

The Long Farewell

Kira Muratova

1971

Kira Muratova's sophomore feature, *The Long Farewell* is often discussed in tandem with her debut, *Brief Encounters*. Both were criticised and ultimately denied distribution, remaining hidden to Soviet viewers until the late 1980s. The cumulative ill feeling towards Muratova as a result of the two films saw her expelled from the filmmakers' union and limited to piecemeal work for almost twenty years. Their shared misfortune has tied these two pictures together in the minds of many critics and viewers: together, they represent "early Muratova", a two-for-one deal, and our window onto a filmmaking sensibility that was never allowed to evolve on its own terms.

With the benefit of historical distance, though, we should learn to appreciate the singularity of these films, and of *The Long Farewell* in particular. It represents a significant departure from its predecessor, even as it picks up many of its thematic threads. Muratova's oeuvre is an endlessly diverse thing, often described by scholars in terms of its dissonance, polyphony, cacophony. *The Long Farewell* sits at the meeting point of so many of her divergent tendencies: it combines her love of the provincial and the Chekhovian with her delight in formal experimentation; her eye for human drama with her thrilling distaste for sentiment. Forty years on, it is a totally singular experience. For its time, it was innovative to a rare degree.

Like *Brief Encounters*, it centres on a lonely, quietly desperate middle-aged woman in Odessa. Single divorcee Evgenia's life revolves around her teenage son, Sasha. Since returning from a camping trip with his father, however, Sasha has withdrawn from her. He wants to move to Siberia to be with his dad, but cannot vocalise this to his mother; she in turn cannot bear the thought of his leaving, and does not know how to process her fear. Like the earlier film, then, it also explores how an absent male figure distorts the emotional world of those he has left behind, creating relationships that are doomed to frustration and misapprehension. The scholar Eugénie Zvonkine has described the film as a "hesitation waltz", noting how its narrative amounts to a series of dashed expectations: potential romances fail to materialise, as does Sasha's seemingly inevitable departure.

In formal terms, however, the film represents a leap forward for Muratova. Here we can already see many of the techniques that would define her post-Soviet masterworks: the freedom of her camerawork, the fractious, disorienting style of her editing, the tendency to loop conversations, the dialogues that descend into repetitious inanities. Oleg Karavaichuk's piano score at times seems to battle with the visuals. In Evgenia's and Sasha's rambling asides we witness the germination of the bewildering verbal assaults of later films like *The Asthenic Syndrome*. The degree of visual and aural sophistication on display can be hard to process at first, but the cumulative effect is never less than compelling.

Muratova explained her own approach to editing and how it helped her to produce the film's sense of inventiveness and play in a 1988 interview: "I could spend my whole life editing. I wouldn't go out anymore. I would stop noticing the difference between day and night. Editing is a game, not an exercise... You can form any thought, accomplish any transposition or interpretation of the scenes; change their nature, complexity, unexpectedness. In *The Long Farewell*, the love of editing became a principle. I filmed various scenes several times in order to be able to select the best take, and I used nearly all of that double material. I threw away very little."

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the film landed with officials like a lead balloon. Muratova herself claimed that she was never told precisely why *The Long Farewell* was denied a release, beyond the usual vague intimations of "petty-bourgeois realism" and lack of narrative clarity; as if its very inventiveness escaped the functionaries assigned to assess it. When it finally saw the light of day, its effect was profound. In 2012, the Russian film magazine *Seance* polled directors, screenwriters, actors, and critics as to the greatest Russian and Soviet films of all time. *The Long Farewell* ranked proudly at number 7, the only film by a woman in the top ten. Muratova's dues were a long time in coming, but they arrived eventually.