, that's the interior, that's urbanistic, and that's better here, then that'll be good taste. *Getting to Know the Big, Wide World* is a leap for me - a Fernand Léger kind of thing or I don't know what. Iampolski writes that everything is in the machine. Yes, the machine is important, but it's only a part of the construction site. It's the construction site itself that matters for me: something that propagates from nothing and seems monstrous, ugly. But, in reality, you find beauty in all things ugly, and only then you progress. Otherwise, it's not interesting.

Everything you say about the aesthetics of *Getting to Know the Big Wide World* seems close to the way your films are structured - there is no clear hierarchy strung on the action, on an intrigue of the plot. In the *Tuner*, for example, there is a story line, and still, the action unveils in a roundabout kind of way.

It wobbles, to and fro. Sure, I always want to fill it with something, with branchlets, so as not to leave only the trunk of the plot. I'm not the only one to have that, this need to branch out, many others do this, but for me, it's necessary - otherwise, it gets boring.

And what about the world around you, does it fire you up, provoke resistance that would make a film appear?

The world around and the resistance – all that can be related only to *Asthenic Syndrome*. This is my only film that has a sociopolitical side to it. A voice crying in the wilderness, something of the sort. And the other films... I don't even know what that is. It's scrutinizing something with something...

But your attitude often shows through them.

The attitude always shows through. It's not like I see something and want to make a film about it, for or against it. All that has been chewed over so many times – the good and the evil and all that... I always said that the evil is entwined in the weave of the carpet. Take the evil out, take out this thread – and the carpet will fall apart. It's impossible, it's how it is, that's the reality. You can inspect it with interest, with curiosity, you can like or dislike something, but it doesn't mean you're fighting with something or putting yourself against something.

And does honesty interest you?

And what can there be but honesty? I want to do this, I want to do this honestly, no, I don't want to do this anymore. That's all there is to honesty. Or what?

I mean that one can observe people from different angles. One can do it from a safe spot, without exposing oneself. There's always a way to slip away. While in your films there is your regard that is uncompromising, including the regard on yourself. You don't turn away. I call that honesty, a sharp eye. It is not sociopolitical cinema because it doesn't give univocal moral verdicts, while it has an inherent ethical agency that is very acute, I think.

Maybe you can call it that. What else can you do during this process? Acuteness – it means something is interesting, you've found something and found an interesting form for it. Maybe that's honesty. But how else can it be? I see it like that, but I'll do it otherwise? How? I'll stop and say: I don't know how. Either I'm bored or I'm lazy, I won't do anything, good-bye. I don't know what honesty means.

Oh, I see, you're trying to find virtue there, pay me a compliment...

It just characterizes your films.

They often say about me: that I'm a very brave and honest director. What the hell does bravery have to do with it? I just want to make films: in an interesting way, a difficult way, differently, in my own way or even in a simple way. Call it honesty if you like. But then I don't get what dishonesty is.

It's just that your cinema changes all the time, we see how you react to things - internally and externally.

Probably. It's not intentional. You change, too, you know, you live and change...

Not all people and not all art produces this feeling of constant rejuvenation.

I am alive, as alive as one can be. There's so little dead stuff in me. In life I am opportunistic... I hate my entire life. Guess what I hate? Gravity. Materiality, gravity - those are my terrible, internal and external lousy enemies. And cinema was always a kingdom of freedom for me. I feel this. It's the freedom to breathe, to do everything I want to do, anything that comes to my mind, thinking of nothing, with no "Sorry, "Would you mind?", "I didn't mean this", "I meant that". Sure, I do exactly what I know how to do, and what I'm good at. If I see that I wanted something but couldn't pull it off, I throw it away immediately, just throw it away. This means that if I don't know how to do it, I can't do it, maybe someone else can. I will look for other forms, or change the direction of my interest. I notice when I haven't succeeded. I had this film, one of the latest, *Melody for a Street-Organ*, and there was a scene where kids torture a deranged man. And I failed to make them be as I wanted them to be, cruel, you know, something stopped me. I think I had scruples. Every time it turned out too soft, softer than what I conceived. So to hell with it. I cut it out. If I can't - I can't.

You've said once that for you there's not enough barbarism in Bergman's cinema. How important is it for you? And what do you mean by barbarism?

Sure, it's important. I call it that. Maybe it can be called differently. I couldn't say what it means exactly. Barbarism is a direct view on things, I guess. It has its own prejudices, rules, conceptions, though. It is not quite what I mean by barbarism. They have destroyed Palmira, you know, and we are like: "Oh, how dare they!" And they just don't get what's so special about Palmira. It's just a monument for the gods of others, "it's a wrong religion, you're all idiots, barbarians," that's what they think. There's something barbaric about them. How they chop heads off, how they film and show it. Sure, there's a show-off part in all that, but there are things that a civilized person can do in public, and there are things that, whoever he is, he just can't do - he doesn't have

this barbarism in him. That's something like that, a direct, simple view on things.

And transgressing boundaries, I guess, swapping the high and low... You mix all that up.

That's called good taste and bad taste. We love forbidden things. This forbidden quality of bad taste, it is so deeply hidden in human mentality that it can't just be pulled out and thrown away. It is there, in our guts. I am human, and nothing human is alien to me. We can pretend that we separate these cards: we'll put the red ones there, the black ones there, and the jokers apart. But you can't mix them up like that on purpose, they have already been mixed, in life. You can't separate it without breaking it. Crime is a form of destruction, I guess. Let's tear the hell out of this carpet, it's bad, and let everything disappear. I just wanted to reflect this mixture.

Say, why do you like repetitions and tautologies so much? I guess, you've been asked that so many times.

Yes, many times. I don't know. At first, I just felt that that's how it happens in life all the time. That's how they speak, how we speak, all of us, we repeat everything. I felt a kind of rhythm, a rhythm of life that I saw. And only after discovering how surprised people were when they saw this, I started to think it over. There's a scene in *Getting to Know the Big, Wide World* - there are lots of such scenes, actually - when Nina Ruslanova sits in a truck with Mikhail, and then she comes out. There's music, and there's repetition in the music, or more like a variation. So she exits the truck, and then she gets out another time. And Nina asks me: "Listen, why do I come out from this truck twice?" How can you answer, simply and briefly? I say: "It rhymes". Do you get the rhyme in poetry? You know, when the endings are similar... That's the rhyme. And that's what it is. I came up with it at that moment. I don't know why. There was beauty in it. It's a romantic film. In this moment, in relation to this situation, this music and this state of mind of the two characters in love - they're floating in a kind of haze - it was just natural, like a dance. The montage was also a dance. Think, what's ballet? There's nothing natural in it! What's poetry? Nothing natural! That's art.

But when it happens in the speech...

We repeat everything all the time...

Because people don't hear each other?

No, it's not that, we hear each other alright. All this so-called lack of communication

means nothing to me. Sure we're different. It may be tragic, it may be fun. That's life, do you understand? Otherwise it would be too boring. I don't remember who said that, Napoleon maybe - that there's only one step from the sublime to the ridiculous. I would add - and we're often treading this gap in between. Sometimes our whole lives. And not only from the sublime to the ridiculous, but many other things have one step between them, and still, we don't make that step but go on milling about on the same spot.

It's in our nature - to repeat, we never end repeating, in all kinds of ways, or even in one and the same way. I don't understand why it attracts so much attention. I don't see anything more special there than in anything else. But everyone keeps repeating it again and again... What does it mean? I say everything. Then I start doing just that - I repeat. That's what I did just now.

Alright, let's digress. Do you watch new films?

Of course, all the time. Not always till the end, but I try.

And what do you like?

I like lots of things, and I dislike lots of things. What stands completely apart for me is Haneke. His *Love*, for example, because of the simplicity of its construction, is exceptional, without twists and turns, it's something perfect, direct and incredible as a whole. There are almost no gimmicks, no ramifications, it goes up and up and up, and there's something all-encompassing in that. I like many films, and sometimes they have nothing to do with what I make. Nothing Russian comes to my mind now, but I always watch with hope and curiosity, and I often like at least half of them, or some scenes. But about those I'll remember forever... I'll never forget Haneke. I'll never forget Sokurov. Not all of his films, but some - yes. Among the last ones there was only *The Tribe*.

What impressed you so much in Slaboshpytskyi's film?

I just liked it a lot. And I was impressed by the fact that it was about the deaf. There is some kind of perversion in it, a kind of twist. That brought me back to ancient times. I started to think how art was conceived among wild humans, from rituals, from shame and fear... They feared naming a tiger or another beast they went to hunt for. To name the enemy meant to attract its attention, that's why they didn't talk about it, they only showed it, they danced about it. It was allusion. What is allusion? It is an image, it is the principle of art. Like in that game: we won't tell you where we've been, but we'll show you what we've done. We won't call things by their names, we'll beat around the

bush. It's either obscene or scary or embarrassing. Maybe he didn't mean it like that, but that's what I saw, that it's not just about deaf people, but that deaf people reflect this imagery. I like pantomime very much, sign language and all that. There is pantomime in conversations of the deaf. Maybe, that's why I like it so much. And besides, it's just extremely well done.

Other than that, there are lots of great "homebrew" films. I call them "homebrew" but it's not an insult, it's a genre, a definition. Aunt Masha and uncle Vanya sit in the kitchen, and uncle Vanya says an interesting thing, and aunt Masha replies. And someone's listening behind the door. And it goes on - who married whom, and who's pregnant. Things you can narrate like that: "Do you know what really happened? I'll tell you." It's good cinema, it repeats all the time. It can be very good, and sometimes just extraordinary. *Kramer vs. Kramer* comes to my mind. The situation's so simple, banal, it is varied and repeated in all kinds of ways, but to such perfection... I am rarely impressed by acting, apart from Chaplin, maybe. I won't go to see a movie because of an actor. I'll ask, "Who's the director?", or, "How was it made?". And here I liked this simple story; primordial, without excesses, with no sharp turns, just by itself, like in a kernel. And it's so well nuanced, from beginning till end. I am always amazed when someone can do something in a simple way, it just fascinates me. When a microscopic regard is put on something tiny. And there's so many bacteria, microbes there and all kind of good and bad stuff, and it changes imperceptibly, but at the same time so significantly. And you don't need battles, explosions, shooting, fast driving. I'm not against it, but it just exhausted itself, no one does anything new in this genre. While I recently rewatched this *Kramer vs. Kramer* film, I had the same exact feeling I had had many years ago, when I saw it for the first time. There was some uniqueness and nuance to the acting, and there was this microscopic regard of tiny things, with no emphasis, no effort. Very often, after all, something is injected into the plot, and becomes more and more significant. It can be very good if it's well done. But when it develops by and in itself, with nothing else, that's even better.

In general, I watch a lot of films, and still it seems that I watch little or not enough. If you compare French and American cinema, I prefer American. They are said to be the founders, but it's true that they also ruin it by repeating and repeating. But there is also very good cinema in parallel. And the French, they are, you know... a bit of a burnt-out nation. "Look, did you see how sophisticated what we've made is, did you notice? No? Well, you're stupid. Go watch again, maybe you'll see this time".

Americans make films in a more sporting manner. "You didn't get it? Don't worry, keep watching, you'll like it, you'll see". It's a healthier regard than that of the French. Sure, the French have very nice things, but it often ends in some kind of hurt feelings: you didn't see us as we are... Well, we didn't, and so what? It isn't worth the grudge.

What are you working on now? Or was *Eternal Return* really your last film?

I don't make films now, I've renounced filming. That's how I call it - I've renounced. I've said that I wouldn't be making any more films, not only for reasons of health. I

guess, something broke in me, something's finished, I don't want to anymore, and I don't like many things. Things I always disliked - all the things that accompany cinema, that have nothing to do with my occupation, but are still present in this industry, as they call it today. And even when it wasn't called industry, when it was called art, this was still there. I withstood all that, I pushed it aside, I liked to do it so much that I pretended not to see all the things I found disgusting in it. Because this love was stronger. And now it's finished. I don't want anything anymore. All in all, it's normal. It's normal.

And what made making films possible for you before?

What do you mean? Just to do what I wanted. Most of all, I like shooting and editing. And I don't like the preparation period at all, all this looking around, finding something. There are great moments there, too, in rehearsals, for example, but I like shooting the best, and as for the editing - it's just a divine kind of activity.

Pure art?

No, art is always there, it's only that it always has to overcome something, struggle with "accessories" as I call them. There are so many things involved, including the weather and money and relations with people who are alive, who are not pieces of paper or film. While in editing you just say to hell with all the living who participated in this, whether they die altogether or if they had never existed to begin with - you just don't give a damn. You lock yourself in a room and you do whatever you want with this film - it's such an independent state of being. The one thing you always depend upon is electricity. Apart from that... There are lots of dependencies you have to put up with, that's why I've always said that a director without megalomania can't do anything. And we all know what megalomania is. But if it's not there, it's very difficult. It's like Rustam Khamdamov - this kind of a defenseless flower, he used to wither away in no time, saying: "I don't want it, I'll go to my place, I'll shut myself away, I can't even go to the cash register to get my salary. Could you please bring it to me?"

And me with my megalomania, I think I confronted all these things rather skillfully. And now I don't need it anymore, I became one out of billions. How many of us are there now - 7 billion? As they say, a speck of dust, a leaf in the wind. That's how I feel about it. It's gone, and that's it.

Translated from Russian into English by Daniil Lebedev

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Editor's note: A decade ago, Iampolski published "Kira Muratova. An Experience of a

Cinema-Anthropology” (“Kira Muratova. Opytkinoantropologii”) with Seans, S-Petersburg, 2008.