

# Touch and Sight in the Films of Kira Muratova: Towards the Notion of a Cinema of Gesture

Irina Schulzki

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<https://vimeo.com/manage/videos/566789380>

In the history of Soviet and post-Soviet cinema, Kira Muratova stands out due to her incessant and multifaceted exploration of corporal dimensions of film, from excessive movements and histrionic gestures to statuesque immovability. Geared towards the notion of a cinema of gesture to define Muratova's oeuvre in a unified way, this video essay tackles her film aesthetics from the angle of the correlation between the visible and the tactile while revisiting the film images of movement in terms of manual – and hence manipulative – work occurring on the surface. The essay draws on the concept of haptic cinema proposed by Laura U. Marks in her seminal *The Skin of the Film* (2000) focusing on the inseparable intertwinement of vision and touch in a film image. On the one hand, Marks's "haptic visuality"<sup>1</sup> resorts to Aloïs Riegl's distinction between haptic and optical images and, on the other, to Gilles Deleuze's notion of a "tactisign".<sup>2</sup> According to Marks, images become tactile when they foreground textures and their material qualities, rather than offer easily identifiable objects and figures. In other words, it is the sensory overload that makes an image tactile and exposes its physicality and mediality.

Cinema is an art of surfaces: of seemingly impenetrable screens and flat film tapes. It is, therefore, no accident that Marks employs an epidermic metaphor – *the skin of the film* – to ground her film ontology. What would the role of gesture then be in relation to the skin of the film? How do gestures form ornaments and imprints? How do monochrome and colourful images reveal structure, curve, and flexion? This essay opens with the treatment of colour in Muratova's cinema and then proceeds to the relationships between seeing and touching, between blindness and bedazzlement, and on to weaving and knitting as gestures of

manipulation, and, finally, to textile images. Tapestry appears as the most appropriate metaphor of Muratova's haptic cinematography as it contains the idea of handicraft, surface, cover, ornament, structure, and a heterogeneity of elements. Cinematic bodies are placed into an environment overladen with various objects and kitschy bric-a-brac, which determine their movements and gestures. This chiasmus of bodies and texture of the world effaces the ontological difference between the fore- and background, between humans and things, centre and periphery, presence and disappearance.<sup>3</sup> In conclusion, I argue that the chiasmic structures characteristic of Muratova's visual style attest to an ornamental egalitarianism, in which things, elevated to the status of characters, rival human bodies in the field of visibility.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Laura U. Marks. *The Skin of the Film. Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Senses* (Durham, London: Duke UP, 2000), 162.

<sup>2</sup> Alois Riegl. *Stilfragen: Grundlegungen zu einer Geschichte der Ornamentik* (Berlin, 1893); Gilles Deleuze. *Cinema 2. The Time-Image* (London: Athlone Press, 1989), 12f.

<sup>3</sup> The term "chiasmus" is suggested by Maurice Merleau-Ponty (See his "Eye and Mind". In *The Primacy of Perception and Other Essays on Phenomenological Psychology, the Philosophy of Art, History and Politics* (Northwestern UP, 1964), 159-190). Irina Izvolova and Emma Widdis both apply resort to Merleau-Ponty to describe the human interaction with the surrounding things in Muratova's films. See: Irina Izvolova. "Zvuk lopnuvšeji struny". *Iskusstvo Kino* 8 (1998), 110-119; Emma Widdis. "Muratova's Clothes, Muratova's Textures, Muratova's Skin". In: *KinoKultura* 8 (April 2005), [www.kinokultura.com/articles/apr05-widdis.html](http://www.kinokultura.com/articles/apr05-widdis.html).

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### Author Biography

Irina Schulzki is publishing director of the journal [Apparatus. Film, Media and Digital Cultures in Central and Eastern Europe](#) and a Ph.D. candidate at the Ludwig Maximilian University of Munich. Her doctoral thesis focuses on Kira Muratova's films and theories of gesture in film and media. She authored book chapters and journal articles on film and gesture, fan fiction, theories of the comical, phenomenology and media, the prose of Mikhail Shishkin, and the cinema of Kira Muratova; and co-edited the volume *Fictions / Realities. New Forms and Interactions* (with Jörg von Brincken and Ute Gröbel, 2011) and the special issue of *Apparatus* 5 (2017), titled *Mise en geste. Studies of Gesture in Cinema* (with Ana Hedberg Olenina). Irina Schulzki is a co-organiser of the international symposium on the cinema of Kira Muratova "[People don't like to look at this...](#)" held in May and September 2021.