

Deconstructing Socialism in the Early Films of Kira Muratova

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<https://vimeo.com/manage/videos/566787359>

In his recent video introduction to the work of Kira Muratova for *Iskusstvo Kino*, Anton Dolin says of the first period of her work: “let’s call it Soviet, though it is as Soviet as it is anti-Soviet or simply non-Soviet...”¹ Indeed, in a period when Soviet comedies sought to provide a modicum of social commentary and art films – following the lead of Tarkovsky – an escape from present-day realities into something more eternal, Muratova’s work refused to either fit or fight the times. To a great extent, her status as an auteur rests on her ability to construct her own world, which, though constantly evolving, has remained seemingly impervious to regime shifts and cultural and political changes. In this video essay, I take an unconventional approach, tracing where and how a reflection on Soviet reality enters the work of this “least Soviet” of filmmakers.

I see this happening primarily in two films: *Brief Encounters* (1967), which ironically was criticized for its narrow focus on women’s affective life – what was denounced by the Russian censors as its “мелкотемье” [“pettiness”] as well as its failure to address “man and the historical process, man and his epoch” – and the more obviously socially oriented *Getting to Know the Big, Wide World* (1978).² In both films, I would like to argue, the critique of the Soviet project is articulated not through the plot structure or anything the characters say or do so much as through the *mise-en-scène*: the built environment they inhabit.

Critically, both films feature construction sites. Valentina, the protagonist of *Brief Encounters*, played by Muratova herself, is a Party official responsible for the city’s water supply (a constant problem in Odessa, where Muratova lived and shot many of her films). As such, she must sign off on all new residential construction. The film is often described as juxtaposing two different spaces: that of the city and the country (город и деревня), a stark dichotomy inherited

from the Russian literary tradition. What these accounts miss is how often the film returns to the construction site: a third, intermediary space that helps to triangulate this opposition. Nadia, Valentina's maid, freshly arrived from the country, tags along on Valentina's first visit to the site. Standing at an upper-story window, Nadia complains about the city ("even the water here doesn't taste like water") and points out that all one has to do to get to her village is follow the road they see below. Her comments serve to connect instead of contrasting the two spaces, and to position the Soviet "микрорайон" ["microdistrict"] as literally a liminal space – the edge of the city. This scene can also be said to anticipate the Village Prose movement that would get underway just a few years later, which would opine against the encroachment of the city and the demise of the village as a way of life.

Valentina makes three return visits to the construction site throughout the film. The site each time is presented as a quagmire, a muddy, chaotic terrain. Inside, doorknobs fall off at the touch and, most importantly, there is no running water. The shiny, new building can thus be seen as a ruin before it is completed, a stillborn project lacking the vital liquid coursing through its veins.

The scenes at the construction site are all the more memorable due to the way in which that environment contrasts with Valentina's own. As Lida Oukaderova notes, her apartment is "overflowing with objects and textures of all kinds – heavily ornamented furniture, kitchenware, bookshelves, wallpaper, curtains, sculptural reliefs, pictures, and much more ... as if revealing the filmmaker's need to separate this home's interior from a particular historical period or ideology."³ The camera draws our attention to every detail of this environment through the numerous pans it executes around each room, the baroque movements of the camera magnifying the ornamentalism of the setting. Valentina, the Party functionary, thus inhabits a space that seems to lie outside of historical time, or at least quite clearly evokes the pre-Revolutionary past.

Getting to Know the Big Wide World (1978), Muratova's third film, produced after a long period when she was forbidden from making films, was outwardly a clear ploy to please the censors. Based on a short story by Grigori Baklanov, it had all the trappings of a proper socialist realist tale: a love triangle set against the backdrop of a construction site. In reality, the film takes up socialist realist tropes only to undo them – or co-opts them for the filmmaker's own, not entirely nefarious purposes. The satire comes across most clearly in scenes depicting the pageantry of official Soviet life – a kolkhoz wedding where the main protagonist, Liuba, must pronounce an official speech and the grand opening of the plant she has helped to build. These are only the most obvious examples, however. Every scene becomes an occasion to subvert socialist realist tropes, albeit in more subtle ways.

From the very first scene in which the protagonists' car gets stuck in the mud and the rescue is long and anything but heroic, the film once again evokes the image of a quagmire, of characters literally “stuck,” going nowhere, caught in a state of perpetual waiting—perhaps in reference to the original satire of the Soviet project, Andrei Platonov's *The Foundation Pit* (1930). A lengthy visit to a local potter who turns that mud into beautifully shaped vessels, in turn, sets up a new dichotomy between the artisanal and the industrial, the hand-made and the mass produced, which extends to everything in the film, from speech to feelings. The space of the factory is only ever presented in a state of incompleteness. Similarly, we never see the workers move into the residential buildings constructed nearby – the film concludes with them on the doorstep, poised to enter, but never quite getting to the Promised Land.

Both films thus invite us to see the unfinished buildings and the decrepit landscapes as metonyms for the Soviet project – one doomed never to be completed. Its status as of 1978 is simultaneously *not-yet* and *already no-longer*. This vision is in line with Muratova's personal aesthetic preferences. After all, as Eugénie Zvonkine, Zara Abdullaeva and others have pointed

out, Muratova's cinema is best described as a "cinema of irresolution" and the "unfinished" or "interrupted" gesture.⁴ While in her other films the aesthetic serves as a means of escape from the political, here it becomes itself the political, the point of entry into a world of critique.

Notes

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- ¹ "‘Искусство кино’ о режиссерах: Антон Долин о Кире Муратовой," posted November 18, 2020, consulted May 18, 2021, author's own translation. Original Russian: 'назовём его советским, хотя он настолько же советский как и анти-советский или же не-советский...', https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0Y4CM9H_lt0&t=571s.
- ² "Chelovek i vremia," *Iskusstvo kino* 10 (1968): 56, as quoted in Jane Taubman, "The Cinema of Kira Muratova," *The Russian Review* 52, No. 3 (July 1993): 370.
- ³ Lida Oukaderova, Chapter 5, "The Obdurate Matter of Space: Kira Muratova's Brief Encounters," in *The Cinema of the Soviet Thaw: Space, Materiality, Movement* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2017), 162.
- ⁴ Eugénie Zvonkine, "The Unfinished Gesture: Kira Muratova's *Long Farewells*," *Senses of Cinema* 9 (October 2019), <https://eefb.org/retrospectives/kira-muratovas-long-farewells-dolgie-provody-1971/>.

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Author Biography

Masha Shpolberg is Assistant Professor of Film Studies at the University of North Carolina—Wilmington. Her research and teaching focus on global documentary, eco-cinema, women's cinema and Russian and Eastern European cinema. Her first book project, *Labor in Late*

Socialism: The Cinema of Polish Workers' Unrest 1968-1989 argues that cinema played a crucial role in the formation of the Polish 'Solidarity' movement, the only successful grassroots opposition movement in the Soviet bloc. The persistence of workers' strikes during this period forced filmmakers to confront the representational legacy of socialist realism, articulating alternative visions of labour and the working body. She is also currently finishing up an edited volume on *Cinema and the Environment in Eastern Europe* for Berghahn Books. Prior to coming to UNCW, she taught as a postdoc at Wellesley College. She holds a Ph.D. in Comparative Literature and Film & Media Studies from Yale University and the Ecole Normale Supérieure.