

KINOFILES

THE FILMMAKERS' COMPANION



KIRA
MURATOVA

JANE TAUBMAN

I.B.TAURIS

Kira Muratova

KINOfiles Filmmakers' Companions

General Editor: Richard Taylor

Written for cineastes and students alike, and building on the achievements of the KINOfiles Film Companions, the KINOfiles Filmmakers' Companions are readable, authoritative, illustrated companion handbooks to the most important and interesting people who have participated in Russian cinema from its beginnings to the present. Each KINOfile examines the career of one filmmaker, or group of filmmakers, in the context of both Russian and world cinema. KINOfiles also include studies of people who have been active in the cinemas of the other countries that once formed part of the Soviet Union, as well as of émigré filmmakers working in the Russian tradition.

KINOfiles form a part of KINO: The Russian Cinema Series.

Filmmakers' Companions:

- | | | |
|---|----------------------------|-----------------|
| 1 | <i>Nikita Mikhalkov</i> | Birgit Beumers |
| 2 | <i>Alexander Medvedkin</i> | Emma Widdis |
| 3 | <i>Dmitri Shostakovich</i> | John Riley |
| 4 | <i>Kira Muratova</i> | Jane A. Taubman |

Film Companions:

- | | | |
|----|--------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| 1 | <i>The Battleship Potemkin</i> | Richard Taylor |
| 2 | <i>The Man with the Movie Camera</i> | Graham Roberts |
| 3 | <i>Burnt by the Sun</i> | Birgit Beumers |
| 4 | <i>Repentance</i> | Denise Youngblood and Josephine Woll |
| 5 | <i>Bed and Sofa</i> | Julian Graffy |
| 6 | <i>Mirror</i> | Natasha Synessios |
| 7 | <i>The Cranes Are Flying</i> | Josephine Woll |
| 8 | <i>Little Vera</i> | Frank Beardow |
| 9 | <i>Ivan the Terrible</i> | Joan Neuberger |
| 10 | <i>The End of St. Petersburg</i> | Vance Kopley, Jr. |
| 11 | <i>Chapaev</i> | Julian Graffy |
| 12 | <i>Storm over Asia</i> | Amy Sargeant |

KIRA MURATOVA

JANE A. TAUBMAN

KINOfiles Filmmakers' Companion 4

I.B. TAURIS

LONDON · NEW YORK

Published in 2005 by I. B. Tauris & Co. Ltd
6 Salem Road, London W2 4BU
175 Fifth Avenue, New York NY 10010
ibtauris.com

In the United States and Canada distributed by Palgrave Macmillan, a
division of St. Martin's Press
175 Fifth Avenue, New York NY 10010

Copyright © Jane A. Taubman, 2005

The right of the author of this work to be identified has been asserted
by her in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

All rights reserved. Except for brief quotations in a review, this book, or
any part thereof, may not be reproduced, stored in or introduced into a
retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means,
electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without
the prior written permission of the publisher.

ISBN 1 85043 409 3
EAN 978 1 85043 409 2

A full CIP record for this book is available from the British Library

Typeset in Calisto by Dexter Haven Associates Ltd, London
Printed and bound in Great Britain by MPG Books Ltd, Bodmin

Contents

Illustrations	vi
Acknowledgements	vii
1 Odessa's Uncompromising Eccentric	1
2 'Provincial Melodramas'	11
3 The Unknown Muratova	27
4 Soviet Apocalypse: <i>Asthenic Syndrome</i> [1990]	45
5 After Apocalypse	62
6 Crimes Without Punishment: <i>Three Stories</i> [1997]	77
7 Muratova as a Ukrainian Film-maker	89
8 Afterwords	105
Notes	111
Filmography	125

Illustrations

1	Muratova at work	7
2	<i>Brief Encounters</i> : Nina Ruslanova, Vladimir Vysotsky	14
3	<i>Brief Encounters</i> : Kira Muratova, Vladimir Vysotsky	17
4	<i>The Long Farewell</i> : Muratova directs Oleg Vladimirsky	22
5	<i>Getting to Know the Big, Wide World</i> : Nina Ruslanova, Sergei Popov	29
6	<i>Among the Grey Stones</i> : Stanislav Govoriukhin	35
7	<i>A Change of Fate</i> : Natalia Leble, Leonid Kudriashov (photo credit: A. Roizman)	40
8	<i>Asthenic Syndrome</i> : Olga Antonova	49
9	<i>Asthenic Syndrome</i> : Sergei Popov	55
10	<i>The Sentimental Policeman</i> : Nikolai Shatokhin	64
11	<i>The Sentimental Policeman</i> : Andrei Kasianov, Leonid Kushnir, Ekaterina Lobanova (photo credit: E. Golubenko)	67
12	<i>Enthusiasts</i> : Svetlana Kolenda, Renata Litvinova, Alexei Shevchenko, Umirzak Shmanov, Mikhail Demidov (photo credit: E. Golubenko)	72
13	<i>Three Stories</i> : Natalia Buzko, Renata Litvinova	82
14	<i>Three Stories</i> : Renata Litvinova, Alexandra Svenskaia	85
15	<i>Minor People</i> : Sergei Chetverkov, Natalia Buzko (photo credit: E. Golubenko)	96
16	<i>Chekhov's Motifs</i> : Georgi Deliev, Natalia Buzko, Irina Doronina (photo credit: E. Golubenko)	102

Acknowledgements

This book could not have been written without the generous help of Elena M. Vasilieva of Moscow, and without the gracious cooperation of Kira Muratova herself. I am thankful for the help generously provided to me by the Olexandr Dovzhenko National Centre in Kiev, its Director of Research, Sergei Trimbach, and the entire staff, including the General Director, Volodymir Mandryka, and the Librarian, Petro Jarovenko. Vira Komisarenko of the Olexandr Dovzhenko Museum helped with translations from Ukrainian to Russian. I thank Alla Verlotsky for helping to arrange my research trip to Kiev. Professors Katerina Clark, Vida Johnson and Josephine Woll, and my husband William Taubman, read and commented on the manuscript at various stages. Marina Madorskaya read and commented on several chapters.

Two anonymous readers provided extremely helpful suggestions, and finally, Richard Taylor provided both encouragement and careful reading throughout.

I thank Tatiana Babyonysheva, Inna Babyonysheva, Viktoria Schweitzer, Maya Turovskaya and Marina Goldovskaya for sharing with me their vast knowledge of Russian culture and cinema. The late Leonid Gurevich helped me begin this project by providing an introduction to Elena Vasilieva. I thank Aleksandra Sviridova for research assistance and advice, Ksenya Kiebuzinski, Archivist/Bibliographer of the Harvard Ukrainian Research Institute, for research assistance and xeroxing, Alla Karasova and present and past Amherst students Constantin Rusanov and Irina Ivanova for translations from Ukrainian to Russian, and Amherst students Jaime Atteniese, Christina Schutz, Nicholas White and Tarja Martikainen for research assistance. The staff of the Frost Library at Amherst College provided peerless reference and inter-library loan assistance.

The project was funded with an Amherst College Faculty Research award.

1. Odessa's Uncompromising Eccentric

I always knew that my films would some day see the light of day. I just didn't believe that I'd live to see it.

Kira Muratova, 1986¹

Muratova's biography helps explain her fierce independence and stubborn insistence on making films her own way. Her mother was Romanian, her father Russian. Both were dedicated communists and professional Revolutionaries. Kira Georgievna Korotkova was born on 5 November 1934 in Soroki, Bessarabia, which was then part of Romania but is now in Moldova. When Bessarabia was ceded to the Soviets as part of the Molotov–Ribbentrop pact, her parents repatriated to the USSR. During the war her father parachuted into occupied Bessarabia to organise the resistance, but he was handed over to the Germans and executed.² After the war Kira and her mother, Natalia, returned to Romania, where she studied in a Russian-language school for the children of Soviet officers. After the school closed she finished the last three years of her studies in a Romanian school. 'This produced more than a bit of confusion in my head. My first language, my love of country, was Russian and Russia, and when I later returned to the Soviet Union I knew that I wanted to stay there.'³ Natalia, a gynaecologist by training, became a high official in the socialist government of post-war Romania.⁴ She served as a member of the committee that approved foreign films, taking Kira along with her to screenings. This gave Muratova extensive exposure to contemporary West European cinema, which was unavailable to contemporaries in the USSR.⁵ She retained her Romanian citizenship until the early 1970s, after her mother's death, though her status as a foreigner complicated her travels within the USSR.

In 1952 Muratova returned to Moscow to study at the literature faculty of Moscow State University, but transferred after a year to VGIK, the All-Union – now All-Russian – Institute of Cinematography, where she studied with Sergei Gerasimov and graduated in 1959.⁶ She remains devoted to her teacher: ‘Gerasimov taught me to listen to human intonation, to notice how people talk, and to love that.’⁷ The listening was particularly important; it is reflected in the unconventional relation of dialogue and soundtrack to image in Muratova’s films. Though he is usually remembered as the director of Soviet classics such as *Komsomolsk* [1937] or *Quiet Flows the Don* [Tikhii Don, 1958], Gerasimov began his career in the 1920s in Leningrad as an actor with the neo-expressionist FEKS (Factory of the Eccentric Actor), a group led by Grigori Kozintsev and Leonid Trauberg. The Soviet film encyclopaedia characterised him as ‘an actor of predominantly grotesque *emploi*’.⁸ That taste for the grotesque and the eccentric lives on in Muratova’s films. Gerasimov passed on the heritage of the early Soviet avant-garde to a director who used its discoveries and frequently paid it homage in her own work. Those who knew Muratova in her student days at VGIK recall that she stood out from the other girls, not only in the stylishness of her haircut and dress but also in her more Western independence of mind and bearing.⁹ Admission to VGIK was very competitive, but eased by parental achievements or citizenship in a fraternal socialist state: Muratova, daughter of a fallen Soviet war hero and a Romanian communist official, would have been given preference on both counts.

While at VGIK she married her fellow student Alexander Muratov, son of a Ukrainian writer. Kira Korotkova is credited as the co-screenwriter for a three-reel short, *Spring Rain* [Vesennii dozhd’, 1958], which he directed as a term project, in response to the Komsomol’s call for help in its campaign against alcoholism. Kolia (beloved Russian actor Oleg Tabakov, in his first screen role) and Katia are young workers whose budding love affair runs into trouble when he shows up for a date with a bottle of vodka. The movie is professionally made, with pardonable borrowings from Kalatozov’s *The Cranes are Flying* [Letiat zhuravli, 1957]: a flock of birds rises as the young couple walk down a deserted street; they conduct tender farewells as she climbs a circular staircase to her apartment. The couple co-directed a short diploma film, *By the Steep Ravine* [U krutogo iara, 1961], for which Muratov wrote the screenplay, based on a story by nature writer Gavriil Troepolsky. Troepolsky’s hero, Senia Troshin, is a collective farm worker whose first love is hunting. A pair of wolves have been decimating the local flocks; he tracks them to their lair and kills them, using as bait one of their cubs, which he later adopts. Senia loves nature: not only does he adopt the cub but he protects a lost baby rabbit, releasing it in a spot where it will be safe from hawks. According to Muratov, they changed the ending in order to alter the film’s moral message:

'Senia didn't hunt the wolves because he wanted to kill them for the benefit of the collective farm, but because his fellow workers badgered him about his love of nature. The wolf hunt was an excuse to spend an entire month in the forest, rather than in the fields.'¹⁰ Muratova's deep attachment to animals was already evident in this early film.

After graduation the couple was invited to work at the Odessa Studio, which had undergone a renaissance during the Khrushchev 'Thaw' with the arrival of talented directors such as Marlen Khutsiev. They were assigned a screenplay about the economic problems of a collective farm. *Our Honest Bread* [Nash chestnyi khleb, 1964], Muratova recalled, was 'a strong social critique that pointed a finger at responsible Party leaders who meddle in agriculture when they know nothing about it, while the competent chairman of the kolkhoz had to submit to their directives'.¹¹ The issue was particularly delicate in 1964, the year in which Nikita Khrushchev, accused of just such meddling, was removed from office. *Our Honest Bread* was attacked by the very bureaucracy it dared to criticise.¹² The film's hero, collective farm chairman Makar Zadorozhny, is an older man wise in the ways of the land and of human nature, suspicious of bureaucrats and their machinations to fulfil arbitrary plans. But, in his absence, his son Alexander agrees to accept defective milking machines from a local factory in exchange for additional deliveries of fodder – the corrupt regional Party secretary is in cahoots with the factory director. An unusually frank romantic sub-plot concerns Alexander and the beautiful milkmaid Katia, who is forced to abort his baby when he abandons her and the village.

The finished film, though not nearly as innovative as Muratova's solo films, still contained excellent acting and imaginative cinematography, such as a striking shot of the shadows of mourners walking their bicycles in a funeral procession (to ride back the long way from the graveyard). But it was too pessimistic for the Kiev authorities, who demanded numerous changes. Muratov re-shot two scenes over his wife's objections. Muratova prefers to begin her creative biography with her first solo film, *Brief Encounters* [Korotkie vstrechi, 1967]: 'In *Our Honest Bread* I consider I was still a student. I still didn't understand anything about editing, and in general, together we basically argued. We had constant "folklore" compromises: we'll do this the way you want, and that the way I want. I didn't consider myself the real author of that film.' But several characters from the village appeared in her later films: 'I have a tendency to attract non-professionals, with whom I fall in love because they are amusing and unique.'¹³ After *Our Honest Bread* the couple went their separate ways as directors, and soon their marriage dissolved as well. He left to work at the Dovzhenko Studio in Kiev; Muratova remained in Odessa with their daughter, Marianna.

Muratova's first two solo films, which contemporary viewers still find most accessible, were treated most harshly by the Soviet authorities, though there is little explicitly political in either. *Brief Encounters* was given the lowest-category release and shown largely in film clubs, often by Muratova herself, who toured the country with one of the few prints. *The Long Farewell* [Dolgie provody, 1971, released 1987] was banned entirely, despite the active support and intervention of Gerasimov. She was 'disqualified' (downgraded to a lower professional category), which effectively denied her the right to work independently as a director. Muratova demanded she be given other work at the studio, and was shown a list of vacancies, which began with cleaning lady and gardener's assistant. The first two suited her: 'I prefer physical labour to needless paper shuffling.' But it was 'awkward' for a director to work as a cleaning lady, so she was given various other jobs, including directing the studio museum and library and writing screenplays to order.¹⁴ In 1978 she was allowed to make *Getting to Know the Big, Wide World* at the Lenfilm Studio, but the film's aesthetic displeased the authorities. The Odessa Studio demanded so many cuts to *Among the Grey Stones* [Sredi serykh kamnei, 1983] that she removed her name from the credits. Asked about those difficult years, Muratova was characteristically philosophical: 'I simply continued to live.' Of the bureaucrats who censored or mutilated her films:

It's a kind of homage, isn't it? [...] By nature I am a very happy person. But I have a pessimistic vision of things... My films are not polemics. There's not a shadow of radical critique of ideology or politics. [...] Every time, they would say to me, "As a whole, it won't work. There are allusions, excesses, associations of ideas." Nothing concrete. But in fact, they wanted you to avoid making the audience think or grow sad.¹⁵

The 1970s were a difficult decade of cultural stagnation, when the Brezhnev regime suppressed artistic originality and political dissent. Aleksander Solzhenitsyn was exiled abroad, human rights activist Andrei Sakharov persecuted. Muratova's idol, director Sergei Paradjanov, was imprisoned from 1973 to 1977 on charges of homosexuality. The artistic and literary intelligentsia supported Paradjanov and eventually got him released, though only the bravest dared show their support by writing to him in the labour camp. Muratova wrote to him pessimistically about the mood of the intelligentsia. 'It's a shame we are so pitiful and weak. And cowardly. We take everything as a matter of course and keep waiting for someone to do something, we keep blaming someone for something, but just keep living our lives, as if nothing at all had happened. [...] Slavery has settled into my soul once and for all.'¹⁶

In the late 1980s, when her early films were brought off the shelf, two young Russian film critics compared Muratova to Alexei German and characterised their aesthetic as 'the striving to represent life in the forms of life

itself... The spectator has the illusion that the director is not interfering at all with the train of action, that life on the screen is “allowed” to exist and flow according to its own logic, its own laws.¹⁷ By the time they wrote, Muratova's style had already evolved through the poetic realism of *Getting to Know the Big, Wide World* into the surrealism and hyper-realism of *Among the Grey Stones* and *A Change of Fate* [Peremena uchasti, 1987]. She still based her aesthetic on the *realia* of everyday life, but the events that take place, and the authorial stance towards them, are far from ‘the illusion that life on the screen is allowed to exist and flow according to its own logic’ – rather, they flow according to life's *illogic*.

Muratova's aesthetic has evolved with each new film, but she has always been *sui generis*, never a member of an identifiable school or movement.¹⁸ In part, this is because of her status as an outsider in Soviet society. When asked if she had ‘the impression that in the mid-1960s films like Shepitko's *Heat*, Tarkovsky's *Ivan's Childhood*, Ioseliani's *Falling Leaves*, Paradjanov's *Shadows of Forgotten Ancestors*, and Konchalovsky's *First Teacher* marked the emergence of a generation and a new cinema,’ she replied: ‘Certainly I watched those films. But I never sensed the existence of a movement. [...] Let's not forget that I came to the USSR from Romania... I was not like those who lived here for a long time, seeing all the defects and the period when it changed... I have a different biography.’¹⁹ Paradjanov, though an Armenian raised in Tbilisi, became – like Muratova – a ‘Ukrainian’ film-maker who made his early films at the Dovzhenko Studio. *Shadows of Forgotten Ancestors* [Teni zabytykh predkov, 1965] and *The Colour of Pomegranates* [Tsvet granata, 1969] were trailblazing in their use of colour and camera motion, and for their move away from an emphasis on a legible narrative. Paradjanov's example was important in giving Muratova the impetus for visual experimentation and what she called ‘ornamentalism’ (*dekorativnost'*), beginning with her first colour film, *Getting to Know the Big, Wide World*.

In May 1986 the new, reformist leadership of the Union of Soviet Film-makers established a ‘Conflicts Commission’, designed to bring about the release of films that had been forbidden, cut or given extremely limited release over the previous thirty years. Among the first films brought off the shelf were *Brief Encounters* and *The Long Farewell*, censored for their ‘incompatibility with the aesthetic canons of Socialist Realism’ and their director's ‘evident political unreliability’.²⁰ Their belated release, and the simultaneous discovery of their nearly unknown director, produced a mild sensation both at home and abroad. *The Long Farewell* won the FIPRESCI award at the 1987 Locarno Festival, where Muratova served on the jury, and the Special Prize at the All-Union Film Festival in 1988. A retrospective of Muratova's films was shown at the Festival of Women's Films in Créteil, France, in March