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ESSAY

Muratova's Lyrical Assault on Socialist Realism

Kira Muratova's *Getting to Know the Big, Wide World* (*Poznavaya belyy svet*, 1979)

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What do they want from her? This is an absolutely Soviet film!
– Soviet actress Tamara Makarova[1]

I consider *Getting to Know the Big Wide World* a very important film. It is extremely significant, I believe, for both Kira Muratova and in general for our cinematography because in this film we can discern a turning point from the modernism of the sixties to that which we now call postmodernism.
– Russian film critic Andrei Plakhov

Despite previous films of hers being shelved (*Long Farewells*) or brutal bureaucratic axes being wielded against Kira Muratova's most cherished project (the axing of her Lermontovian project *Princess Mary*, stopped in its tracks by cinematic bureaucrats, was a genuine source of trauma for Muratova)[2], her third major film project *Getting to Know the Big Wide World* seemed to promise to fit fully into Soviet canons, both in terms of plot and genre. It marked the end of a long seven years of enforced silence. When offered a number of scripts to shoot at the Lenfilm Studios, Muratova chose to opt for a rather conventional socialist realist tale by Grigory Baklanov about a romantic triangle at a construction site. The script, originally titled *The Birch Trees Whisper in the Breeze*, was, by all accounts, a fairly wooden, stilted one, but it was to prove to be Muratova's 'excessive love for reality' (a judgment initially used by Pasolini about Fellini and Rossellini) which 'distorted' the real world portrayed with some sublimely Fellinesque moments.[3] So systematically did Muratova 'distort' Baklanov's text, at one point even putting Baklanov's most grandiloquent lyrical speech into the mouth of the film's most negative character so as to turn the script's pomposity purposefully against itself, that there is little wonder that Baklanov was none too happy. As Muratova later

recalled “he rejected much of it, refused to accept it… But he agreed to co-authorship, and certain things he had to accept, perhaps not in their entirety, but there was nothing he could do”.[4] As Zuev, who had collaborated with Muratova on the 1969 film script *Watch Your Dreams Attentively*, concluded after they had worked together, “You shouldn’t give Kira a completed script”, since Muratova’s way of working was to take apart stories as she needed to. In the words of Eugénie Zvonkine, “Muratova’s relationship to her scripts was never too well-behaved”.[5]

The plot of both the script and the film revolves around a triangular relationship, as did her two previous films *Brief Encounters* (1967) and *Long Farewells* (1971). It is more similar to *Brief Encounters,* focusing as it does on a ‘love triangle’ rather than a family one. But here, unlike in both the script and her previous films, the pivotal character, Liubov (whose name means ‘love’ in Russian), is female. Liubov (nicknamed Liuba) was played by a Kira Muratova regular, Nina Ruslanova, who had also starred in *Brief Encounters* as the love rival to the character played by Muratova herself. Ruslanova was to become very much a Muratova regular, her screen persona played to an ideal of a much more independent female type than previous socialist realist canons had ever allowed. Interestingly Ruslanova’s own complex biography (born at the end of the Second World War, she was orphaned in her infancy and grew up in a series of children’s homes) added considerable weight to her screen appearances. Prior to starting her acting career, she had worked as a construction plasterer, which is precisely the profession which she is given in this film.[6]

Ruslanova’s Liuba is the ‘object of desire’ of the two main male characters, who are polar opposites. Misha (or Mikhail) is played by Sergei Popov. A non-professional actor and scriptwriter of Muratova’s *Asthenic Syndrome*, he was to star in subsequent films by Muratova. His character is a taciturn, non-demonstrative truck driver who had lost a leg in a heroic attempt to save another’s life in a road accident. His ‘hippie-like’ appearance, is one of those Muratovian touches which deftly undermine the Soviet canon of ‘proletarian’ characters. The other truck driver, Nikolai, played by the professional actor Alexei Zharkov, is a far more garrulous and immediately unlikable character, who is either spouting clichés (in the very first scene he speaks like an advertisement), or bragging about impossible deeds. He keeps hectoring and demeaning Liuba, who tends to fiercely resist his strictures with volcanic eruptions of justifiable rage. Liuba progressively rejects the garrulous and boastful Nikolai, for the tenderer and more human charms of Misha. This triangular dynamic, though central to the film, is accompanied by a whole host of other plots and even the final resolution is marked with a certain ambiguity.

It is in this film that Muratova’s love of both the idea of doubles, and the filming of twins, fully come into its own. This will become a consistent feature of Muratova’s subsequent films. Not only is there a parallel relationship recounted in silent Chaplinesque scenes between the director of the drama company at the construction site played by Victor Aristov and a fellow plasterer of Liuba’s work brigade played by Natalia Leble (a Muratova regular who had earlier been chosen to play in the ill-fated *Princess Mary)*, but there are also a number of scenes centered around two twins –

Zoya and Vera – played by the non-professional Shelgunova twins. Other characters in minor scenes include a cameo appearance by Liudmila Gurchenko (one of the Soviet Union's most iconic actresses), who plays herself in a scene which also features a letter whose existence and content takes on, as it were, a life its own. Her appearance is preceded with an image of her on posters advertising films in which she had appeared.

Kira Muratova herself referred to *Getting to Know the Big Wide World* as her "transitional film". It was indeed, in more ways than one. A transition from her two early "provincial melodramas" (again, this was Muratova's designation of *Brief Encounters* and *Long* Farewells) to her more 'formalist' stage (a characterization given by Oleg Aronson in his essay on Muratova for a volume of essays on various cinematic masters, *Metakino*),[7] there were many incipient film devices which would be further accentuated in later films. Indeed, it was not only Aronson who noticed her "absorption with formal experiments". The latter was a phrase used by the censors of the Lenfilm Party Committee and their further comments on "poetic episodes …lacking in realism and motivation" and "conjunction of the humdrum and the poetic"[8] give an indication as to the nature of Muratova's formal experimentation. Her signature phrasal repetitions, her love of identical twins and doubles, the ubiquity of the mirror and of framing motifs, and the explicit theatricality of its scenes, are all foregrounded in her particular way of unmasking reality. Some motifs were present in her earlier films too, although they may not have been so central to their thematic structures. When, for example, Liuba removes her wig after reciting her wedding speech, a speech repeated three times in the film, this echoes a scene in *Long Farewells* where Yevgenia Vasilevna makes the same gesture. The theme of masks and unmasking becomes ever more central to Muratova's *oeuvre.* Here in *Getting to Know…* it is very much linked to the presence and absence of the double. A notable use of this is when Liuba, accepting Misha's marriage proposal at the end of the film, finally confesses to him that she had entirely made up the story of a non-existent brother, upon which one of the twins breaks down in tears. The 'double' is also eliminated by Nikolai's act of smashing the mirror with a stone after hearing of Liuba's acceptance of Misha's marriage proposal.

Yet the film is transitional above all for Muratova's adoption of what has been called her 'ornamental (or decorative) style'. Much has been made of the fact that Muratova's work in the mid-seventies with Rustam Khamdamov on film project *Princess Mary* attracted her to this decorative style. She herself has stated that Khamdamov's explanation of the ornamental style came to her as a revelation 'like Newton's apple'. However, Muratova scholar Eugénie Zvonkine noted an earlier example of this style in Muratova's 1969 joint script with Vladimir Zuev, *Watch Your Dreams Attentively*, which was never brought to fruition. In any case, Muratova's 'ornamentalism' in *Getting to Know…* is rather extraordinary in the way it juxtaposes decorative ornamentalism with the prosaic setting of a chaotic construction site. This aspect certainly makes it one of Muratova's pivotal films, as well as an extraordinary Soviet film to rediscover in post-Soviet times. However, while the film was screened at the time of its very limited release, it was said to have been printed in only six copies and did not receive a single printed review. The jailed Soviet dissident author Andrei Sinyavsky once said of himself that any differences with the Soviet regime were

“primarily aesthetic”. Very much the same could be said about Muratova. Here was an attempt to construct a new aesthetic from the chaos of an iconic *topos* of Soviet culture and this made her film rather unique. By adapting the genre of the construction film, and referencing her VGIK teacher Sergei Gerasimov’s 1938 film *Komsomolsk*, Muratova discovers in the building site a location in which a non-canonical beauty can be created out of chaos:

A building site is chaos – a sphere where culture has not yet been created, where there’s no concept of ‘beautiful/not beautiful’, where there’s no aesthetic (it remains to be created). Chaos may seem terrible, but to me it is wonderful, because there are as yet no postulates at all. There’s no style, so stylization is impossible. I wanted to create a culture, a beauty outside existing canons.[9]

Not only did Muratova talk of it being her transitional film, she also mentioned that of all the color films that she made, she was only absolutely happy with *Getting to Know…* She connects this to the fact that she worked with the camera operator Yuri Klimenko on this film. Klimenko has worked with directors as diverse as Sergei Parajanov, Sergei Solovyov and Alexei Uchitel, and worked on Rustam Khamdamov’s elusive film *Anna Karamazoff* as well as Alexei German Sr.’s equally unique *Hard to be a God*. Shooting in color is more artistically limited for Muratova, but it’s clear that she does find a new aesthetic expressiveness in its use. The theatrical scenes are one example of how she re-evokes long-buried worlds of the Soviet imaginary. Thus she recaptures some of that naïve romanticism of the 1920s, seemingly so distant from the socialist realist canon of the stagnation era. Both the plasterer’s colorful red scarves and Leble’s adoption of theatrical costume on the construction site while reciting Lermontov’s speech from *Princess Mary* (an obvious allusion to Muratova’s ruined pet project) call to mind artworks such as Petrov-Vodkin’s headscarfed proletarian Madonna and invoke Brechtian epic theater (although the influential scholar and philosopher Mikhail Iampolski argues cogently that Muratova’s strategy through the differing acting styles of the characters encompasses both Brechtian and anti-Brechtian principles of the epic and the dramatic)[10]. Equally, the appearance of the potter and the emphasis on pottery near the beginning and at the end of the film highlights the form/formlessness dichotomy that Muratova plays with throughout the film. Like Pasolini she finds the sublime in the wretched and in chaotic, formless worlds.

Another aspect of the film which sets it apart from her earlier films is its lack of structure, the fact that it mimics the flow of life without any particular beginnings and endings. Here, arguably, is where Plakhov might have taken his cue for arguing that it was a turning point from the modernism of the sixties to the postmodernism of the later stagnation period. The chaos is not just the spatial chaos of a new building site, but also a temporal one. Even the resolution at the end of the film is ambiguous. Although the new housing complex has been built and people are congratulating each other on settling in, this still occurs outside of that *topos* of a construction site as yet uncleared of furniture, mirrors and bedsteads, the latter surprisingly reminiscent of the iron railings around Russian tombstones. Moreover, throughout the film, we only see Liuba, Galia and the twins in their temporary cabin hut cluttered with objects, an

early example of Muratova's decorative style. The two main male characters are almost only ever seen in their trucks, as though symbolizing the nomadic and flowing character of the film. Curiously, given her and fellow Soviet filmmaker Boris Vasilyevich Barnet's common attitude to the prepared script, Muratova's episodic stream-of-life nature of the plot echoes Barnet's own 1962 'trucker road movie' about an unrelated group's journey to the virgin lands of Central Asia.

As well as being topographical and temporal, the chaos of Muratova's non-canonical beauty is also marked by linguistic disruption. The film begins with a character declaiming advertising clichés, setting the scene for the introduction of this character who embodies a kind of walking cliché. This first instance of linguistic estrangement is only enhanced by both the intrusion and excision of phrases to disorientate the spectator. Language is not used as a clarifier of the visual but as a challenge to the viewer's attention. Zvonkine in her essay on the earlier 1969 Muratova script noted that this feature had already been present, but it takes on a particularly relevant role in *Getting to Know…:*

Muratova always works on dispersing and challenging the spectator's attention. The paroxysm of such an approach to sound and editing is evident in *Getting to Know…*, where during a conversation, while one character is telling one story, the editing tells a completely different one.[11]

This approach to editing is particularly relevant in building up the love story between Liuba and Misha, while her boastful regular boyfriend ignores this development. Refrains and repetitions may be used more sparingly in this transitional film by Muratova than in her protracted use of them in later films, but they are clearly marked. Liuba's prepared speech at the mass Komsomol wedding is heard three times in the film: once as rehearsal at the very beginning, then at the wedding ceremony itself, before finally being prompted by Misha, who asks her to repeat it while sitting in the truck. Muratova explained these verbal repetitions as owing to her love of opera.[12] Liuba's statement that "*No-one loves anyone*" is scattered throughout Muratova's later films. We start to get a real appreciation in *Getting to Know…* as to how the oral, the written and also the visual, frame her new formalism. Muratova uses the half-constructed houses and factories of the chaotic building site to splendid effect by framing scenes through windows, doors and many other aspects of a half-constructed space which would be less present in completed buildings.[13]

The mirror-like quality of the film, alongside the obsession with duality and repetition highlight yet another central feature, that is the film's theatricality which insinuates itself throughout the work. This theatricality is not simply present in those scenes which are explicitly theatrical, but becomes manifest through the use of many of what were later to become Muratova's stock devices, from refrain and repetition, to the specific performances of the protagonists. As Iampolski points out, there are a number of dramatic principles embodied by the characters. While Misha is the anti-theatrical character *par excellence*, he is surrounded by the representational in all its guises. Nikolai exhibits pure representation and not much else – from his advertising clichés at

the very beginning of the film, through his tap dancing, to his boastful and fantastically untrue tales in the truck, and his constant hectoring of Liuba and Misha. There is not a moment in which he appears on screen where his presence is not patently dramatic. Of course, theatricality also comes in an explicit guise in the form of the amateur drama group, and in particular Galia, played by Nataliya Leble, performing in the half-constructed buildings. Dramatic, too, are the personal relations between its director and Galia, performed in silent mode à la Chaplin and watched at from a distance by the troupe. One cannot help feeling the presence of the Soviet eccentric traditions of the 1920s in these scenes. Theatricality comes too in the Gurchenko scene and Liuba's reading of her dropped letter, and in what is perhaps the central scene of the film whereby Liuba walks towards Misha's truck with its flashing lights. Liuba's speech at the mass Komsomol wedding as well as the speeches at the factory by the twins (one correcting and prompting the other) and by Timofeyich exemplify a typically Soviet 'performance' at contrived public mass events. Their theatricality is intertwined with Muratova's masking and unmasking of the Soviet 'attraction'. Yet, all this theatricality is wrapped up in what is, unmistakably, Muratova's most tender film, narratively decentered but wrapped around three monologues on love, recited by Liuba, Galia and once again by Liuba, who reads the letter abandoned by Gurchenko. Although it can safely be said that Kira Muratova's 'career' in Soviet cinema was undermined by Soviet officials in an even more incapacitating way than is true of many other more well-known martyrs (Andrei Tarkovsky, Aleksei German or Elem Klimov), any 'ideological' reading of this fact regarding Muratova's cinema gets us only so far. Indeed, Nikita Eliseyev, a film critic for Russia's most prestigious film journal *Seance*, upon reviewing Muratova's anti-consumerist anti-fairytale *Melody for a Barrel Organ*, went so far as to state that, in spite of sharing a lot in common with Aleksei Balabanov, their films were ideologically polar opposites – his those of a "conservative nationalist', whereas for Eliseyev, Muratova's position could be precisely characterized as 'communist'[14]. Ironies and paradoxes abound, but it is surely the case that when one attempts to give a reading of Muratova as an anti-Soviet filmmaker one falls flat on one's face.[15] Her genius and her danger for 'Soviet power' was of another sort – her films in the sixties through to the eighties, after all, were shelved, butchered or in the case of *Getting to Know…*ignored, and even in the era of perestroika she managed to truly scandalize and provoke censorship with her bleakly severe film *Asthenic Syndrome*. But in *Getting to Know…* a unique Soviet lyricism, not masking the pale and defective, did emerge. A film whose authentic mystery even the most progressive of Lenfilm's lyrical practitioners in the guise of Ilya Auerbach did not grasp. Nonetheless, there was a kind of truth to Tamara Makarova's defense of Muratova's film as absolutely Soviet – for all of Muratova's quirkiness and idiosyncrasies, her work existed within some definite Soviet parameters, even while she managed to detonate subversive charges under the surface. Life and art seeped through the defective screen, rescuing those aspects of Soviet lyricism which shone through regardless in an era which stamped its heavy seal upon the image. Muratova would never again reach the heights of tenderness discernible in *Getting to Know…* even in what appears to be her return to the eccentrically sweet (and Chaplinesque) film in the guise of *The Sentimental Policeman* (1993). *Getting to Know the Big Wide World* was not only transitional in her oeuvre, it also had a felicitously unique character.

References

1. This is a reaction Makarova gave upon hearing of the negative reaction to Kira Muratova's "Getting to Know the Big Wide World" from officials at the Lenfilm Studios. Makarova was one of the Soviet Union's leading actresses, wife of Sergei Gerasimov and Muratova's teacher at film school.
2. In "Getting to Know the Big Wide World", a speech from the Lermontov story is recited by Natalia Leble.
3. Interestingly, the Lenfilm Studio's Party Committee stated that Muratova's film "dislocated" the picture of life in 'the great construction site' and obscured the 'presentation of the film's "social environment"'- showing that, as rather frequently was the case in the Soviet Union, censors and detractors did have a sense of what was going on in 'difficult' films which undermined the existing 'canonic framework' (cited in Tom Roberts, "Nina Ruslanova: Traversing the spaces of late socialism" in: Women in Soviet Film: The Thaw and Post-Thaw Periods, 2017 pp.49-70, page 61).
4. Cited in Jane Taubman, Kira Muratova, Tauris 2005, p. 30.
5. Eugénie Zvonkine, Watch you films attentively: Kira Muratova's unrealized script as a key to her oeuvre, Studies in Russian and Soviet Cinema, 2014 Vol. 8 No.1 p.44. Interestingly, Muratova's way of working with scripts seems surprisingly similar to that of Boris Barnet, who was famously seen scrambling on the floor with scripts cut up into pieces before the day of shooting.
6. A fuller overview of Ruslanova's biography and acting career can be found in the essay by Tom Roberts (see fn. 3).
7. Oleg Aronson, Metakino, Ad Marginem 2003.
8. Cited by Condee in her book, The Imperial Trace: Recent Russian Cinema, Oxford 2009, p.122.
9. Cited by Jane Taubman, op cit p.28.
10. Mikhail Iampolski, Kira Muratova, Seans, 2015 pp.98-100.
11. Eugenie Zvonkine, op cit. p.45.
12. "- There's the impression that you're bored with words, or why elsewould dialogues in your films be repeated to the point of senselessness? – That's simply because I love opera. How is it, after all, in opera? He sings, 'How I love you! How strongly I love you!' And she answers 'The moon is shining! The moon is shining!' Chorus." Interview with Dmitry Bykov cited in Taubman, op cit. p.107.
13. As Tom Roberts puts it, "Many shots also utilize mirrors to reflect and extend space, as well as transparent glass surfaces (windows, windshields, phone booths) that simultaneously reveal and reflect, thus naturally superimposing images". Roberts, op cit. p.62.
14. https://seance.ru/blog/melodia-sharmanka/. Accessed on October 31st 2019.
15. For those with a knowledge of Russian, one can see how the film critic Zara Abdullaeva tore apart a lazy attempt by Uri Gershowicz to interpret Muratova as constructing a denunciatory portrait of Alexeivich's 'Red Man or Homo Sovieticus' avant la lettre at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3XjhtHBL5tw. For more on this 'eternal hunt for the Red Man', see Ilya Budraitskis' seminal

essay on Alexeivich’s concept of Homo Sovieticus at https://www.e-flux.com/journal/70/60563/the-eternal-hunt-for-the-red-man/. Accessed on October 31st 2019.