

Difficult People: Kira Muratova's Cinematic Encounter with Chekhov

by

JULIAN GRAFFY

Russian Cinematic Adaptations of Chekhov

Literary adaptation has been a constant genre in Russian cinema, from its inception in 1908. The first adaptation of Chekhov was Petr Chardynin's version of the 1884 story *Surgery* (*Хирургия*), made for the Khanzhonkov Company in 1909. This film has not been preserved, but the second Chekhov adaptation, Kai Hansen's spirited 1911 version of the 1886 story *Romance with Double Bass* (*Роман с контрабасом*) is extant, and further Chekhov adaptations were made every year until the Russian Revolution disrupted film production. When the new Soviet industry became established in 1924, it once again turned to Chekhov, and one of the first Soviet films is Otto Frelikh's *The End of the Lunich Family* (*An Unnecessary Victory*) (*Конец рода Лунич* [*Ненужная победа*]), made for Sevzapkino that year and based on Chekhov's 1882 short story *An Unnecessary Victory*. Throughout the Soviet epoch Chekhov remained a favoured literary source and among the most admired Soviet productions are the comedies of Isidor Annenskii, including *The Bear* (1938), *The Man in a Case* (1939), *A Wedding* (1944) and *Anna on the Neck* (1954); and the late works of Iosif Kheifits, *The Lady with Lapdog* (1960), *In the Town of S* (*В городе С*, 1966), a version of the 1898 story *Ionych*, and *A Bad Good Man* (*Плохой хороший человек*, 1973), taken from the 1891 story *The Duel*.² The history and achievements of these adaptations are assessed by Maïia Turqyskaia in an article which almost coincided with the end of the Soviet Union.³ Turovskia's article provides a conventional summation of the history of the adaptation of literary sources for the cinema, rehearsing such critical commonplaces as the way fashions in cinematic adaptation change over time and the evolution of the understanding of the concept of faithfulness to the original, a concept which is presided over by critics. Most noteworthy among her reflections is the idea that the best adaptations are those that fight against the original and have something of their own to say. 'Copying' is disastrous and the film director is not a translator. The best films result from a 'struggle with the classic author from new aesthetic positions'. Destroying the initial

structure of the work you are filming is a crucial condition for creating it in another art form.⁴ These ideas are of particular importance to the case of Kira Muratova's film *Chekhovian Motifs* and will be returned to below. Certainly the late Soviet period saw the release of a number of films which stretched and radically re-interpreted the relationship of the cinematic rendering to the original text(s). Nikita Mikhalkov's *Unfinished Piece for Mechanical Piano* (1976), is a free adaptation of Chekhov's early play *Platonov* which also uses motifs from the stories 'On the Estate (*В усадьбе*, 1894), *The Literature Teacher* (*Учитель словесности*, 1894), *Three Years* (1895) and *My Life* (1896). In 1982 Aleksandr Belinskii and Vladimir Vasilev turned *Anna on the Neck* into the film-ballet *Aniuta*, with Ekaterina Maksimova in the title role. These more radical approaches to the filming of Chekhov are mentioned by Turovskaja, along with Mikhalkov's 1987 film *Dark Eyes* (*Oci Ciornie*), which she describes as a 'mass cultural, melodramatic version' of its source, *The Lady with Lapdog*, and Ivan Dykhovichnyi's heavily aestheticised version of *The Black Monk* (1988), the last major Soviet film version of Chekhov, leading her to remark upon Chekhov's continuing capacity to be used as a 'litmus paper of the time'.⁵ Evidence that a Chekhovian approach can also be used to illuminate works set after his death lies in the admission by another leading Russian director, Aleksei German, that his examination of provincial life in the 1930s, *My Friend Ivan Lapshin* (*Мой друг Иван Лапшин*), made in the period 1979-1984, is informed by a desire to bring out the 'Chekhovian intonation' of the (non-Chekhovian) literary source.⁶

Chekhov's works have continued to be adapted for the screen in the post-Soviet years. Vladimir Motyl's *Horses are Carrying Me...* (*Несут меня кони ...*, 1996), is a transposition of *The Duel* to the present day, while Kirill Serebrennikov transfers the action of *Ragin*, his atmospheric 2004 adaptation of *Ward 6*, to 1904, the year of Chekhov's death. More broadly, repeated allusion to Chekhov's work attests to his continuing capacity to be an enabling point of reference for Russian film artists. Nikita Mikhalkov takes the country estate setting, the cast of the characters and the tone of much of their conversation from Chekhov's plays and transposes them daringly into the Soviet 1930s in his *Burnt by the Sun* (1994). Vasilii Pichul takes a phrase from Sonia's ecstatic declaration of faith at the end of *Uncle Vania* for the title of his 1999 film *The Sky in Diamonds* (*Небо в алмазах*), and his hero is a writer named Anton Pavlovich Chekhov. But he is also a post-Soviet bandit, named thus fortuitously since he was placed in a cardboard box outside an orphanage on the centenary of the writer's birth, and the film as a whole is an

ironical, post-modernist reworking of the central post-Soviet genre of the thriller.⁷ Sergei Snezhkin's 1998 film *Marigolds* (*Цветы календулы*), uses motifs from *Three Sisters*, *The Cherry Orchard* and *Uncle Vania* in his tale of the widow, daughter and three granddaughters, here called Anna, Elena and Masha, of a dead poet, a leading figure in the literary politics of the Stalinist period. Lazy and proud, the younger women scheme to sell the family dacha to a New Russian before the death of the grandmother. Whereas Chekhov allowed the characters in his plays to retain a commitment to ideals, Snezhkin's characters have been corrupted by the succession of compromises that the Russian twentieth century has exacted from them.⁸ There is a less ambitious drawing upon a famous Chekhovian source in Marina Mareeva's script for Andrei Razenkov's 2003 film *Amber Wings* (*Янтарные крылья*). A Christmas story set in Tallinn in the present it tells of the brief love affair between Elena, an unhappily married failed Muscovite actress, and Aleksandr, an unhappily married German lawyer. The plot turns on the fact that Aleksandr is in Tallinn to reclaim the house where she and her actress mother were born, which before the war belonged to his grandfather. At first he insists upon his rights, but eventually he renounces his claim to the house, and flies off out of her life forever. The script's parasitical relationship with *The Cherry Orchard* is directly signalled: Elena's mother and her actor lover, Robert, are rehearsing the play and Elena has just lost the part of Varia in a Moscow production. On the other hand, perhaps the boldest of these re-imaginings of Chekhov is the collaboration between the writer Vladimir Sorokin and the director Aleksandr Zeldovich in *Moscow* (*Москва*, 2000). Though they do, indeed, live in Moscow, the post-Soviet Irina and her two daughters Masha and Olga feel none of the happiness that Chekhov's sisters thought the move to the city would bring them, living out their lives in desperate, doomed love affairs and crippling anomie.

One Russian director who made a more conventional attempt to film Chekhov in these years was Sergei Solov'ev, who had also begun his career with Chekhov, contributing versions of the 1886 story *From Nothing to Do* (*A Dacha Romance*) (*От нечего делать [Дачный роман]*) and the 1888 comic play *A Proposal* to the 1969 portmanteau film *Family Happiness* (*Семейное счастье*). Solov'ev returned to Chekhov in the 1990s, staging *Three Sisters*, *Uncle Vania* and *The Seagull* and making a film version of *Three Sisters*, closely based on his stage production, in 1994. But it is his 2004 film *About Love* which offers the closest parallel to the approach to filming Chekhov taken by Kira Muratova. Like *Chekhovian Motifs* it takes as its source works

written within a few years of each other but not directly connected, in this case the 1887 story *The Doctor* (*Доктор*), the comic play of the following year *The Bear* and the story *Volodia* (also 1887). Solovev has called his film 'not so much a literary "screen version of Chekhov", rather a retelling of stories which once struck me. [...] And I made a "screen version" not so much of the novellas but of a certain light and airy atmosphere, which envelops all Chekhov's works about love'.⁹ But his solution to the problems caused by bringing together unrelated texts is to do considerable disabling violence to the originals, introducing invented characters, merging distinct characters into one, and making of others unlikely friends. The film which results, however indifferent viewers might be to the concept of faithfulness to the original(s), is psychologically and dramatically disjointed. Solovev's miscalculations illuminate the care Muratova has taken in *Chekhovian Motifs* not to damage the intrinsic coherence of her source materials.

Muratova and Chekhov

Muratova's first full-length feature film, *Short Meetings* (*Kороткие встречи*, 1967), is based upon a story by Leonid Zhukhovitskii and her second, *Long Farewells* (*Долгие проводы*, 1971), is taken from a script by Natalia Riazantseva which another director had abandoned. Asked about her treatment of Riazantseva's script, however, Muratova described her approach as taking the completed material and 'ruining' it,¹⁰ an approach consistent with Turovskaia's recipe for successful adaptation discussed earlier. Both films are set in the small provincial towns that Chekhov favours in his stories, and both contain motifs and concerns which have suggested a 'Chekhovian' approach to viewers, and which have been interpreted through the prism of Chekhov. The intense yet oppressive love Valentina Ivanovna feels for her husband, Maksim in *Short Meetings* is echoed by the similar feelings Evgeniia Vasilevna has for her teenaged son in *Long Farewells*. The male characters in the two films both dream of leaving, of going to another place in search of a better life. While current in the bard poetry and the tourist songs of the time, and associated with Vladimir Vysotskii, who acted the part of Maksim in *Short Meetings*, this trope is also repeatedly used by Chekhov in his stories. The absent Maksim's guitar, which hangs on the wall of the heroine Valentina Ivanovna's flat, is perhaps an allusion to Chekhov's method of investing objects with symbolic significance. And the critic Vladimir Bozhovich has described Muratova's approach to dialogue in the film in the following words: 'Characters respond not so much to the words of those they are speaking to as

to their own thoughts, provoked by these words',¹² a method patented by Chekhov in the dialogue of his plays. This indirectness was untypical of most of the cinematic production of the time and the film came under heavy fire. It is striking that this negative criticism also took the form of comparison with Chekhov. In his damning review of the film in *Iskusstvo kino*, N. Kovarskii noted that scriptwriters often refer to Chekhov when describing scripts of this kind, and referred to the role of subtext in Chekhov's work. He went on to quote Astrov's remark about the weather in Africa and to dwell lengthily upon on the behaviour of the characters in *The Seagull* before perversely concluding:

Nevertheless I had no intention of comparing Chekhov's plays and the script of Zhukhovitskii and Muratova from the point of view of their artistic worth. I merely wanted to show how helpless the script is in its striving to make use of individual features of a particular type of poetics, in which the weakening of the external action and the breadth and tension of the internal action, and the text, and the subtext, and the relationship of these two sides of the dialogue demand an unusually subtle and precise literary mastery.¹³

Short Meetings came under further adverse criticism and the film was quickly shelved but Kovarskii, for all his polemical zeal against it, identified Chekhovian features in Muratova's early poetics which would come to be widely admired.

In *Long Farewells* the dream of leaving is the motivation both for the main plot action and for the minor characters. Evgeniia Vasilevna's son, Sasha wants to go away to live with his archaeologist father, who himself has left his wife for a glamorous and ambient life, and his mother later dreams of him as a sailor returning briefly to the port of Odessa. The two young women with whom Sasha is involved, Masha and Tania, also seek happiness elsewhere, and Evgeniia Vasilevna's hapless admirer talks (quoting Griboedov's *Famusev*) of taking her away 'to the country, to auntie, to the backwoods, to Saratov'. The lure of departure is also echoed in the important scenes set in the town's railway station where an old man dictates to Evgeniia Vasilevna a letter to his own absent children and the station announcer speaks of distant places. It is brought to an ambiguous conclusion by a young woman's singing of the Lermontov poem 'A Lone White Sail' ('Белеет парус одинокий') and by Sasha's insistence to his mother that he is going to stay. This common obsession is ironically alluded to in a story from her early marriage told by

Evgeniia Vasilevna, the only character doomed not to leave. She and her husband had once seen a red parrot sitting in a poplar, its 'bright, bright redness' a shocking contrast on a grey day. Evgeniia Vasilevna had interpreted it as a symbol of the desire to escape, but it turned out to be only the red parrot from the local tea-house and eventually it had returned. This story is described by Bozhovich as a 'completely Chekhovian inserted novella' which seems to be quite irrelevant to what is going on but which serves as 'a memory of her past and irretrievable happiness with Sasha's father'.¹⁴

Other features of the poetics of *Long Farewells* are reminiscent of Chekhov's plays. The love mixed with exasperation that Evgeniia Vasilevna and Sasha feel for each other suggests the relationship of Arkadina and Treplev in *The Seagull*, and the dead seagull which the old watchman finds at the beginning of the film bears the same significance for Muratova as it does for Chekhov. The watchman intrudes into a scene at a beachside house which includes a Chekhovian meal and Chekhovian/Tolstoian doomed flirtations between Sasha and Masha and Evgeniia Vasilevna and Nikolai Sergeevich. The characters are firing arrows into a target set against the incoming waves and for Bozhovich 'this placing together in the frame of an unmoving geometric abstraction and the eternally moving waves of the sea arouses a feeling which is so unaccountable and complex that I can clarify it only by quoting Chekhov', going on to quote a description of the noise of the sea from *The Lady with Lapdog*.¹⁵ The main events of *Long Farewells* happen off stage, many of the characters are distinguished by verbal tics, and secondary characters, such as the old man at the station, provide a chorus, their stories shedding light on the lives of the central figures in the film. All these are features which are commonly associated with Chekhov, and Bozhovich quotes Muratova as describing these films as 'provincial melodramas', though he goes on to insist that they are 'imaginary melodramas' and to call Muratova's phrase a 'trap for simpletons'.¹⁶

Long Farewells was met with even greater incomprehension and hostility than *Short Meetings* had been, and Muratova was encouraged to turn to older literary sources:

Five years passed and people started saying to me: 'Well you can try the classics. You can't do contemporary life, you have no feeling for it, you distort it. Try the classics.' At first I didn't want to, but then I re-read *A Hero of Our Time*. I hadn't studied it at school, it wasn't worn out

in my consciousness. I took the story *Princess Mary* [...] ¹⁷

In fact this enterprise was as doomed as her earlier films, and the project was banned at the stage of screen tests. But it ushered in a period in which Muratova attempted to make literary adaptations. *Getting to Know the World* (*Познавая белый свет*, 1978), is a development of a screenplay by Grigorii Baklanov, while its successor, *Among the Grey Stones* (*Среди серых камней*, 1983), was taken from Vladimir Korolenko's 1885 story *In Bad Company* (*В дурном обществе*). Both were banned. It was only with the greater freedom given to film makers after the Fifth Congress of the Union of Film Makers of the USSR in May 1986 that Muratova finally had the freedom to film whatever she wanted. She chose to make a version of the Somerset Maugham story *The Letter*, though consistent with her earlier practice she transposed the resulting film *A Change of Fate* (*Перемена участи*, 1987), from Malaya to an unspecified location in Soviet Central Asia. Sergei Manuilov has described Muratova's purposes here in the following terms: 'You really cannot, however, call this a film version (экранизация). ¹⁸ The plot of Maugham's story is just the carcass for revealing her own ideas'.

After this Muratova began to make films from original scripts, though allusions to the Russian literary classics remain. Her sixth and most famous feature film, *The Asthenic Syndrome* (*Астенический синдром*, 1989), set in the chaotic late Soviet present, makes the most specific reference of all her films to societal issues, and perhaps for this reason it is presented as a polemic with the ideas of Lev Tolstoi. It opens with a scene in which three old women hold hands and proclaim, though not in unison: 'in my childhood, in my early youth, I thought that what it needed was for everyone to read Lev Nikolaevich Tolstoi attentively and they would understand everything, everything, and everyone would become good and wise', but this is followed by a film in which goodness and wisdom are in conspicuously short supply. Answering viewers' questions about the film in 1992, Muratova referred to the 'naïve aspect of the author's charming babyishness. But I can no longer seriously believe in this. ¹⁹ Asked in another interview, two years later, what writers she was reading, she mentioned Tolstoi again, and also Dostoevskii, Petrushevskiaia, Makanin and Solzhenitsyn, adding 'but I don't like Chekhov'. ²⁰ Muratova's move away from Chekhov would seem, at least for the time being, to be complete. Nevertheless, by the end of the 1990s, Chekhov had once again become a useful prism for understanding the life around her, and Muratova referred to the Odessan heroes of her 1999 short film *Letter to America*

(*Письмо в Америку*) as provincial intellectuals who: '[...] sit around, write letters somewhere, hate, lament and complain, but do nothing at all. Like characters out of Chekhov. They write fine poetry, but they are not active enough to do anything else.'²¹

The critic Zara Abdullaeva has drawn a parallel between Misha, the young collector of trifles in Muratova's 2001 film *Minor People* (*Второстепенные люди*), and his namesake in Chekhov's 1883 story *The Collector* (*Коллекционер*),²² and Muratova refers in detail to her return to Chekhov in an interview with Dmitrii Desiaterik, published in July 2002, at the time of the making of *Chekhovian Motifs*:

DD So what makes you like Chekhov?

KM You know, for a long time I couldn't stand Chekhov. At first, in my youth, I adored him. I renounced him after I fell strongly in love with Tolstoi and Dostoevskii. His humour, his manner, I couldn't take them. I have to tell you that that sort of remains. Now, re-reading his humorous works, I understand that it is work of genius, it's remarkable and stunning. But still when I get to the middle of the book he starts irritating me to the point of an inexplicable repulsion, and I stop reading.

DD So what happened?

KM At some point I picked up his Collected Works. My idea was to read his plays, I thought they must be more interesting. I really liked the plays, but they didn't make me want to do anything in terms of a script. Then I happened upon the play *Tatiana Repina*, which I hadn't read before. A short, one act play. Very strange and completely untheatrical. But it stunned me, at first because I hadn't read it, and then by the capaciousness, the naïveté and at the same time the extraordinary beauty of the church service, the marriage ceremony which takes place in it. Later when I was writing I added something else from early Chekhov and the whole thing got transformed.²³

Even at this point it is clear that Muratova's attitude to the Chekhovian sources did not become one of conventional reverence. Asked again in October 2004 about what had led her to make the film, she replied:

But I'm not such a fan of Chekhov. He very often irritates me, sometimes he simply infuriates me, I look for something of his to read and I get angry. It's some sort of monotonous tugging at my nerves,

that's to say that the result is a very active relationship with him. At one point I even used to say that I had definitively fallen out of love with Chekhov, he irritated me so much.²⁴

Chekhovian Motifs - the Chekhovian sources.

Chekhovian Motifs (Чеховские мотивы), which Muratova directed in 2002, is an adaptation of two little known early texts by Anton Chekhov. The story *Difficult People* (Тяжелые люди) was first published in 1886.²⁵ It tells of the travails of the eternal student Petr Shiriaev, who is eager to return to his studies in Moscow but needs money for the journey, for clothes and for books. His father, Evgraf Ivanovich, a small landholder from a family of priests, will not give him enough, despite his wife's attempted intercession, and abuses him and the whole family. Both the father and the son are described as having a difficult (тяжелый) character. Petr's sister, Varvara, groans, while the three younger brothers watch in fear. Petr insists that he cannot stand these scenes, and the narrator points out that they are a regular occurrence but that this time Petr pushes things further. He shouts at his mother and strides out into the damp autumn, determined to walk to Moscow. As he walks he has melancholy musings of his father chasing after him and begging forgiveness, and then of his own death from starvation, near Kursk or Serpukhovsk, of its being reported in the papers, and of his father's tormented remorse. Suddenly he meets an old woman landowner travelling in her landau. He smiles at her. He muses on the way nature has given us the capacity not to rehearse our family sorrows and secrets in public. He knows that she, too, has a desperate family life. When darkness comes, with the rain, he decides to go back to have things out with his father. On his return he feels a momentary pity for all his family but he overcomes this and challenges his father. They have another row, which resolves nothing. Petr goes to bed and feels spiritual pain but blames no one, since he knows that everyone in the house is suffering, and only God knows who is suffering more and who is to blame. No one sleeps that night. At 5.00 Petr gets up to leave. His father says goodbye and has left him money, but will not turn to look at him. They are not reconciled. Petr goes to the station.

This story has not been widely discussed by critics, though Donald Rayfield suggests that it alludes to the 'touching obstinacy' of Chekhov's father and 'relives appalling rows between father and son'.²⁶ Rosamund Bartlett writes of the religious fervour of Chekhov's family, especially of his uncle Mitrofan,

who would begin each visit to the family of his brother Pavel with extensive prayer. 'Pavel Egorovich would stand waiting to greet his brother with outstretched arms, but the praying would go on and on', a motif that is echoed in the lengthy paternal prayer that delays the start of the Shiriaev family's meal in the story.²⁷

In *Chekhovian Motifs*, Muratova wraps *Difficult People* around a version of Chekhov's one act drama of 1889 *Tatiana Repina*.²⁸ In the play Petr Sabinin and Vera Olenina are being married. All the local intelligentsia are there, in their finery, as well as a troupe of actors. As Fr Ivan reads from the marriage service, the congregation complain about how stuffy it is, and how interminably the service, of which they seem to have no understanding, is dragging on. They gossip about Vera being married for the second time and ask if it will be over soon. A 'woman in black' groans. The congregation talk of a doctor's wife poisoning herself, the fourth to follow Tatiana Repina's example. Repina has poisoned the air - even in the church you cannot breathe. Sabinin insists that the woman in black is Tatiana Repina, the woman he jilted and thus led to suicide. Fr Ivan tells the congregation to keep quiet: 'You are stopping us carrying out the mystery'.²⁹ Nevertheless, there are further interruptions and further assertions that it is indeed Repina. The congregation cannot understand why Sabinin and Olenina decided to marry in this church and continue to comment on the jilting. When the wedding service is finally over, the bridal couple and the congregation leave. As the deacon and the church warden clear up after the service, the church warden speaks of the constant stream of funerals, marriages and christenings, 'and there is no point to any of it - it's all pointless'.³⁰ Two of the priests return and suddenly the woman in black appears again. She says that she is the sister of the officer Ivanov and that she has poisoned herself from hatred. A man has offended her so why should he be happy? She insists that everyone should kill themselves since there is no justice in the world. Fr Ivan calls this blasphemy. The woman in black repeats her charge and, in the final lines of the play, calls repeatedly for help. *Tatiana Repina* is one among a number of tragic-comic early plays and vaudevilles by Chekhov in which proposals, marriages and anniversaries do not work out as they were intended.

In Muratova's marriage of these two texts, which she has transposed to the period of the film's making, while retaining many allusions to the time of their writing, Petr, the hero of *Difficult People*, whom Muratova calls Petia, is present at the marriage of Sabinin and Olenina, and it is only when the service

is over that he returns to the family home to remonstrate once more with his father, and the film draws to a close with his second departure for Moscow.

Chekhovian Motifs - A Dialogic Text

One may speculate that what drew Muratova back to Chekhov was a sense of his texts' closeness to her own thematic and formal concerns. An awareness of the narrative potential of internal dialogism is most evident in *The Asthenic Syndrome*, in which the initial black and white story is eventually revealed to be a film within a film, but in which both parts share a concern with the debilitating personal and societal effects of asthenia. Muratova uses a less ambitious form of internal connection in the episodic structure of *Three Stories* (*Три истории*, 1997), in which all three parts are concerned with violent death. But *Chekhovian Motifs*, in which one text is enclosed inside the other and somehow provokes the resolution of that other, further complicates the process. In this context it is significant that the initial impulse for Muratova was her enthusiastic discovery of *Tatiana Repina*, itself already a dialogic text.

Chekhov wrote the play as a gift for his friend the journalist and publisher Aleksei Suvorin (1834-1912), who himself had written a four-act play of the same name in 1886. Suvorin's play, which premiered in St Petersburg on 11 December 1888 and in Moscow on 16 January 1889, and which ended with Repina's death, was itself a response to a burgeoning genre of plays and other works occasioned by the self-poisoning of the opera singer and actress Evlaliia Pavlovna Kadmina (1853-1881) on the stage of a Kharkov theatre on 4 November 1881, followed by her death a few days later. Kadmina had been performing the part of the scheming title character in a production of Aleksandr Ostrovskii's 1868 play *Vasilisa Melenteva*, which is set in the court of Ivan the Terrible and tells of a plot to poison the young tsaritsa.³¹ One of the first reactions to the event was by Petr Chaikovsky, who in 1875 had composed *A Terrible Moment* (*Страшная минута*), a romance filled with amorous uncertainty, for Kadmina. In a letter to Natalia von Meck of 20 November 1881 he wrote: 'I knew that strange, uneasy, morbidly self-loving nature well, and it always seemed to me that she would not end well'.³² Kadmina's dramatically staged death, apparently occasioned by the treachery of her lover, a young officer named Treskin, immediately became the subject of broad and intense speculation and provoked a number of literary texts. The first published response was an anonymous play, *I Am Waiting. There is Still Time* (*To the Dear Memory of an Unforgettable Performer*) (*Я жду. Еще есть*

время [Дорогой памяти незабвенной артистки]), published in the Kiev paper *Zaria* on 20 December 1881. It was closely followed by the most famous contribution to the genre, Ivan Turgenev's 1883 story *Klara Milich*, originally entitled *After Death* (После смерти). Turgenev's story made a profound impression upon Nikolai Leskov. According to his son's memoirs, for two or three months it was all his father would talk about, and he felt a mixture of sympathy and incomprehension when he encountered someone who had not read it.³³ Leskov published his own version of the story, *A Theatrical Character* (Театральный характер), in 1884. In the same year as Chekhov's play Aleksandr Kuprin published his story *The Final Debut* (Последний дебют), apparently in response to seeing the production of Suvorin's play at the Malyi Theatre in Moscow.³⁴ As Buckler notes, 'Most of these works are as much about the process by which stories are spun around an event like Kadmina's suicide as they are about Kadmina herself'.³⁵ They are also explicitly dialogic: Leskov responds to Turgenev, Chekhov and Kuprin to Suvorin.

In the early twentieth century the legend spread to other genres. In 1909, the composer Aleksandr Dmitrievich Kastalskii (1856-1926), who, coincidentally, was mainly known for his church music, composed an operatic version of *Klara Milich*. Then in 1915 the leading director of Russian pre-revolutionary cinema, Evgenii Bauer, directed *After Death*, a film version of Turgenev's text which returned to Turgenev's original title, and also had a subtitle which prefigures that of Muratova's film, *Turgenevan Motifs* (Тургеневские мотивы). In order to stress that his film was a contribution to the still fertile genre of texts inspired by Kadmina's tragic fate, Bauer changed the name of his heroine back from Klara Milich to Zoia Kadmina, and cast in the role Vera Karalli, a performer who, like Kadmina, had performed on stage in more than one art form, having been a ballerina both at the Bolshoi Theatre and in the Diaghilev ballet.³⁶

This, then, is the densely self-referential context from which Muratova took her initial literary inspiration for *Chekhovian Motifs*, and both the concern with the making of a legend and the dialogue with existing texts will inform Muratova's approach to telling the story.

Chekhovian Motifs - Muratova's dialogue with the Tsarist period

The year after Chekhov wrote *Tatiana Repina*, another famous tragic actress,

the star of the Warsaw Drama Theatre Mariia Visnovskaia, also died in scandalous and mysterious circumstances. Her death was reported by a young army captain, Aleksandr Bartenev, with whom Visnovskaia had had an intense but doomed love affair. Though Bartenev insisted that he had shot her, three notes were found at the scene of the crime, suggesting a failed suicide pact.³⁷ Like the story of Kadmina, the Visnovskaia affair provoked intense public interest, leading the writer Ivan Bunin to write his 1925 story *The Case of the Cornet Elagin* (Дело корнета Елагина). In the same year as Muratova made *Chekhovian Motifs* the story of Visnovskaia was filmed, as *Playing at Modern* (Игра в модерн), by Maksim Korostyshevskii and Igor Efimov. The approach of Korostyshevskii and Efimov is highly conventional. They set the film in the late Tsarist period in which the events took place, and fill it with the usual accoutrements of the genre and the period: love intrigues, *romansy*, high society, officers, gypsies, cards, duel and death by duel, scandal, political demonstrations and Liebestod.

Muratova's approach is utterly different and considerably more ambitious. She sets her film explicitly in the present, with the link between the two stories provided by a New Russian/New Ukrainian businessman in an ostentatious Toyota 4x4, lost on the way to the wedding of Sabinin and Olenina. Nevertheless, the film contains many allusions to the pre-revolutionary setting of its source materials, though its range of reference is chronologically very broad. At the beginning of the film, as a storm disrupts work on a new outbuilding for Petia's father, and despite the fact that the film, like the story, is set in autumn, one of the workmen quotes the opening line 'Люблю грозу в начале мая' ('I love a storm at the beginning of May'), of Tiutchev's poem 'A Spring Storm' ('Весенняя гроза'), first written in 1828 and then re-worked in the early 1850s. Picking up the wandering Petia en route for his studies the businessman likens him to Lomonosov. At the wedding service, a pious guest invokes The Reverend Ambrosius of the Optyna Monastery (Преподобный Амвросий Оптынский), who influenced the religious thinking of Dostoevskii and served in part as a prototype for the figure of the Elder, Zosima in *The Brothers Karamazov*.

The nineteenth century is further evoked in the *Difficult People* episode by the presence on the walls (along with several icons and a portrait of Chekhov) of a profusion of woven and embroidered wall hangings. Some are striped, some have floral decorations, several bear sententious statements such as 'People live joyfully even without gold', 'Where there is love there is counsel' or 'For

your beloved friend take the ear-ring out of your own ear.' The decorative density of the hangings is echoed in the riot of clashing stripes and patterns on the family's clothes, suggesting that for Muratova these are objects to be cherished for their own material sake.³⁸ A similarly ambiguous attitude to the source material is suggested by the romance 'Our days are running, disappearing in the darkness' ('Бегут наши дни, исчезая во тьме ...') by the composer Valentin Silvestrov, which is sung in both episodes of the film. Near the end of the first episode it is sung by an unseen singer to accompany an extended sequence of men planing wood and then of pigs, geese, turkeys and other farmyard animals. After the end of the wedding service the voice we have heard is revealed to be that of the groom, Sabinin, a professional singer, who repeats the song briefly as he leaves the church. The romance laments the evanescence of human joy, but lauds the power of music and springtime to re-evoked the past and to transport us into the 'wonderful country' of our distant childhood. Musically, lexically and through its sentiments, the song sounds as if it was composed in the nineteenth century, but Silvestrov was born in Kiev in 1937, three years after Muratova. The song comes from his collection *Simple Songs* (*Простые песни*), written in 1974-1981 and is said to be a setting of the words of an anonymous author. At the same time, 1974-1977, Silvestrov composed a large cycle of *Quiet Songs* (*Тихие песни*) mainly consisting of settings of the poetry of the early nineteenth century, of Pushkin, Lermontov and Tiutchev, of Keats and Shelley.³⁹ Gerard McBurney has described Silvestrov's work as part of a revival and development of the musical languages of the past, and specifically of Slavic forms of classical music. But he further insists that these

[...] excursions into the past are driven not by a simple desire to retreat from the present, but by a far more creative and complex endeavour to explore the constructive and imaginative connections *between* the past and the present. In fact, as much as anything,⁴⁰ Silvestrov's music is about the impossibility of recreating the past.

This suggestion of Silvestrov's complex relationship with his source material, including both respect and an inclination towards pastiche, is highly reminiscent of Muratova's own approach, and indicates the appropriateness of Silvestrov's song to her intentions.

Allusions to pre-revolutionary Russian cinema are particularly apparent in the section of the film based on *Tatiana Repina*. The extravagant clothes of the

female guests at the society wedding are evocative of those of the women in Bauer's films, a similarity underpinned by Muratova's decision to make her film in black and white.⁴¹ The eyes of the bride, Olenina, played by Nataliia Buzko, are heavily made up, and in her beauty she recalls Vera Kholodnaia, the most famous beauty of pre-Revolutionary Russian film, the so called 'Queen of the Screen', who appeared in a number of films by Bauer. While the link between Bauer's *Turgenevan Motifs* and the *Chekhovian Motifs* of Muratova is obvious in their shared relationship with the Kadmina text, Muratova also alludes to another film by Bauer, and a 'double' of Kadmina, Vera Karalli, in an invented episode in the *Difficult People* section in which Petia's mother switches on the television to find that Natalia Makarova is dancing the Dying Swan, a dance which provokes her to ecstatic invocation of its beauty. The dance was created by Mikhail Fokin for Anna Pavlova, and first performed in December 1907, to music taken from Camille Saint-Saëns's *Le Carnaval des Animaux*, written in 1886, five years after Kadmina's death. In addition to becoming one of Pavlova's most famous balletic performances, it was also danced by Vera Karalli. In Bauer's 1916 film *The Dying Swan* (*Умирающий лебедь*), taken from a script by Zoia Barantsevich, Karalli (who had played Zoia Kadmina in *After Death*) plays the part of Gizella, a mute dancer, who poses for a mad artist who has watched her dancing the swan, and who uses her in his attempt to capture death on canvas. When he discovers that she is in love with someone else, he strangles her in the pose of the dying swan. Thus, once again, Karalli plays for Bauer a performer who dies for love during the performance of one of her greatest roles.⁴²

At the start of the *Tatiana Repina* episode, an old female guest arrives at the church quoting the lines 'What a dinner they served us. What wine they treated us to. I drank it and drank it ...' ('Какой обед нам подавали. Каким вином нас угощали. Уж я его пила, пила ...'). The first two of these lines are declaimed, in reverse order, by a character called Katerina Ivanovna who recalls a jolly party in Sergei Sergeev Tsenskii's 1902 'poem in prose' *The Country Churchyard* (*Поземь*),⁴³ and in plot terms they are provoked here by a town dweller's ironic condescension at having had to trek out to a rural church. But in *The Country Churchyard* Katerina Ivanovna is quoting an aria from Jacques Offenbach's opéra-bouffe *La Périchole*, the story of a Peruvian street singer, imprisoned for love by the Vice-Roy of Lima, which had its premiere on 6 October 1868, the year in which Ostrovskii published *Vasilisa Melenteva*. Through this string of evocations of Makarova, Pavlova, Karalli, *The Dying Swan* and *La Périchole*, Muratova provides a *figura* for Kadmina,

the innovative and misunderstood female artist, and significantly broadens the intertextual range of the Kadmina plot.⁴⁴

Chekhovian Motifs - Developing a Dialogue between the two Source Texts

It becomes clear that Muratova intends to bring her two Chekhovian sources, so different in tone and intention, together into a composite and more complex text when Petia, the hero of *Difficult People*,⁴⁵ wandering the byways at the start of his journey to Moscow, is asked for directions by a guest, lost on his way to the Sabinin wedding. This guest offers to drop him at the station after the wedding, and thus Petia is also present at the marriage service of *Tatiana Repina*. At the end of the service he lingers behind and is one of the characters upbraided by the tragic heroine of the latter text. Thus Petia provides a narrative connection between the two stories. Muratova strengthens this connection by means of formal repetition and repetition of imagery. The names of the brother and sister in *Difficult People*, Petia and Varia, are almost exactly echoed in the names of the bridal couple, Petr and Vera. Both episodes conclude with a performance of the Silvestrov romance. In *Difficult People* the father, anguished at the perceived ingratitude of his family, pulls a dressing gown over his head and rages, a motif repeated in the sari-like scarf under which the raving young woman hides as she rails against the world and its injustice in *Tatiana Repina*. It is particularly important that the parent of one episode is likened to the child of the other, suggesting that Muratova's representation of unhappiness has a broad existential dimension. Both episodes have icons on the wall and contain a religious ritual - the chanting of grace and the Lord's Prayer before the meal in *Difficult People* and the Orthodox Wedding Service in *Tatiana Repina*, a ritual which itself includes the recitation of the Lord's Prayer. Both of these rituals are 'made strange', to use Viktor Shklovskii's term, by disruption, the grace by a gradual break down of synchronicity as the children gabble their prayers, the wedding service by the bored and uncomprehending comments of the guests. *Tatiana Repina* already contains a strongly performative element, and directly addresses that performance's reception, as the guests, some of whom are described in the cast list as actors, comment on the nature of the wedding service. Muratova increases the element of reception by having Petia observe both the marriage ceremony and the disruptive behaviour of Marisha. Chekhov's *Difficult People* also contains an audience, with the younger children sitting in frozen observance of the ritual argument between Petia and his father, an argument which Petia explicitly refers to as a scene that is regularly played out between

them, but Muratova develops both spectacle and reception, by adding new characters, a group of eccentric German-speaking workmen, and by making the younger children perform an ironic parallel commentary on the family argument. Thus in *Chekhovian Motifs* both episodes already contain both a text and its reception, a device used both by Muratova in *The Asthenic Syndrome* and by Chekhov in *The Seagull* to pre-empt audience rejection of their radical innovations.

Above all, Muratova creates a connection between the two source texts by changing the identity of the woman in black in the second episode, who is here given the name Marisha and revealed to be the daughter of Fr Ivan, one of the priests who has officiated at the ceremony. Fr Ivan and Evgraf Shiriaev are further brought together by the motif of having them both attentively comb their thinning hair in a mirror.⁴⁶ By this change the fraught relations between unsympathetic parents and their neurotic children are revealed to be a central thematic concern of *Chekhovian Motifs*. Petia and Marisha each have a difficult relationship with a parent, but this motif is also extended to Petia's sister Varia, who refuses to obey her exhausted mother's instructions. Though she is only thirteen she is described by Petia as a 'terrorist' and the double of the neurotic and hysterical Marisha. Crucial to the breakdown of parent-child relations is the failure of love, and both episodes contain dramatic narrations of love's absence leading to a death staged to provoke remorse. The story of Tatiana Repina is explicitly discussed in these terms, and Marisha is just one of several women who wish to follow her example in order to exact punishment for a love withdrawn. But the same motif is played out in *Difficult People*. In Chekhov's story Evgraf invites his ungrateful family to strangle him and Petia imagines his penurious death on the road en route for Moscow, its reporting in the papers, and the remorse it will evoke in his stricken father. In *Chekhovian Motifs* Petia's story is imagined and recounted by Varia, who rehearses it with ghoulish relish. The elements of rejection, guilt, spiritual pain and the 'difficulty' ('тяжесть') of being related to others are all present in both of the Chekhovian source texts. But Muratova provides a further variation on them in a refrain repeated in the *Tatiana Repina* episode of the film by one of the wedding guests, an older woman played by Nina Ruslanova, who insists: 'Nobody loves anyone. I so much like it when someone loves someone.' In the credits at the end of the film it is this woman who is described as the 'woman in black', making her another double of the deranged Marisha.

Chekhovian Motifs - A Muratova Film

The critic Lev Anninskii warns us against reading *Chekhovian Motifs* as 'yet another illustration of a well trodden classic',⁴⁷ and there are compelling reasons for looking at it as a *Muratova* film, a film in intense and suggestive dialogue with her earlier work. Most of the leading actors in *Chekhovian Motifs* have worked with Muratova on other films, and carry to it the persona they have accrued elsewhere. Sergei Popov, who plays the impossible Evgraf, was most famously cast as the asthenic teacher, Nikolai,⁴⁸ also unable to respond to the demands of family, in *The Asthenic Syndrome*. Filipp Panov, who plays his son, Petia, offers us a companion to Misha, the young man he played in Muratova's previous film, *Minor People*. Jean Daniel, who plays the groom, was Veniamin Andreevich in the 'Boiler House No. 6' episode of *Three Stories*, while Nina Ruslanova, the guest who wears black and speaks of the impossibility of love, played key roles in Muratova's first film as a solo director, *Short Meetings*, in *Getting to Know the World*, *Among the Grey Stones* and *The Tuner*. Georgii Deliev, who plays the best man, went on to be cast by Muratova as her eponymous *Tuner*. Nataliia Buzko, the bride, played one of the twin schoolgirls in *The Asthenic Syndrome* and was Vera, the heroine of *Minor People*. Deliev and Buzko are both members of the eccentric Odessan theatrical troupe *Maski-shou* and the guests at the wedding are played by performers in the troupe, whom Muratova had used in *Minor People* and would use again in *The Tuner*.

There are also crucial thematic and formal links to the rest of Muratova's oeuvre. From the start of her career, Muratova has been interested in observing the behaviour of sensitive and often solitary young men.⁴⁹ Senia, the solitary wolf-hunter hero of the film with which she began her career, *By the Steep Ravine* (*У крутого яра*, 1961), made with Aleksandr Muratov, is explicitly called eccentric ('чудной') by another character. Tolia, the eponymous hero of *The Sensitive Policeman* (*Чувствительный милиционер*, 1992), who finds a baby in a cabbage patch and immediately determines to adopt her, is another such figure, and there are several more in *The Asthenic Syndrome*. Misha, the angelic bricoleur of *Minor People*, is a touching member of this group, in which Petia Shiriaev, whose voice reaches a strangled falsetto when he is driven to rage by his father, offers the nineteenth-century variation of the 'eternal student'. Near the end of *Chekhovian Motifs*, sleepless in his room, he gazes intently at a skull, encouraging us to see him as Hamlet, but characteristically this young

dreamer's conflict is with his father and his support comes from his mother.

Difficult young men have difficult relationships with their parents and 'difficult' characters have always attracted Muratova. In the 2002 documentary film, *Kira*, the actress Zinaida Sharko, who memorably plays the emotionally clumsy mother Evgeniia Vasilevna in *Long Farewells*, recalls that Muratova chose her for the part with the words 'I need a clumsy woman', and later in the film Muratova suggests that 'there must be something of a hindrance' in the characters that attract her. The ambiguous relationship between Petia Shiriaev and his parents is thus prefigured in the combined love and exasperation that the teenaged Sasha feels for his mother in *Long Farewells*, and both he and Petia Shiriaev are prevented from leaving home by parental emotional interdiction. The difficult relationships of parents and their children are further alluded to in the chorus character in *Long Farewells* of the old man for who Evgeniia Vasilevna writes a telegram at the railway station. Muratova's next film, *Among the Grey Stones*, offers contrasting types of father-son relationship. While the judge, played by Stanislav Govorukhin, is grief-stricken at the death of his wife and ignores his young son, he is contrasted with Valentin, played by Sergei Popov, here incarnating a loving father, who, though in penury, cares for his suffering children. The fragility of the relationship between parent and child is also suggested in an episodic character in *The Asthenic Syndrome*, who returns home with oranges for his teenaged daughter but soon, exasperated by her music, begins to fight and abuse her. There is a much warmer relationship in the same film between the senior teacher Irina Pavlovna, memorably played by Aleksandra Svenskaia, and her son, the schoolboy Ivnikov. This is another young man who has been shown to be exasperating and generous by turns, and his relationship with his exuberant mother is one of ironic affection. In general children seem to have easier relationships with their mothers in Muratova's films, but when mothers are deficient, the children are quick to exact revenge. One of her *Three Stories* is the tale of the matricidally eponymous *Ofa*, while in another, *The Little Girl and Death* (*Девочка и смерть*), an uncaring mother leaves her child with an authoritarian father substitute, a man whom the child promptly poisons.

Love, or more specifically men's inability to feel or articulate love for other members of their families, has been a recurrent concern of Muratova's female characters in many of her films. In *Short Meetings* Valentina insists to her wandering husband Maksim 'You simply don't love me', while Evgenia Vasilevna makes the same accusation to her son in *Long Farewells*. The harsh

judge in *Among the Grey Stones*, whose self-absorption prefigures that of Nikolai in *The Asthenic Syndrome* and of Evgraf Shiriaev, calls love a constraint upon his freedom. The words spoken by the Nina Ruslanova character, the woman in black, in *Chekhovian Motifs*, 'Nobody loves anyone. I so much like it when someone loves someone,' are particularly relevant here. The same actress, playing the central part of Liuba, had twice spoken the first half of this statement, 'Nobody loves anyone', in *Getting To Know the World*, in which Liuba chooses a shy but generous lover over a smugly self-confident one. There are other ways in which *Chekhovian Motifs* echoes *Getting To Know the World*, which contains a scene of a mass Komsomol wedding, with rows of white-clad brides, and which also *twice* uses the Silvestrov romance, 'Our days are running, disappearing in the darkness', also used twice in the later film.⁵⁰ The other part of the woman in black's assertion, 'I so much like it when someone loves someone', had previously been spoken by a female character in *A Change of Fate*, while Vera, the heroine of *Minor People*, also *twice* says 'Nobody loves anyone.' That the absence of love brings death to Tatiana Repina is consistent with the statement by Tolia, Muratova's *Sensitive Policeman*, that 'Everything else is like death, everything that is not love,' and the withdrawal of love has led to mortal punishment in *Three Stories*. In this context, it is interesting to note that Muratova, asked what was the significance of bringing two such different Chekhovian texts together, answered:

The affirmation of simple moral values. This is a film about the family. About love. You understand, it is very important to me that everyone in this family loves each other, despite the fact that they are different people, and are being pulled in different directions, and quarrelling. So that you feel that they love each other.⁵¹

Tension, on the other hand, has frequently been expressed in Muratova's films through physical symptoms. In *A Change of Fate* a visit to the village of the mistress of Aleksandr, the heroine's murdered lover, leads to breathlessness and coughing fits. And in the only film in which Muratova attempted a broad social analysis, the state of late Soviet Russia in *The Asthenic Syndrome* is expressed through the diametrically opposed indicators of asthenia, the narcolepsy of the hero Nikolai and the hysteria and psychological disturbance experienced by the heroine Natasha and several other characters. In some respects, in its concern with family, communication, language and social ritual, as well as in its structural innovations, *Chekhovian Motifs* is a companion piece to *The Asthenic Syndrome* and the characters in the later film manifest

the same symptoms. Hysteria pervades both the family quarrels of the first part and the increasing sense of incarceration of the guests at the wedding ceremony. Even one of the officiating priests, Fr Ivan, the father of Marisha, becomes hysterical after the ceremony since the service book had not been open at the right place. Petia Shiriaev is both hysterical, in the scenes with his family, and narcoleptic, when his falling asleep at the wedding prevents him from getting the promised lift to town and thus fulfilling his threat to escape from the parental home. Narcolepsy is also playfully alluded to in a brilliant scene in which the youngest brother nods off to the accompaniment of yet another Shiriaev family row. The physical sickness motif used in *The Asthenic Syndrome* is echoed in the comic trope of having of all members of the Shiriaev family wearing glasses, in Petia's and his father's coughing fits, and in the bride, the groom and many of the guests at the wedding choking, feeling breathless and getting sick. As in the earlier film, everyone in *Chekhovian Motifs* feels uneasy and tormented. The two films even share the motif of enclosure, of returning to the point of departure, though it is an indication of the love that Muratova nevertheless finds in her characters in *Chekhovian Motifs* that whereas Nikolai in *The Asthenic Syndrome*, returns to the metro station where we had first seen him in order to die, Petia's return home, though it produces another argument with his father, does lead Evgraf to give him the money he needs, and makes it possible, at last, for him to leave for Moscow.

One of the most striking ways in which Muratova develops her Chekhovian original in the context of her own interests is in the film's representation of animals. Though *Difficult People* is set on a smallholding, Chekhov refers only in passing to a turkey, and later to 'hens, ducks and pigs'. But Muratova's *Difficult People* has hens and ducks, geese and turkeys, a cow, a lamb, a goat, pigs and horses in abundance. Muratova has spoken repeatedly in interviews of her love of animals and her anguish at human mistreatment of them.⁵² This concern is most starkly expressed in her films in *The Asthenic Syndrome*, which starts with a scene in which a cat is taunted by having a tin tied to its tail and has a later episode in which a man and his daughter fight over their pets. Near the end of the film is one of the most shocking episodes Muratova has filmed. A group of women visit a dog pound in which pathetic caged dogs suffer without water in overcrowded cages with flies crawling over their faces. The scene is followed by a unique piece of polemic. A title appears on screen: 'People don't like looking at this. People don't link thinking about this. This must not have any relationship to conversations about good and evil.' These concerns are echoed in her next film, *The Sensitive*

Policeman, which includes a scene in which householders threaten to take noisy dogs to a knacker's yard and a character returns home to see further evidence of animal suffering in the Estonian photographer Peeter Tooming's 1981 film *Town Animals* (*Linnaloon*) showing on her television. But to counterbalance this, her films regularly show scenes of human affection and respect for animals, a wolf-cub adopted at the end of *By the Steep Ravine*, a dog stroked in *Long Farewells*, the wonderful scenes of racing horses in *Enthusiasms* (*Увлечение*, 1994). In *A Change of Fate* there are kittens and goats, a ram and a tiger and the film ends with a scene of a wild horse running free. *The Little Girl and Death* opens with a bravura sequence of a resourceful cat stealing a plucked chicken and in *Minor People* an affectionate monkey kisses its owner in delight. This film is full of animal noises, the sounds of a pig, a dog and a kitten and the animal noises made by its human characters.

There is animal suffering in *Chekhovian Motifs*, too, for the Shiriaevs have drowned their pet cat's kittens. But more than ever before, in another sign of the playful, merciful tone towards human frailty which Muratova adopts in this film, there is sympathy and respect. Petia's mother promises the cat that they will never again kill its offspring and the animal comes to console the dejected Petia in his room in the film's final sequence. His defeated arrival back at the family home had begun with him gazing lengthily in silent communion with the family's pigs, marking him as the returned Prodigal, a point underlined by the intercutting of the faces of his father and a pig at the start of the film. The Makarova ballet also speaks of human admiration for animal grace, and this is followed by an extraordinary lengthy sequence choreographing the graceful movements of farmyard animals to the Silvestrov romance of human longing which ends the first part of the film.⁵³

In formal terms, too, *Chekhovian Motifs* both echoes and develops the approach to character and narrative Muratova has used in her earlier films. She has always employed the human voice as an instrument and verbal mannerism as a means of defining her characters. Her films are full of play with lexis and intonation, parallel narratives, ecstatic monologues and the repetition of verbal tics. Among the first commentators to discuss Muratova's verbal inventiveness was Viktor Bozhovich:

K. Muratova structures her dialogue in a particular way. A number of characters speak at the same time, interrupting each other and repeating themselves. Some of the remarks are inaudible, but certain words and

fragments of phrases suddenly 'jump out' on to the surface, making unexpected links among themselves and merging into some other 'text'. As early as in *Long Farewells* this device was employed with virtuosity by K. Muratova in the scene of the meal in the dacha. We have long used the term 'subtext'. With regard to the films of K. Muratova we have to speak also about their 'supertext'. Each remark taken individually can be psychologically motivated, ordinary, emerging out of the situation, but the 'supertext' turns out to be outside of the situation and abstractly poetic.⁵⁴

Asked by Pavel Sirkes to define the 'enzyme' ('фермент') which gives her films their particular quality, Muratova identified linguistic repetition: 'The first thing I'll say to you is that people often repeat the same lines. It's obtrusive, isn't it? ... And you can immediately tell that it's one of my films'.⁵⁵

Not that this repetition leads to understanding. Oksana Vasina has described the speech of Muratova's characters as 'serving in a strange way as a mechanism of defamiliarization (остранения)', while Helen Ferguson, in the most concentrated study yet of Muratova's use of language, writes of the preponderance of 'speech which conceals rather than communicates, and ultimately renders language meaningless by reducing it to mere sounds'.⁵⁶

All of these verbal stratagems are used in *Chekhovian Motifs*. Both parts of the film contain parallel dialogue, delivered in different registers. An early question as to whether the workmen are building 'a barn or a shop' ('сараи или магазин') is developed into a comic verbal refrain by the young children. Their parents' quarrel provokes, in ironic commentary, their doggerel phrase 'Porridge, porridge, television' ('каша, каша, телевизор'). The solemn litanies of the wedding service are intoned to the accompaniment of the guests' fretful complaints about a mad woman and a mosquito. One of the most inventive and comic of Muratova's linguistic tropes, the obsessive repetition of an *idée fixe*, is used to wonderful effect at the start of *Chekhovian Motifs*. In the Chekhovian original, the mother suggests to her husband: 'Evgraf Ivanych, you might give him six roubles more for boots', and adds 'At least give him something for trousers'. In the film this is extended into a patented Muratova tirade with the mother repeating with ever greater passion 'At least buy him a sweater' ('Хоть бы свитер ему купить.') Not that this happens. As Anninskii notes, echoing the lines about love repeated in the film, the mind-numbing phrases are repeated 'without the hope that anyone will hear

anything' ('без надежды, что кто-нибудь что-нибудь услышит').⁵⁷

Some of the most challenging and illuminating readings of Muratova's work examine her films in the context of Formalist theory and the theory and practice of the Russian cinematic avant-garde of the 1920s, especially Sergei Eizenshtein.⁵⁸ Oleg Aronson, for example, suggests that there can really no longer be any need to prove that Muratova is a formalist, and traces the evolving presence of eccentricism ('эксцентризм) and the attraction (аттракцион) in her films. For Aronson the purposes of the attraction for Eizenshtein and Muratova are different: while Eizenshtein uses montage to sub-ordinate individual attractions to his overall intentions in the film, Muratova's attractions are sufficient unto themselves:

Muratova departs from 'using' her attractions 'in the aims' of art. In her films it is as if they live separately from the work - in all their irrelevance, redundancy [...] (Since all that there *is* is an uncollected, unedited set of recognisable trick-attractions - signs of the Muratova manner.⁵⁹

Chekhovian Motifs is full of compelling Muratova attractions, from the use of language to the television film of Makarova dancing *The Dying Swan*, the twice sung romance and the extended scenes of animals, and for all their self sufficiency it is also possible to argue that each of them is, in Eizenshtein's words, 'mathematically calculated to produce specific emotional shocks in the spectator in their proper order within the whole'.⁶⁰

Tatiana Repina itself can be viewed as an 'attraction' within the text of *Difficult People*, put on for the diversion of the student Petia. Formally this sequence, with its shocking mixing of registers, is one of the boldest Muratova has attempted, and in this context it is interesting to consider the eccentricism of Muratova's films in the light of the cinematic practice of another major strand of the Russian cinematic avant-garde, the Leningrad group *The Factory of the Eccentric Actor* (FEKS). A key collaborator of the FEKS, the Formalist theorist Iurii Tynianov, wrote the book and the screenplay for another film in which the Orthodox Wedding Service was defamiliarized, this time by performing the ceremony in the absence of the (non-existent) groom, *Lieutenant Kizhe* (*Поручик Киже*), directed in 1934 by Aleksandr Faintsimmer. And Tynianov's condemnation, in the first sentence of his libretto of the celebrated 1926 FEKS film of Nikolai Gogol's *The Overcoat*,

of the banal 'cine-illustration' ('киноиллюстрация') of literary texts, is also illuminatingly close to Muratova's practice.⁶¹

But as Mikhail Iampolskii has observed in a brilliant short analysis of the film, what is even more cinematically innovative about Muratova's wedding scene, and also more shocking to viewers than the mixing of the sacred and the profane, is the fact that she chose to film the wedding scene *in real time*, forcing viewers of the film, like the guests at the wedding, to experience time in all its (disconcertingly uncinematic) slowness:

The radicalism of Muratova's resolution consists in the fact that she films the wedding service without any cuts, preserving on screen, so to say, the literal chronological time of the event. The director does not omit a single word of a prayer, a single gesture of the priest. In this way she puts the viewer of the film in the same position as the 'viewers' in the church.⁶²

Chekhovian Motifs, as this article has attempted to show, is made, as Oleg Aronson has put it, 'absolutely and completely "in the Muratova manner"'.⁶³ But she also offers us brilliantly imaginative and compelling readings of her two source texts. Since the beginning of her career what Muratova has found in Chekhov is an artist equally ready to explode formal constraints and to turn his attention to what had hitherto been considered marginal to the workings of art. Just as Chekhov was accused of destroying the laws of the theatre, so Muratova explodes the laws of cinematic spectacle. To quote Aronson again:

Chekhovian Motifs returns us to Chekhov not through the text, not through the plot and not even through the 'motifs' which we can find in his stories and plays. [...] Muratova returns us to Chekhov through her manner, - through the attraction which does not become art, but remains only a gesture, directed towards unmanifested sociality. [...] For Chekhov the same role is played by his specific ethic of the principled insufficiency of art, and his social intention, which forces him to put limits on the sphere of expressiveness, to seek the unused possibilities of language.⁶⁴

Perhaps above all in its scintillating revelation of 'the unused possibilities of language', *Chekhovian Motifs* is (also) a Chekhovian film.

NOTES

1. It is commercially available in the British Film Institute's series of videotapes entitled *Early Russian Cinema*, on *Tape 1: Beginnings*.
2. For an indication of the extent of Russian cinematic adaptations of Chekhov, consult *Russian and Soviet Film Adaptations of Literature. A Catalogue*, compiled by Anat Vernitski, at <http://www.surrey.ac.uk/lcts/lvmg/Catalogue.html> (accessed 18 February 2005).
3. M. Turovskaia, 'Ob ekranizatsii Chekhova. Predvaritel'nye zametki', *Kinovedcheskie zapiski*, 5, 1989, pp. 25-40.
4. *Ibid.*, pp. 27, 31, 39.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 40.
6. For German's invocation of Chekhov, see A. Lipkov, 'Proverka... na dorogakh', *Novyi mir*, 1987, 2, pp. 202-25 (221). For an examination of the Chekhovian allusions in *My Friend Ivan Lapshin*, see J. Graffy, 'Unshelving Stalin: after the Period of Stagnation', in *Stalinism and Soviet Cinema*, ed. Richard Taylor and Derek Spring, Routledge, London, 1993, pp. 212-27 (224).
7. For an illuminating examination of the relationship between Pichul's film and the Russian literary classics, see Z. Abdullaeva, "Eto ne Chekhov", *Iskusstvo kino*, 1999, 9, pp. 16-23.
8. On *Tsvety kalenduly* see N. Sirivlia, 'Imet' i byt', *Iskusstvo kino*, 1999, 2, pp. 21-4.
9. Solov'ev's words are quoted from the material on the film on the website of the Tsentr podderzhki kinematografii, <http://www.centrkino.ru?films.asp?id=65> (accessed 18 February 2005).
10. For a detailed examination of the way Solov'ev treats his Chekhovian source material, see J. Graffy, 'Sergei Solov'ev, About Love [O liubvi] (2004)', <http://www.kinokultura.com/reviews/R4-05liubvi.html>

(accessed 28 January 2006).

11. On ruining a source, 'in the way that I needed to', see Muratova's response to questions in V. Bozhovich, 'Rentgenoskopiia dushi', *Iskusstvo kino*, 1987, 9, pp. 51-70 (henceforth Bozhovich, 'Rentgenoskopiia'), (59). On this ruining as an 'improvement', see Kira Muratova, "'Iskusstvo rodilos' iz zapretov, styda i strakha'", *Iskusstvo kino*, 1995, 2, pp. 90-8 (henceforth Muratova, 'Iskusstvo rodilos' iz zapretov'), (92).
12. Bozhovich, 'Rentgenoskopiia', p. 57
13. N. Kovarskii, 'Chelovek i vremia', *Iskusstvo kino*, 1968, 10, pp. 50-7 (53-4).
14. Bozhovich, 'Rentgenoskopiia', p. 62.
15. Ibid.
16. Ibid., p. 63.
17. Muratova quoted from Ibid., p. 64
18. S. Manuilov, 'Vyrozhdenie cheloveka' in *Kira Muratova 98. Masterskaia kinovedov Evgeniia Gromova*, ed. Pavel Portnov, VGIK, Moscow, 1999, pp. 56-62 (henceforth *Kira Muratova 98*), (57).
19. 'Kira Muratova otvechaet zriteliam', *Kinovedcheskie zapiski*, 13, 1992, pp. 157-68 (henceforth 'Kira Muratova otvechaet zriteliam'), (162).
20. Kira Muratova, "'Ia ne koshka i ne Gospod' Bog'", *Stolitsa*, 1994, 20, pp. 48-50 (50). In response to this statement Muratova's interviewer, Dmitrii Bykov, merely says 'That's good' and does not pursue the matter.
21. Kira Muratova, "'Liubliu nazyvat' veshchi svoimi imenami'", *Iskusstvo kino*, 1999, 11, pp. 78-86 (henceforth Muratova, 'Liubliu nazyvat' veshchi svoimi imenami') (80). This assessment of her characters is of course expressed in explicitly Chekhovian terms. Compare Andrei's

complaint in act 4 of *Three Sisters* about living in a town in which no one has ever done anything remarkable and people 'just eat, drink, sleep and then die ... others are born and they too eat, drink, sleep and, so as not to die of boredom, bring variety to their lives with vile gossip, vodka, cards, malicious litigation [...] (Anton Chekhov, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii i pisem v tridsati tomakh*, ed. N.F. Bel'chikov et al., Nauka, Moscow, 1974-1983 (henceforth Chekhov, *PSS*), volume 13, 1978, p. 182.

22. Z. Abdullaeva, 'Sarai ili magazin?', *Iskusstvo kino*, 2002, 11, pp. 37-44 (39). Abdullaeva also links the 'The Little Girl and Death' episode of Muratova's film *Three Stories* to Chekhov's 1888 story *Sleepy* (*Спать хочется*).
23. Kira Muratova, 'V pervuiu ochered' ia khochu nraivit'sia sebe samoi', *Russkii zhurnal*, 26 July, 2002; http://www.russ.ru/culture/cinema/20020726_des-pr.html (Henceforth, Muratova, 'V pervuiu ochered' ia khochu nraivit'sia sebe samoi'), (accessed 28 January 2006).
24. Kira Muratova, "To, chto nazyvaetsia 'kich' ili 'bezhkusitsa' mne ne chuzhdo", *Iskusstvo kino*, 2005, 1, pp. 12-22 (17).
25. References to the story *Difficult People* will be to Chekhov, *PSS*, volume 5, 1976, pp. 323-30.
26. D. Rayfield, *Anton Chekhov. A Life*, HarperCollins, London, 1997, p. 146.
27. R. Bartlett, *Chekhov. Scenes from a Life*, The Free Press, London, 2004, p. 24.
28. References to the play *Tat'iana Repina* are to Chekhov, *PSS*, volume 12, 1978, pp. 77-95.
29. Chekhov, *PSS*. 12, p. 87.
30. *Ibid.*, p. 94.

31. For a brilliant account of Kadmina's life and the literary reactions to her dramatic death, see Julie Buckler, 'Her Final Debut: the Kadmina legend in Russian Literature' in *Intersections and Transpositions: Russian Music, Literature and Society*, ed. Andrew B. Wachtel, Northwestern University Press, Evanston, Illinois, 1998, pp. 225-52 (Henceforth Buckler, 'Her Final Debut').
32. On Chaikovskii's romance for Kadmina, see Buckler, 'Her Final Debut', p. 235. For the text of the romance see *ibid.*, p. 250. For the text of his letter on Kadmina's death, see I.S. Turgenev, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii i pisem v dvadtsati vos'mi tomakh*, ed. M.P. Alekseev et al., Izdatel'stvo Akademii Nauk SSSR, Moscow-Leningrad, 1960-1968 (henceforth Turgenev, *PSS*) volume 13, 1967, p. 580, note 1.
33. Leskov's reaction is quoted from Turgenev, *PSS*, volume 13, pp. 582-3.
34. On Kuprin and Suvorin, see A.I. Kuprin, *Sobranie sochinenii v devyati tomakh*, ed. E. Rotshtein and P. Viacheslavov, Biblioteka "Ogonek", Izdatel'stvo "Pravda", Moscow, 1964, volume 1, p. 488.
35. Buckler, 'Her Final Debut', p. 232. The anonymous 1881 play *I Am Waiting. There is Still Time*, Turgenev's, Leskov's and Kuprin's stories, and the plays by Suvorin and Chekhov are all discussed illuminatingly by Buckler. For a biography of Kadmina, see B. Iagolin, *Kometa divnoi krasoty: zhizn' i tvorchestvo Evlalii Kadminoï*, Moscow, 1970.
36. On Bauer's film *Posle smerti* see *Velikii kinemo. Katalog sokhranivshikhsia igrovykh fil'mov Rossii 1908-1919*, comp. V. Ivanova, V. Myl'nikova, S. Skovorodnikova, Iu. Tsiv'ian, R. Iangirov, Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie, Moscow, 2002 (henceforth *Velikii kinemo*), pp. 269-71, and R. Morley, 'Gender Relations in the Films of Evgenii Bauer', *Slavonic and East European Review*, 81, 2003, 1, pp. 32-69.
37. On the Visnovskaia affair, see 'Delo Barteneva', <http://murders.kulichki.net/d111.html> (accessed 13 February 2006).
38. For a fascinating analysis of the role of texture in Muratova's *mise-en-*

scène, and an examination of other cluttered interiors, see E. Widdis, 'Muratova's clothes, Muratova's textures, Muratova's skin', <http://www.kinokultura.com/articles/apr05-widdis.html> (henceforth Widdis, 'Muratova's clothes'), (accessed 18 February 2006).

39. One of the Lermontov poems chosen by Sil'vestrov for *Tikhie pesni* is 'Beleet parus odinokii', and Sil'vestrov's version is reminiscent of the version sung at the end of Muratova's *Long Farewells*.
40. G. McBurney, 'Soviet Music after the Death of Stalin: the Legacy of Shostakovich', in *Russian Cultural Studies. An Introduction*, ed. Catriona Kelly and David Shepherd, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1998, pp. 120-37 (137). I am also extremely grateful to my colleague, Dr Philip Bullock, for sharing with me his sophisticated understanding of Sil'vestrov's work.
41. The careful attention shown to the way her characters are dressed is also something which links *Chekhovian Motifs* to earlier Muratova films. See Muratova, 'Liubliu nazyvat' veshchi svoimi imenami', p. 85, for the influence in this context of her meeting with Rustam Khamdamov; and see Widdis, 'Muratova's clothes'.
42. On Bauer's film *Umiraiushchii lebed'* see *Velikii kinemo*, pp. 355-7.
43. See S.N. Sergeev Tsenskii, *Sobranie sochinenii v 12 tomakh*, Biblioteka Ogonek, Izdatel'stvo Pravda, Moscow, 1967, volume 1, pp. 35-42 (41).
44. I am extremely grateful to Candyce Veal for information about *The Dying Swan* and also for the suggestion of a link between the doomed swan and the woman who is watching her, the trapped mother of the family.
45. Muratova does not use the Chekhovian titles for the episodes of her film, but for ease of identification I shall use them here.
46. Giving Fr Ivan a difficult character and a strained relationship with his daughter introduces another link to the Chekhovian text of 'Difficult People', in which Evgraf Shiriaev's father was a priest named Fr Ioann,

who had a fiery temper and beat his congregation about the head with a stick.

47. L. Anninskii, 'Dialogi s vsevyshnim', *Iskusstvo kino*, 2002, 11, pp. 61-2 (62). (henceforth Anninskii, 'Dialogi s vsevyshnim').
48. Popov was also cast as the 'good father', Valentin, in *Among the Grey Stones*, and as the successful lover, Mikhail in *Getting to Know the World*.
49. Muratova's interest in solitude is attested by her words 'I don't have enough solitude' ('Мне не хватает одиночества'), quoted by Marina Veksler in her 'Smert' za odinchestvo', in *Kira Muratova* 98, pp. 14-18 (17) and repeated by Muratova herself years later in the documentary film *Kira*, directed by Vladimir Nepevnyi, Nikola-fil'm, 2002.
50. For a revealing comparison of the representation of weddings in *Getting to Know the World*, *Chekhovian Motifs* and *The Tuner* see Widdis, 'Muratova's clothes'.
51. Muratova, is quoted here from the interview 'V pervuiu ochered' ia khochu nravit'sia sebe samoi'.
52. On the mistreatment of animals, see especially 'Kira Muratova otvechaet zriteliam', p. 158. On her own understanding animals better than humans, and relating better to them, see , 'Zhenshchina, kotoroi skuchen alfavitnyi poriadok', <http://www.film.ru/article.acp?ID=2645> (accessed 17 February 2003).
53. On Muratova's representation of animals, see especially P. Portnov, "'Skvoz' krov' i pyl'" (motiv zhivotnykh v tvorchestve Kiry Muratovoi), in *Kira Muratova* 98, pp. 62-5.
54. Bozhovich, 'Rentgenoskopiia', p. 68.
55. Muratova, 'Iskusstvo rodilos' iz zapretov', pp. 97-8.
56. O. Vasina, 'Strannye liudi Kiry Muratovoi', in *Kira Muratova* 98, pp. 9-14 (12); H. Ferguson, 'Silence and Shrieks: Language in Three Films

by Kira Muratova', *Slavonic and East European Review*, 83, 2005, 1, pp. 38-70 (70).

57. Anninskii, 'Dialogi s vsevyshnim', p. 61.
58. See, for example, two excellent studies by Oleg Aronson: 'Ekstsentrika priema i materiala. O fil'makh Kiry Muratovoi', in his *Metakino*, Ad Marginem, Moscow, 2003, pp. 205-17; and 'Stolknovenie ekranizatsii', *Kinovedcheskie zapiski*, 61, 2002, pp. 6-21 (16-21) (Henceforth Aronson, 'Stolknovenie ekranizatsii'). The same point about Muratova's use of the traditions of the Russian cinematic avant-garde is made by Andrei Plakhov in the chapter on Muratova in his *Vsego 33*, Akvilon, Vinnitsa, 1999.
59. On Eizenshtein's theory of the attraction, see S. Eizenshtein, 'Montazh attraktsionov', [First in Lef, 1923, 3, June-July], in his *Izbrannye proizvedeniia v shesti tomakh*, Iskusstvo, Moscow, 1964-1971, volume 2, 1964, pp. 269-73. The quotation from Aronson is from his 'Stolknovenie ekranizatsii', p. 18.
60. Eizenshtein in 'The Montage of Attractions' quoted from S.M. Eisenstein, *Selected Works. Volume 1. Writings, 1922-34*, ed. and transl. Richard Taylor, BFI Publishing, London and Indiana University Press, Bloomington, Indiana, 1988, p. 34.
61. Tynianov introduced the libretto in the following words: 'The film story *The Overcoat* is not a film illustration of Gogol's famous story. Illustrating literature for the cinema is an arduous and inauspicious task, since the cinema has its own methods and devices, which are not the same as those of literature. The cinema can only try to reincarnate and reinterpret literary heroes and literary style in its own way. That is why we have before us not a Gogol' tale, but a film tale *in the manner of Gogol*', where the story is made more complicated, and the hero is dramatized in a plane which is not given by Gogol', but which is as it were suggested by Gogol's manner.' Quoted from Iu. Tynianov, 'Libretto kinofil'ma "Shinel'" [1926], in *Iz istorii Lenfil'ma*, 3, ed. N. Gornitskaia, Iskusstvo, Leningrad, 1973, pp. 78-80 (78).
62. Chekhovian Motifs lasts 118 minutes. The wedding service begins after

47 minutes and lasts 44 minutes. See M. Iampol'skii, 'V zashchitu krepkogo sna' [1990], reprinted, with a new postscript on *Chekhovian Motifs*, in his *Iazyk - Telo - Sluchai: Kinematograf i poiski smysla*, Novoe Literaturnoe Obozrenie, Moscow, 2004, pp. 236-43 (240-1). Iampol'skii goes on to speak of the synchronicity between wedding guests in the film asking when it is all going to end and exasperated viewers leaving the cinema. For another Chekhovian scene in which a plea to be allowed to leave a crowded and oppressive wedding service is followed by an order from the priest to keep quiet, see the 1900 story *In the Ravine*, Chekhov, *PSS*, volume 10, 1977, pp. 144-80 (153)

63. Aronson, 'Stolknovenie ekranizatsii', p. 16.

64. Ibid., pp. 18-19.