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Based on Anton Chekhov's short story "Difficult People" (*Tiazhelye liudi*, 1886) and one-act play *Tatiana Repina*, Kira Muratova's *Chekhovian Motifs* (*Chekovskie motivy*, 2002) begins in a din of noise. A farmer traipses through the mud against a backdrop of squawking birds. He then starts chasing a goat, trying to corner it before the distressed animal outruns him.¹ These farmers are watched by a boy, who asks when they will finish work on the new barn. He is told that it will not be a barn but a store. Oddly agitated, the child responds: "No, it'll be a barn." Their conversation devolves into a shouting match over the building's fate: "Barn!" (*sarai!*), "No, store!" (*net, magazin!*), "No, barn!" (*net, sarai!*). Their fighting startles the barn animals, and the soundtrack backslides into a garble of unintelligible yells and animal cries. From its outset, *Chekhovian Motifs* establishes the centrality of animals to its visual and aural economy. Not only are animals in close quarters with human beings, but language itself turns into a kind of non-linguistic noise resembling animal "talk." This interspecies proximity, I argue, is the main theme of *Chekhovian Motifs* that invites us to interrogate the human's separation from and, by implication, superiority over animals.

In line with what Mikhail Iampolskii calls Muratova's "cine-anthropology" – that is, the ways in which Muratova harnesses moving images to probe questions of what constitutes humanness – *Chekhovian Motifs* draws analogies between humans and animals to expose their likenesses and to reiterate how humans work to establish difference.² The film undertakes this deconstructive project through its topical and aesthetic mobilisation of cross-species looking, distorted language, non-narrative time, and allusions to the violence humans inflict on animal life.

The Pig's Face

After the discord settles down in the opening of *Chekhovian Motifs*, Muratova presents an extreme close-up of her protagonist, Evgrav Shiriaev, the father of the farmstead's family, played by the Russian actor Sergei Popov (a standby performer for Muratova). This close-up, though, is a disorienting one. It is a magnified image of Shiriaev's facial hair and nose, with his upper face cut out of the frame. The camera holds its focus, compelling us to linger on the matted texture of the man's goatee. We notice stray black and grey hairs climbing up his cheeks, the slight wrinkles of his lips, his bulbous (Gogolian?) nose, and droplets of rain clinging to his coiling whiskers.

This textural image evokes what Laura Marks calls a "tactile gaze," a mode of looking in which our encounter with an image is processed by drawing on other forms of sense experience.³ Most often enacted through visual obfuscation, images of texture, or tracking shots, tactile looking frustrates our ability to engage an image purely optically. It appeals to our sensorial apprehension of an image's material qualities. This bushy, somewhat indistinct close-up in *Chekhovian Motifs* (Chekhov famously sported a goatee) engenders a wandering gaze that registers the image's texture.

The camera tracks upward to reveal Shiriaev's face. We watch him wearily shut his eyes. The camera then cuts to the mud-spattered face of a pig staring back at Shiriaev staring at it. The extreme close-up of the pig's snout replicates the previous image of Shiriaev: the thin hairs covering its face are similarly soaked by rain, its nostrils dominate the frame, and its eyes and cheeks are splotched by the wet dirt. We again register all the textural subtleties of this close-up.



Figure 1 and 2: Alternating close-ups of Shiriaev and the pig, which draw a parallel between the two.

The next image turns back to Shiriaev, who begins complaining about the rainfall and the wages he pays his laborers for what will be another lousy harvest. Cycling between close-ups of Shiriaev and the pig, which are shot in coarse black-and-white film that accentuates their bedraggled features, Muratova communicates the shared misery of a human and an animal on a decrepit farm that seems pulled out of the nineteenth century, Chekhov's era. This scene of interspecies intimacy relayed by close-ups does not invite identification but tactile apprehension.

The close-up of this pig looking directly at Shiriaev – and, by turn, the camera – begs the question with which every scholar writing about animals in film must grapple. As John Berger asks in his seminal essay “Why Look at Animals?”⁴ : What do we see when we look at an animal? Though we detect apparent layers of familiarity in any animal's look, especially in one that is close to us, we must acknowledge, “despite all our convictions, all our knowledge, all our reasoning [...] that we are looking at something that eludes our ability to form a concept.”⁵ Though we know that animals cannot participate in human speech, their muteness “always accompanies us in the realm of our language.”⁶ We lack the resources to fully articulate what we are watching and what is watching us. The animal look refuses more than it allows; it reminds us of a life, an existence, that echoes our own but remains distantly outside of language, and, therefore, the (human) mind's reach.

Does this distance, though, foreclose possibilities for meaningful cross-species exchange? The shot-reverse-shot alternation between textural close-ups of Shiriaev's face and the pig's in *Chekhovian Motifs* suggests otherwise. The human-animal look incites what Barbara Creed calls a “creaturely gaze” – a mode of cross-species recognition that appeals to the viewer's awareness of, and sensitivity toward, bodily engagement.⁷ The absence of language in human-animal relations necessitates that they consist instead of “superficial” encounters, oriented in an

appreciation for the material, surface qualities of living beings. The creaturely gaze “speaks to the viewers’ familiarity with [...] bodily engagement, thus bringing into the relationship the animal body covered variously in fur, hair, wool, feathers, scales, skin [...] The creaturely gaze draws on a range of senses.”⁸ It presents an alternative mode of interspecies engagement beyond the operations of language. In *Chekhovian Motifs*, we develop an appreciation for Shiriaev and the pig as two bodies subject to harsh conditions; they are pelted by rain and dappled in mud, inciting our tactile awareness of their skin surfaces. The human’s presumed difference with animal life melts away. These haptic close-ups posit a human-animal mutuality that language precludes.

More than unflatteringly equating Shiriaev to a pig, Muratova here uncovers life’s creatureliness, the way all bodies are, first and foremost, corporeally exposed to the elements.

Kasha, Kasha, Televizor

After this noisy outdoor sequence, Muratova brings us inside Shiriaev’s family home. He enters the dining room, his family members rise, and they begin reciting grace (fig. 3). Yet everyone riffs on the before-dinner-prayer in their own way (or rehearses the father’s words at an uneven pace). In doing so, they create a similar cacophony to the one heard in the barn. Distorted, unintelligible noise invades the Muratovian home. It is not incidental that Muratova spotlights a wall-hanging quilt with an ear on it (another Gogolian grotesquery) to call attention to how *Chekhovian Motifs* strains listening. The quilt is cleverly placed under a portrait of Chekov himself.



Figure 3: The provincial family sitting down for dinner.

Shiriaev's wife asks about the state of the barn being built, whereupon the children again launch into the argument of whether it will be a barn or a shop (*Sarai!*; *net magazin!*). Their back-and-forth has the effect of overwhelming our ears, so the words are uncoupled from their meaning, triggering a psychological phenomenon that linguists call "semantic satiation."⁹ This process occurs when our extended encounter with a given word (by durationally staring at or hearing it) generates a kind of mental fatigue. This linguistic oversaturation weakens our semantic associations with words, impressing upon us their status as acoustic constructions. Put simply, there is nothing inherent about the idea of a "barn" (or a "store") that would lend it the sound

designation of “b-a-r-n” or “s-t-o-r-e.” Semantic satiation waterlogs perceptual input, laying bare the fundamental arbitrariness of words’ (i.e., signs’) relations to that they intend to signify.

In *Chekhovian Motifs*, the children’s back-and-forth of whether the edifice will be a “barn” or a “shop,” repeated ad nauseam, suggests language’s unstable relation to the essence of a thing. To call a building a *sarai* is as arbitrary as to designate it as a *magazin*. Throughout this dinner table scene, which mirrors the Last Supper, Muratova intensifies our feelings of semantic satiation. The children stop squabbling about the barn only to start repeating the words of gratitude expressed by Shiriaev’s eldest son for being given money to start a new life out of town. They regurgitate the phrase “thank you” (*blagodariu vas*) at least thirty times, whereafter Shiriaev’s wife starts urging her husband to lend their son more so that he can purchase nicer clothes. “At least for a sweater for him to buy,” she demands, “it’ll look bad [*smotret’ stydno*] if not.” Every request she makes, she repeats at least three times. In the background, the children then start chanting: “Oatmeal, oatmeal, television” (*kasha, kasha, televizor*). The chant is occasionally broken up by their intoning of “*mormyshka*,” an alliterative Russian word for a “fishing lure.” This hurricane of speech pulverises our aural capacities into something akin to “kasha,” a soup of sound and affect.

Incited by this din, Shiriaev jumps out of his chair and expels a frustrated cry. Then, he starts slamming his head with his fists and growling in exasperation (fig. 4). His capacity for “semantic satiation” has reached its breaking point; he reacts to the phenomenon of linguistic overstimulation in exaggerated nonverbal gestures, like an animal. It as if this outburst represents the human’s inability to confront the fundamental arbitrariness of language. Shiriaev’s family has been reduced to a kind of pre-semantic state in which language loses its capacity for meaning-making. One can only “meaningfully” express oneself through gestures, guttural noises, and emotive displays.



Figure 4: Shiriaev explosively reacting to his family's incessant talking.

In this way, *Chekhovian Motifs* replicates an animal's auditory experience of the world. Animals navigate their world via sound devoid of linguistic "content": by grunts, murmurs, screeches, roars, yelps, and growls. For animals, it is the material texture of sound that is of importance. Muratova, I suggest, here exposes the arbitrariness by which humans have historically privileged and fetishised their own peculiar mode of communication of words and syntax over the nonverbal interactions of animals. It was Aristotle in *Politics* who wrote: "The mere making of sounds serves to indicate pleasure and pain, and is thus a faculty that belongs to animals [...] But language serves to declare what is advantageous and what is the reverse, and it is the peculiarity of man, in comparison with other animals, that [...] makes a family and a city."¹⁰ For Aristotle, language is

the fault line between humans and animals because it allows individuals to construct a society, a *polis*, separate from nonhuman life. In *Chekhovian Motifs*, however, Muratova disabuses us of the illusory distinction between language and animal-speak. What is a word, after all, if not the “mere making of sound”? We have erroneously convinced ourselves that speaking people are of a higher order than non-linguistic animals. If the pig’s gaze seen in the film’s opening suggests that there might be more to human-animal relations than language allows, then this following episode lays bare the animality of language: repetition, alliteration, vowels are our own animal cry.

Be quiet!

The dinner table scene gives way to the second act of *Chekhovian Motifs*, which, for nearly an hour, takes place at a church ceremony. After Shiriaev’s eldest son leaves home, he is picked up by a Toyota truck, alerting viewers that *Chekhovian Motifs* unfolds not in the nineteenth century but at the time of the film’s release in 2002. He is taken to a wedding ceremony at an Orthodox church, where Muratova satirises the wealthy attendees who perfunctorily go through the motions of the liturgy, suggesting the performative status of religion and piety in the post-Soviet world.¹¹ The church bells are, indeed, replicated by the car horns of fancy automobiles; wealth has become the new religion of modern Russia and Ukraine. However, this scene is more than simply social critique.

Muratova decided to shoot the wedding in real-time so that her viewers could experience the ritualistic ceremony, which recalls certain scenes from Sergei Eisenstein’s *Ivan the Terrible* (1944; 1946), as her characters do. “Muratova has made time the central hero of this film,” Zara Abdullaeva wrote.¹² It invites an alternative encounter with eventhood and duration unlike our traditional experience of film rhythm. The narrative logic of classic cinema, as the film theorist

Gilles Deleuze says, is relayed through the “movement-image,” revealing itself through fast-paced action and a forward-moving plot, propelling viewers to eventual climax and resolution.¹³ In *Chekhovian Motifs*, however, Muratova has us dwell in the liturgy in which “nothing” happens. The episode studies how humans confront non-narrativised, non-instrumentalised time (fig. 5).



Figure 5: The elaborate church ceremony, filmed in real-time.

In the church, some onlookers distract themselves with inappropriate jokes, others whisper secrets and pass judgements, and almost everyone vacantly gazes ahead. The church’s solemn music is matched by incessant coughing, sneezing, and exaggeratedly loud yawning, and the “chorus” of guests telling each other to “Be quiet!” (*tikho!*) creates an ironic parallel soundtrack. Without narrative, humans devolve into restlessness, chatter, and absent-mindedness. The church

attendees, like Muratova's viewers, await a return to the time-based order outside the liturgy. *Chekhovian Motifs* analogises the durational wedding with an earlier sequence of animal feeding.

Sandwiched between the dinner table and the liturgy, the two poles of *Chekhovian Motifs*, Muratova takes us back to the barn, where we first see several pigs fitfully walking in and out of the frame. The snouts and eyes of these pigs are obscured as they sniff out food on the ground, so the viewer struggles to determine where one animal ends and another begins (fig. 6). These amorphous porcine bodies then give way to a shot of geese, whose elastic necks similarly disorient the visual field as they haphazardly stretch forward and backward. Muratova calls attention to the peculiar spectacle of goose necks in a few close-ups of the birds staring and squawking at the camera. More birds enter the frame loudly clucking and gobbling. This barnyard episode depicts animals in chaotic formations that generate an intense multiplicity of affect, bodies, and sounds.



Figure 6: The bodies of pigs filling the visual field.

The restlessness and disruptiveness of animals here anticipate the behaviour, looks, and noise of the humans seen at the wedding ceremony. The crowd of churchgoers blurs together the same way that the pigs do in a welter of ornaments, fabrics, and relics that dislocates our perceptual coherency as viewers, and the peculiar physicalities of the geese mirror the grotesque expressions of the outlandish churchgoers, who boorishly comport themselves in God's house (fig. 7 and 8). Released from the pressures of time and narrative, Muratova shows how humans "devolve" into unruly animal-like configurations. Stripped of "plot," the artifice of "humanity" collapses. Our humanness, for Muratova, hinges not only on the arbitrary privileging of speech over non-linguistic noise, deconstructed at the dinner table but also on time-based narrative. Dwelling in time, Muratova shows we behave no different than fidgety, raucous geese and pigs.

Humanness, *Chekhovian Motifs* suggests, is a façade; we employ language and narrative time to distance ourselves from animality, to lacquer over our likeness to barn animals. And this façade has consequences. After the feeding scene, a shot presents two horses standing in the frame, and the background fills with the sound of a chainsaw. Their ears perk up, registering the clangour. The contrast between the grating noise and the gorgeous visuals of the horses conjure up an unnerving feeling, alluding to the ways barn animals are processed – literally sawed up – for human consumption (fig. 9). This fleeting montage suggests animals are threatened in ways humans are not, despite what *Chekhovian Motifs* posits as their intrinsic yet obscured similarities. Besides language and narrative, Muratova implies, humans uphold humanity through violence. To kill an animal to eat it – we recall an earlier image of a man dismantling a chicken carcass (a close-up that itself reminds us of scenes of meat-eating in *Asthenic Syndrome*) – is to simultaneously announce and renounce human likeness with animals (fig. 10). It is a radical act of identification, an engulfment of animals into the body, made possible by annihilating animal lives. *Chekhovian*

Motifs urges sensitivity not only to how we resemble animals but also to how we establish difference from animals – a difference that, for Muratova, is both artificial and lethal.



Figure 7 and 8: Close-ups of the elongated necks of geese and grotesque facial expressions of the churchgoers



Figure 9: A shot of two horses backdropped by the sound of a chainsaw.



Figure 10: A shot of a man's hands stripping meat from animal bones at the beginning of the film.

Conclusion

Certainly Muratova, as Nancy Condee writes, dismantles the boundaries between humans and animals in *Chekhovian Motifs*, as she does in all her films, to expose and mock the “predatory ambitions,” stupidities, and pretensions of humankind.¹⁴ But perhaps Muratova also analogises humans and animals in a more ethically minded mode? Muratova portrays human beings in ways that do not place them on the other side of a divide with animals. Muratova’s “failure” to affirm human uniqueness might be a basis for cross-species solidarity in which any being’s claim to superiority is undercut. Demoting human ontology is another version of *promoting* that of the animal. The goal is not to treat people like animals – at least as humans presently treat them – but to extend animals the consideration that we reflexively do to other humans. *Chekhovian Motifs* invites recognition that we inhabit the world with nonhuman lifeforms with whom we are dangerously alike yet whose likeness we disguise to preserve a stable, exclusive category of who “we” are. Animalising her humans and anthropomorphising her animals, Muratova puts pressure on that binary. “Maybe,” Erica Fudge says, “animals are more like us than we want to imagine and the label ‘anthropomorphism’ merely allows us to recognize and devalue it simultaneously.”¹⁵ The human-animal levelling in *Chekhovian Motifs* is not simply an anti-human polemic. It urges awareness of the human’s animal latency which might generate the foundation needed not for a Hobbesian, dog-eat-dog world but a more capacious vision of species community and belonging.

Notes

¹ This episode recalls the tormented cat pinned down by several construction workers in a grave-like pit at the start of Muratova’s *Asthenic Syndrome* (*Astenicheskii sindrom*, 1989).

² Mikhail Iampol’skii, *Muratova: Opyt kinoantropologii* (Sankt Petersburg: Seans, 2008).

³ Laura U. Marks, *Touch: Sensuous Theory and Multisensory Media* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), 2.

- ⁴ John Berger, "Why Look at Animals?," *Why Look at Animals?* (London: Palgrave, 2009), 35.
- ⁵ Marcus Bullock, "Watching Eyes, Seeing Dreams, Knowing Lives," *Representing Animals*, ed. Nigel Rothfels (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002), 99.
- ⁶ Ibid.
- ⁷ Barbara Creed, "Animal Deaths on Screen: Film and Ethics," *Relations* 2.1 (June 2014): 15-31.
- ⁸ Ibid., 26-27.
- ⁹ John Kounios, Sonja I. Kotz, Phillip J. Holcomb, "On the Locus of the Semantic Satiation Effect: Evidence from Event-Related Brain Potentials," *Memory and Cognition* 28.8 (2000): 1366-77.
- ¹⁰ Aristotle, *Politics*, trans. Ernest Barker (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 11.
- ¹¹ Jane Taubman describes the ceremony as "another superficial affectation of the New Russian style." Taubman, *Kira Muratova* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2005), 101.
- ¹² Zara Abdullaeva, "Sarai ili magazin?," *Iskusstvo kino* 11 (2002): 37-44; also, cited in Taubman, 103.
- ¹³ Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 1*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986).
- ¹⁴ Nancy Condee, *The Imperial Trace: Recent Russian Cinema* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 130.
- ¹⁵ Erica Fudge, *Animal* (London: Reaktion, 2002), 144.

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