

# Getting to Know the Big, Wide World

KIRA MURATOVA

1978

Kira Muratova's *Getting to Know the Big, Wide World*, was her personal favourite of her own films and the director's first work in colour. Muratova was one of the many victims of censorship and oppression throughout her working life; a common situation but one made all the more tragic by her formidable talent, unusual cinematic language and status as one of a few female directors working at the time. Muratova's two earlier films, *Brief Encounters* (1967) and *Long Farewells* (1971) had both met the same, sad and discouraging fates: shelved practically immediately after production and criticised for being 'bourgeoise'. This silencing was so brutal, Muratova began to believe her films would never be seen by audiences and would instead be doomed to gather dust in an archive: 'In Soviet times, after *Long Farewells* (1971), it became crystal clear that whatever film I made, it would be lambasted. And I started to dream, "Let me shoot, and you can just put it on the shelf, Don't show it, don't watch it, just let me make it." ' Whilst the critiques hedged at her prior films were specious and unfair, even the most vicious censor would struggle to find *Getting to Know the Big Wide World* petty or bourgeoise, it ran into distribution issues regardless.

Based on a construction site, Muratova extends her talent for intimate psychological portraiture against the liminal backdrop of the shifting space. Most directors who turn their attention to human character tend to do so with a proclivity for the serious or severe; but Muratova approaches her insightful delineations with whimsy and a delightful touch of the surreal. Workers and their families live on this site, building a Soviet dream and playing out their own lives in this strange space. The winding plot is not explicitly linear, instead the dream like machinations of routine, work and love's intermingling are focused on in the same winding way in which they might occur in life. The central plot is a love triangle between Lyuba, dreamy and generous; and the two rivals for her attention, Misha, who is painfully shy due to having lost a leg in an accident three years before the events of the film, and Kolya who oscillates between kindness and cruelty in quick succession.

In this strange place, two little girls yell for Misha through an empty and half built corridor, ducking and hiding behind the

unfilled window space to avoid him when he looked for the voice. In another scene there is a row between lovers, it takes place in the expanse of wet, formless soil on the ground. As the audience, we see it from a bird's eye view, assumedly through the eyes of the other female workers who watch from the top of an empty building. We cannot see anything the two characters say over the noise of the machinery. We can barely even see their expressions; we mostly watch the top of their heads and their physical movement. But armed with the worker's commentary which filters over the noise of machinery and the familiar body language of a lover's argument, we feel intimately as though we understand what is taking place- even through the distorted lens with which the information is relayed to us. Aaron Cutler for *Senses of Cinema* commented on this use of space by Muratova: 'Characters wander across its windowless, open-aired levels where they can both hide from and look onto their surroundings, and build physical structures and their identities at the same time. '

The women take a box of hats and preen in front of a broken mirror: the jagged mirror and their work clothes juxtapose the overwrought drama and glamour of the costume hats. It is exaggerated, but it is a slice of the experience how individuals play out fantasies against the structures of their lives. The crumbling or foundational aesthetic, depending on your perspective, is half finished, always, and also has a great deal of symbolic resonance. It is a place of destruction, creation, life and death all at once. This is mirrored in the fertile imagery of wet earth, patchy grass, weddings and the vast array of ages who live on the site. Muratova said of her choice of location: 'lampolski writes that everything is in the machine. Yes, the machine is important, but it's only a part of the construction site. It's the construction site itself that matters for me: something propagates from nothing and seems monstrous, ugly, and only then you progress. Otherwise, it's not interesting.' Lyuba gives a speech at the communal wedding: 'We're building a huge city. Houses can be big, houses can be small, but it doesn't really matter. The most important thing in the world is a happiness that is genuine. They don't make it at factories, even the best ones.' There is an exquisite beauty to Muratova's foray, the forging of lives against a backdrop of decay and growth.