

## NARRATIVE RESISTANCE IN KIRA MURATOVA'S CINEMA

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### THE DUBIOUS RECEPTION OF MURATOVA'S CINEMA

Kira Muratova (1934-2018) was a Ukrainian filmmaker born in the town of Soroca, Romania (contemporary Moldova). Her oeuvre includes such films as *Brief Encounters* (1967), *The Long Farewell* (1971), *The Asthenic Syndrome* (1989), *The Sentimental Policeman* (1992), *Chekhov's Motif* (2002), and other films that are still awaiting worldwide recognition. Muratova spent most of her life in the city of Odesa, Ukraine, fighting for the right and opportunity to realise her creative vision of the world through something she loved and knew best – directing films.

The misunderstandings and the falsehood of the recent and not-so-recent reception of Muratova's cinematic legacy are easily understandable, but not sound. In the English-language-based scholarly literature, one does find a strange tradition of reception, aligning Muratova's cinema as a part of the Russian national cinematic world. Jane Taubman, the author responsible for the first English-speaking monography on Muratova's cinema declares that “she quickly became a cult figure, revered by lovers of serious Russian film, admired for her brilliant and totally idiosyncratic approach to film-making”.<sup>i</sup> While the quotation can give the impression that the author speaks about the expectation of the *audience*, recurrent comments<sup>ii</sup> throughout the book clearly indicate in which cultural tradition Muratova is assigned. Yet Soviet should not mean *Russian*. The different ways various ex-Soviet countries developed after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, and the different local communist party approach to state apparatus that existed in the USSR republics, indicates a different context for cinematic production and reception, which should not be put under the same umbrella.

A more interesting example of inadequate reception can be found in a more recent monograph on Ukrainian identity in cinema during the Thaw period. Joshua First declares that:

“Nonetheless, film-makers at Odesa did not participate in the specifically Ukrainian cultural politics that pervaded Dovzhenko Studio during this period. The *Odessity* did not, like the *Dovzhenkovotsy*, consider themselves ‘Ukrainian film-makers’, nor did they consider their work to be emblematic of ‘Ukrainian national cinema’. Therefore, I feel it necessary to exclude this studio from analysis in this book, believing that film production in Odesa would best be examined in relation to central studios like Mosfilm and Gorky”.<sup>iii</sup>

This statement is convenient because it clearly conveys two general mistakes that are often made in the post-colonial discourse on art regarding Eastern Europe. The first one is the presupposition that there exists a direct link between the creator and the art. This presupposition essentially means that the artist's explanation and contextualization of her art is the defining feature of an artwork. It is a modern belief, stemming from the idea of Enlightenment, that consciousness is transparent to itself. After a century of scholarly work on power politics, psychoanalysis, philosophy of difference, and other hermeneutics of suspicion, I take this presumption to be false.

The second dubious presumption regarding the contemporary reception of Muratova's work is thinking about identity in representational terms<sup>iv</sup>. While there is a huge contemporary debate about the genesis and being of personal and national identity, and which to cover would exceed the limits of this paper, the fundamental aspect of identity that I will emphasize in this work is *performativity*. When scholars find *Ukrainiannes* in movies that depict landscapes filled with sunflowers, Carpathian Mountains, or Ukrainian national clothes<sup>v</sup>, they are embracing the rules of identity articulation that were proposed by the totalitarian government – the communist party of the Soviet Union itself. Essentially, this concept of identity is *ethnographic*, because ethnicity, as a remnant of the bourgeois past, is supposed to function only as a historical reference in ethnographic discourse for the glorification of the present. Even to try to find more honest representations of Ukrainian ethnic identity would be to remain within the contours drawn by the Soviet apparatus. To avoid this ping-pong, the notion of identity in this work is not understood as something static, based on historical work, which has essential qualities that filmmakers should try to represent. A good example of such a rigid understanding of identity can be found in contemporary Russia, in its guide to relevant creative themes for filmmakers<sup>vi</sup>.

Instead, the narrative resistance that Muratova's films *do*, implies a processual, always-becoming, and acknowledgement-seeking conception of identity. I will not juxtapose *Brief Encounters*, *The Long Farewell*, and *The Asthenic Syndrome* between Ukrainianness and Sovietness, but I will try to show how Muratova's films create a different temporal and spatial understanding of identity, which conflicts with official Soviet temporality. Historicism, the scientific belief about the determined progress of historical time was not specific only to the Soviet project. This modern notion of temporality is characteristic of modernity in general<sup>vii</sup>. But speaking in a more relevant context, a good conceptual illustration of the link between cinema and Soviet historicism can be found in one of the great directors and film theorists in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Sergei Eisenstein's attempts to conceptualize the performativity of cinema's temporality:

“Here is another organic secret: a leaping imagist movement from quality to quality is not a mere formula of growth but is more, a formula of development – a development that involves us in its canon, not only as a single "vegetative" unit, subordinate to the evolutionary laws of nature, but makes us, instead, a collective and social unit, consciously participating in its development. For we know that this very leap, in the interpretation of

social phenomena, is present in those revolutions to which social development and movement of society is directed".<sup>viii</sup>

It is interesting to see, that the performative aspect of cinema, the *making* of audience was already noticed in the beginning of cinema as art and yet came to the forefront in the theory and philosophy much later – firstly in the writings of Stanley Cavell. During the cinema of the Thaw and later epochs, the understanding of identity did get more sophisticated, but the essential narrative juxtaposition of the *personal lagging temporality* against the *collective progressive history* is one of the fundamental characteristics of the cinema in Soviet colonial republics.

I hope that by providing this context a certain contour of conceptual strategy emerges. My proposed reading of Muratova's three melodramas and the exposition of the interlink between it and Ukrainian identity will follow in advancing a threefold thesis. a) The articulation of specific, present-oriented temporality and spatiality in Muratova's films that clashes with the official Soviet Union's historicism. b) The analysis of two Cavell's proposed essential notions of cinema – skepticism and moral perfectionism. c) An explication of the performative ontology in the melodrama genre.

#### NARRATIVE RESISTANCE IN MURATOVA'S MELODRAMAS. BRIEF ENCOUNTERS

From the synopsis, *Brief Encounters* looks like a melodrama classically structured around a love triangle. The two female protagonists – Valentina and Nadia throughout the film try to regain and understand their relationship with the never directly seen, guitar-playing geologist Maxim. But what is actually at stake, is not the possibility of romantic love, but the being, the *presentness* of the heroines themselves. Maxim is someone whose existence consists of spending time in the great outdoors and constantly being away – absent. By profession, he is a geologist – the modern and subtler version of classical land conqueror. We see him only in flashbacks, in the memories of Nadia and Valentina. The absence of Maxim, who in the female protagonist understanding is shown as an essential key to acquire presence, both in spatial and temporal meanings, and the gradual realization of the futility of this desire is the main narrative axis of the film.

The film starts with Valentina reciting over and over her speech for the local communist party committee about the contemporary state of the provincial town's sewage. Yet she mumbles, and fails to finish, the speech must be repeated again and again. What does repetition mean in its most simple terms? It means a discrepancy in the smooth flow of time. The theme of repetition and its implications for narrative continuity will be an important artistic tool in most of Muratova's films. "Forestalling time and narrative alike, repetition opposes the historicist logic

of diachronic progression and culmination.”<sup>x</sup> The repetition of speech is accompanied by the sound of a ticking clock. But the clock works smoothly. The following scene establishes the basic motive of the whole film – the unstoppable passage of objective historical time and its dissonance with the personal, experiential time and the ensuing focus on the more present things – everyday objects. Things, objects, and even dirty dishes (in Valentina’s case, the metaphysical monologue of Hamlet is changed by a monologue about washing dishes – *to wash or not to wash*) are more than the characters themselves. The constant detail shots of clocks, beds, newspaper headlines, walls, and other objects enjoy a haptically inspired presence while Nadia and Valentina are more absent than present.

Nadia, a waitress from a small country café comes to Valentina’s apartment in a provincial town to help her with daily chores. But the true reason for her arrival is to meet the man she falls in love with – the same wild, yet charming bard Maxim. In one of the pivotal scenes, Nadia, before going to sleep, touches a mirror. A bit later, her sleep is filled with dreams of the idyllic life of Valentina and Maxim. We as the viewers know, that this is only a fantasy. In Valentina’s memories, we see, that around Maxim she feels insecure, constantly analysing him and trying to tame him. Which, as the film shows, fails. Here again, we see the dynamics of absence and presence. The mirror being an analogy for Maxim, is a perfect symbol of nothingness, that through its absent qualities can reflect the presence of others. But the reflection itself does not enjoy the full substantiality of presentness – hence the flashbacks and the discrepancies of speech. The failures of communication, both in semantic and phonetic terms, a constant theme throughout the film, indicates the trouble that the heroines have with having a *voice* and participation in the process of signification.

While it can be interpreted that Muratova is influenced by that particular, Thaw era sensibility and the fashionable iconology of still-life, the juxtaposition of the human beings and objects emphasizes the two kinds of presentness:

“The presentation of still life-like images, of both direct and oblique kind, becomes for Muratova nothing less than a method for creating two spatial systems within one sequence or often one shot, moving from a regular, realistic setting to what we might call an aesthetic space, which discards the usual hierarchies among people, objects, and the environment (such as foreground and background, or container and contained), asking instead for their equal consideration.”<sup>x</sup>.

Both women have their own way in coming to terms with their presentness, although, at the end of the film, only Nadia can be expected to join the non-hierarchical presentness of the things. In the last shot of the film, she prepares the dinner table for both Maxim and Valentina. Before leaving she snatches an orange from the perfect still-life of the table, acknowledging a more optimistic path in her future. *Brief Encounters* finds presence in the *things* it shows on the screen, while the heroines are always lacking presentness. The accomplishment of the film is not to posit the two main women between the things, *as a thing*, with all the ensuing problems of

objectivation of gender, but to quit the rules of becoming present that the contemporary society proposes.

As we know from the production history, Kira Muratova did not intend to appear in the film as the leading actress, but circumstances led her to play the bureaucrat Valentina. Remembering, that most of the actors in the film were non-professionals, I believe the reason for her to take the leading part is a simple sense of identification with the character of Valentina. In the Soviet regime, there is no essential difference between a film director and a housing bureaucrat. The communist party plans and the rest of society does the implementation. In *Brief Encounters*, the plot is superficially structured around a love triangle, but essentially it presents a story about how women struggle to be present. It touches the Cavellian theme of the interdependence between individuals while asking the question – how to live in a world where men reign yet are non-existent? Being one of the first Muratova's films, it ends with a touch of hope. Nadia, a subliminal daughter of Valentina, realizes the impossibility of being with Maxim, becomes more resolved than Valentina herself, and leaves us with the hope of leading an authentic, autonomous, and integrity-filled life.

#### THE LONG FAREWELL

*The Long Farewell* centres on Evgenia Vasilievna, a divorced woman stuck in her role as a mother and a small-time translator, who is unable to acknowledge her son – Sasha's growth. She refuses to believe that he has grown up and to allow him to leave the house. The same way her husband has left her. Evgenia's main identity, and frankly the only identity she has left, rests on being a mother. When she is approached by a sympathetic man who shows interest in her – she declines. Evgenia is a complex character, a woman who is so afraid of coming back to the multitude of perspectives in life, that she neurotically clings on being with her son. In comparison with *Brief Encounters*, *The Long Farewell* shifts from the lack of female presentness of a girlfriend or a lover to the over-presentness of the mother. This over-presentness essentially is a form of control, forcing her son Sasha into a state of absence, unacknowledgment. While a simpler depiction of their relationship could contain psychoanalytic references, here Muratova again employs the dialectics of absence and presence. The presence of Evgenia rests on the control and absence of Sasha's part. Yet while unable to acknowledge her son, she lacks confirmation of her presence from her immediate surroundings.

Both Evgenia's and Valentina's fixations rely on the male counterpart, and in both cases, the leading females are afraid of autonomy. Evgenia's presence exists only in the relationship with her son. While in *Brief Encounters* we encountered the presence allowing factor – Maxim, only through flashback, the main technical feature of emphasizing the female heroine's absence

in *The Long Farewell* is the constant use of repetition. The film is filled with narratively unmotivated, repetitive shots. The various mise-en-scenes are also repeated with no clear function, the narrative action and dialogue happen in the margins of the shot, while the camera focuses its attention on trivial things – a chat between Sasha’s classmates, on a tree, or an old gardener watering the plants.

The narrative and compositional repetition we see throughout the movie creates an effect, that there is something wrong with these ordinary melodramatic events. The repeating of the repetitions suggests that the characters and the movie itself try to catch up with the flow of time. But because of the narrative tension, the objective and the subjective times are forking, making the main characters lose their presentness. In the same way Evgenia fails to be acknowledged as being present in one of the last scenes of the film when she is denied her seat in the pantomime performance, and yet as she tries to fight the situation, the public defeat comes with personal victory:

“It is in the final scene that both the audience and Sasha first see Zhenia in her true state, utterly vulnerable, and racked with hurt pride. She symbolically removes the wig, an attribute of her falseness. By being forced to confront the silence between herself and her son she has also been forced to acknowledge her own self-deception: her son is an adult and she is no longer the merry, frivolous young woman she pretends to be. Zhenia's final acceptance of herself also brings about a sea change in Sasha he decides that he cannot leave her”.<sup>xi</sup>

The film was not shown in the public cinema theatres, motivated by the lack of represented progress and blatant mood. While *Brief Encounters* ended on a less positive note, the protagonists in *The Long Farewell* do find hope in their presence. Sasha’s late affection for his mother and the promise to stay home in the final scene of the movie is an acceptance of her mother instead of the pursuit of imaginal and absent reality (Sasha’s fixation with viewing slides, his admiration for the father who left the family, or inability to express affection to Kartseva).

The Soviet authorities clearly saw the bleak portrayal of everyday life, its hopelessness, the lack of joy in the historical progress, and the emphasis on individual choices as something not akin to social realism. The film was forbidden to be shown publicly, Muratova’s creative rights were taken away, and for the next twenty years, she filmed movies that did not have the ambition to reflect the conditions of ordinary life in Soviet Ukraine. *The Long Farewell* is often considered Muratova’s best film, ingeniously presenting the despair and absence of the people found not in cinematic experiments, but on the surface of ordinary people's lives. It is a film about negating the future and accepting the presence and the reality embodied in it.

*Brief Encounters* and *The Long Farewell* form a cinematic diptych, researching the tragedy of human relationships and the necessary link of the Other for the I to exist. The films can be called melodramas only formally because they play with the classical conventions of the genre. We do not find any of the five essential qualities that are usually attributed to this genre<sup>xiii</sup>. One of

the reasons for the inability of an honest filmmaker to create a classical melodrama story rests on the all-pervading nature of totalitarian politics:

“Melodrama has persisted as a dramatic mode because, in a fundamental sense, it succeeds in expressing “the truth of life,” capturing a crucial existential truth, an aspect of life that affects everyone—namely, that, ultimately, we are all governed by random forces of happenstance.”<sup>xiii</sup>

Where time is determined by historical laws, there can be no random forces. But an honest artist will always find a creative way to deal with obstacles. *Brief Encounters* and *The Long Farewell* can be aligned to the broader, poetic way of creating cinema that was gaining popularity in the Thaw era of the Soviet Union<sup>xiv</sup>. But the next film steps over the inclinations of the poetic-oriented filmmakers and shows what happens when laws of history cease to exist.

#### ONTOLOGY OF MELODRAMA

The constant reference to the dialectics of presence and absence in my reading of Muratova’s films takes shape in Cavell’s thought as the problem of *skepticism*. The philosophical problem of skepticism in simple terms means the negation of the ordinary.

Usually, the research on Cavell’s philosophy of films starts with the exploration of the link between Cavell’s thought and the fundamental influence that late Wittgenstein and his *Philosophical investigations* had on him. It is often believed that late Wittgenstein was trying to show how to *overcome* skepticism. If one stays in this line of thought, there is a risk of misreading Cavell’s research on film. To emphasize a different reading on Cavell’s film ontology, I would like to start with a quote that shows a different strand of influence:

“When I learned of an essay of Heidegger’s called “The Age of the World View,” the mere words suggested to me, from my knowledge of Being and Time, a range of issues—that ours is an age in which our philosophical grasp of the world fails to reach beyond our taking and holding views of it, and we call these views metaphysics.”<sup>xv</sup>

In the referenced essay, Heidegger argues that the state of contemporary Western civilization has achieved a tragic point, where the fundamental understanding of the world is reduced to a *worldview*. The skeptical (in Heidegger’s vocabulary *nihilistic*) result of this standpoint means, that to acquire the worldview, and to base the ontology of the world on a human perspective, means to lose the world – to be in a state of *weltloss*. For Heidegger, this contemporary state is consistent with modernity’s obsessive search for certainty and the metaphysics of presence that manifested itself from the beginning of philosophy – namely Plato himself. Hence the title of the book, *The World Viewed*, which already gives a hint, about the forthcoming Cavell’s aspirations in thinking about cinema.

Cavell's main ontological thesis about cinema is that film is a *moving image of skepticism*. Because of its photographic nature, cinema articulates our ontological condition – being in present yet absent reality. The modern doubt on reality not only made us lose our belief in reality itself, but without it, we lose our belief in the existence of ourselves. The way to treat this modern problem, according to Cavell is to move towards a new moral philosophy.

The two Cavell's books, which deal more with philosophy *in* film rather than philosophy *on* film – *The Comedy of Remarriage* (1981) and *Contesting Tears: Hollywood Melodrama of the Unknown Woman* (1996) are concerned with the same problem yet offers two different situations. In the comedies of remarriage, the female protagonist does achieve a certain acknowledgment through the transformation of her relationship with her husband and the social milieu, while in the melodramas of *Contesting Tears*, the marriage and the relationship with the husband and the surroundings are not willing or incapable to transform to meet the heroines need for personal growth and integrity, meaning that the heroine is denied acknowledgment. Ultimately, the movies analysed in this pair of books depict various ways of struggling towards what Cavell calls *moral perfectionism*. The films discussed in the former deal with the various ways a woman protagonist does find means and companionship in the pursuit of some state of moral perfectionism, while the latter explicates the ways, where four analysed films show what happens when they reach for moral perfectionism is denied by the surrounding world and the possible positive outcomes of such failure. A natural question arises – what is moral perfectionism?

By searching for a unique, American understanding of what makes a good life, Cavell brings his attention to the founding fathers of a forgotten moral philosophy in addition to utilitarianism and deontology. Viewing these two moral conceptions as imported, specifically European systems of thought, Cavell formulates a theory of moral philosophy by refocusing on the writings of two famous American transcendentalists – Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau. Moral perfectionism emphasizes the constant, yet never fully achievable growth of an individual's integrity, the individual's ability to create conditions for socialization, and responsibility for one's being. While the "European" moral philosophy emphasizes the consequences of moral action or the necessary duty of morality, perfectionism strives for the goal of becoming a better version of oneself. But this goal is never achievable – a person exists within society, and the change of the person changes the fabric of society and *vice versa*. It means, that perfectionism is deeply anti-foundationalist – there is no final goal. Or to put it differently, moral perfectionism is the journey in which a person befriends the world and others:

“Perfectionism is the province not of those who oppose justice and benevolent calculation, but of those who feel left out of their sway, who feel indeed that most people have been left, or leave themselves out, of their sway. It is a perception, or an intuition, that Emerson articulates as most men living in “secret melancholy” and that Thoreau a few years later transcribes as “the mass of men liv[ing] lives of quiet desperation.”<sup>xvi</sup>



Putting aside the chauvinistic understanding of humanity, I quote this excerpt in length for the temporal implications this passage presents. Here, and through other Cavell's investigations in the dealings with moral perfectionism, a modern struggle with futurity appears. The men living in quiet desperation, or the women in the melodramas of *Unknown Woman* deal with a sense of time being out of joint, of not participating in the dealings, and sphere of presence. But the present time here, as in general modern understanding, acquires its meaning and worth only through comparison with the future. In this sense, the moral perfectionism theory of acquiring presence implicates the aligning of the present with the path of the future: "The first theme is that the human self—confined by itself, aspiring toward itself—is always becoming, as on a journey, always partially in a further state".<sup>xvii</sup>

Through contemplation, realisation, or action, the heroes of moral perfectionism acquire presence and participate in the affairs of the present by acquiring the possibility to influence the desirable future outcomes. In a negative situation – denied by their milieu, the future they demand is not achievable and we are shown the following failure of becoming present. A quality melodrama deals with the tragic failings of acknowledging the heroine's presence and the main tactic these films show in coping with this failure is sacrificing her future for the future of the other – almost always her children.

In the huge scope of melodramatic production, there is room for qualitative differentiation. In Muratova's case, *Brief Encounters*, *The Long Farewell*, and especially *The Asthenic Syndrome* form a triptych which in my reading, provides a different phenomenological experience than the bulk of most melodramatic production, including the quality ones that Cavell interprets in *The Contesting Tears*. What do I mean here by phenomenological experience? Cavell's provided ontological notions show that the main function of cinema is to *defamiliarize* the familiar – to explicate the always implicit ordinary conditions for communication between human beings and the reach for moral well-being which in Cavell's case takes the name of moral perfectionism. The shaking up of the habitual phenomenological intentions is described by Cavell as:

"It is in answering these questions concerning the procedures of traditional epistemology that we ought to arrive at a more visible appreciation of three phenomenologically striking features of the conclusion which characterizes skepticism: the sense of *discovery* expressed in the conclusion of the investigation; the sense of the conflict of this discovery with our ordinary "beliefs"; the *instability* of the discovery, the theoretical conviction it inspires vanishing under the pressure (or distraction) of our ordinary commerce with the world."

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Cavell speaks here about the procedures and the phenomenological results of the ordinary language philosophy. But there is no reason to declare, that the same phenomenological *performativity* cannot be done by cinema. Considering, that the journey of moral perfectionism starts with grasping and taking responsibility for one's life, it should not be shocking to believe in cinema's performative power:

“The persistence of this feature of metamorphosis indicates the cause of these genres as among the great subjects of the medium of film, since a great property of the medium is its violent transfiguration of creatures of flesh and blood, its recreation of them, let us say, in projecting and screening them.”<sup>xix</sup>

Here Cavell indicates a simple yet fundamental feature of cinema – the ability to change reality. In this case melodramas, by articulating the ordinary conditions of acknowledgment by others and acceptance of the world, invites the female audience to pursue moral perfectionism, to change their lives. By showing a different status of possibilities, of the *future*, the present can be changed.

It would not be a violent reading if we would localize *Brief Encounters* and *The Long Farewell* in the broader, modern search for Cavellian moral perfectionism. But in the case of Muratova’s *Asthenic Syndrome*, the simple division between present and future is not that evident. As I noted above, Muratova cannot show a perfectionist understanding of personal development concerning future possibilities. In a totalitarian regime, the distinction between private and public does not exist. When the public world is destroyed – as is shown in *The Asthenic Syndrome*, people are not given back the private sphere. They are left in a nihilistic void. In Muratova’s milieu – the Soviet Union and Soviet Ukraine, the present time and the personal experience of temporality had always to be sacrificed for the future, for the objective, determined time. When these historicist notions fade, the philosophy of moral perfectionism becomes impossible to achieve.

#### THE ASTHENIC SYNDROME

The usual reading of Muratova’s *The Asthenic Syndrome* is that it is a film that reflects the ending of the Soviet empire and the uncertainties of the future. Keeping in the tradition of the film’s controversial nature, I proposed throughout the article that *The Asthenic Syndrome* is a melodrama. Or to be more precise, a metamelodrama. The reason for this is that I find a fundamental conceptual change in the ability of the film’s characters to acquire presence.

The films that Muratova filmed between *The Long Farewell* and *The Asthenic Syndrome* are less concerned with moral perfectionism than the examined ones here – reacting to the harsh criticism from *Goskino* officials and the creative ban Muratova received, these four films align more with the casual Soviet Ukraine production. While they can be seen as experimentation in style, strongly influenced by the success of Sergei Parajonov and the ornamentalism found in his films, the films present themselves to the contemporary viewer as certain compliance with the Soviet film system. The scandal following the release of *The Long Farewell* crippled Muratova’s creative possibilities, so a certain loyalty to the values of social realism had to be shown.

*The Asthenic Syndrome* can be divided into two parts – the short introductory film, which works as an allusion to previous Muratova's melodramas, where the main heroine Natasha loses her husband and simultaneously loses the structure of the world. She aims to bring back her ordinary life by sleeping with a first found bum on the street, which fails miserably. Like *Brief Encounters* and *The Long Farewell*, the beginning is filmed in black-and-white. But as the film continues, we are shown that the beginning of the film is just a *film*. And this puts the viewer on a different, *meta cinematic* grounds. The most defining feature of meta-cinema is that it breaks the inertia of suspension of disbelief and asks the viewer to reflect on what is she seeing on screen.

The audience in the film quits the cinema disappointed, in rage, mumbling about the lack of beauty and comfort in contemporary cinema. The second part of the film is about Nikolai – a young man suffering from asthenic syndrome. When Nikolai is overwhelmed, he passes out and starts sleeping. Both Natasha and Nikolai are unable to cling to the world, to be present – for a simple reason of the inhumanness of the world, of the world not existing. The film is not about the loss of political order and societal structure, even if the structure is totalitarian, but about the impossibility of the world. And the impossibility of the world, by implication means the impossibility of selfhood. *The Asthenic syndrome* is not about epochal change, but about the fragments of the world that the fall of the Soviet system had created. The virtues that people in the Soviet Union thought made them better than the regime – human dignity, social bonds, empathy, and reach for beauty, were only an illusion. The societal structure existed mostly because of fear of punishment. In *Glasnost*, when the fear became irrelevant, the true status of human integrity can be seen. For Nikolai, this image is worse than death – hence his inability to continue to live, and his body's decision towards metaphorical death. The film works as a direct opposition to Cavell's notion of moral perfectionism, showing the finitude of human choice. The responsibility of selfhood has limits in acknowledging the world, in the sense, that the world must be not fundamentally corrupt for it to be acknowledged and accepted.

*The Asthenic Syndrome* is the final part in Muratova's trilogy of melodramas because it speaks about the world failing to acknowledge other human beings. It is the most personal Muratova's film, where Muratova's position is concerned not about the place of the lover or the mother in the Soviet system, but her own existential experience as a film director. We can see it in the clear notion of the director's disappointment and the naivety and conformism of the audience. In essence, *The Asthenic Syndrome* confronts the idea of the universal self, the construction of always present subjectivity. The film provides an alternative, skeptical view on the existence of the selfhood. For Cavell, this ordinary self is the ground for adequate expression, acknowledgment, ethics, and politics. The temporality of moral perfectionism, the opening of the future for the possibility of presence for Muratova, and the decaying world depicted in *The Asthenic Syndrome* are impossible. Cavell believes, that by saving the selfhood, the world can be restored. Muratova, on the contrary, in *The Asthenic Syndrome* shows, that without the world,

there is no self. And the world that exists no more, that was built in the past by fundamentally relying on the promise of the future, is left with fragmented temporality where the present can be defined as the *nostalgia for the future*<sup>xx</sup>.

## CONCLUSION

The event of modernity fundamentally changed the way we phenomenologically structure time. Before modernity, the normative aspect of the meaning of time was linked to the past. The divine creation of the world had happened before, so to seek order in the present meant to align the present with the past through various performances – ritual, celebration, study of ancient texts, sacrifice. Modernity offered an alternative vision in the ontology of change – the idea of progress was introduced; the spread of technology increased the acceleration of time, resulting in a reorientation of the present towards the future. The Soviet Union, a self-proclaimed child of the Enlightenment, took these notions of the future in the present to their extreme limits. The difference between the future and the present became a feature of the past. The metaphysical doctrine of Soviet historicism, the desire for the end of history, and the deterministic notion of the movement of time, in which the present is the future, although in reality was never achieved, had to be articulated through various narrative practices. One of these glorified practices was cinema. Kira Muratova and her three melodramas, as I interpret them in this paper, refuse to sacrifice the present for the glory of the future. In *Brief Encounters* and *The Long Farewell*, the present and presence itself is something to be achieved, something her heroines lack. Muratova shows in her films that without the temporal present, there is no spatial present, no *presence*. While Cavell's thoughts on cinema have great merit in unfolding the narrative, temporal, and performative tensions in Muratova's melodramas, they lack an understanding of the primacy of politics in individual life. *The Asthenic Syndrome* can be read as a critique of the Cavellian moral perfectionism, emphasizing the primacy of political liberty before individual freedom. For Cavell, personal autonomy is an unreflected ontological notion from which a stable and democratic political way of life may or may not emerge. In the triptych analysed above, Muratova shows, based on her first-hand experience in a totalitarian regime, that only a political realm that aspires to liberty is the basis for individual autonomy. It is the established forms of political life that create the space for personal autonomy, the presence of the individual, and not the other way round. Herewith I find the link between Muratova's work and Ukrainian identity. Muratova's heroines seek recognition, and her cinema tries to *create* the conditions that are lacking in the present order of things. On a larger and far more tragic scale, Ukraine is doing the same as it enters the third year of fighting against the brutal Russian military invasion.

- <sup>i</sup> Jane Taubman, *Kira Muratova*, (London: I.B. Tauris, 2005) 6.
- <sup>ii</sup> Jane Taubman, *Kira Muratova*, (London: I.B. Tauris, 2005) 8, 77.
- <sup>iii</sup> Joshua First, *Ukrainian Cinema: Belonging and Identity During the Soviet Thaw*, (London: I.B. Tauris, 2015) 6.
- <sup>iv</sup> An important but nonconceptual note: a third reason for the various misunderstandings is the simple lack of empirical experience with Eastern and Central Europe. Even in the context of propaganda films, Richard Taylor's seminal study of Nazi and Soviet film propaganda *Film Propaganda* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1976), in which one of the films the author discusses is probably the most vulgar example of Soviet film propaganda - *The Fall of Berlin* (1946). Taylor identifies three Soviet soldier protagonists - two Russians and one soldier from Central Asia - who march in and occupy Berlin throughout the film. But he fails to distinguish between the two "Russian" soldiers. Anyone who has heard Ukrainian language knows that the second protagonist is not a Russian but a Ukrainian. It may sound trivial, but the narrative during the film shows that both the Ukrainian and the Central Asian soldier die for the glorious expansion of the Soviet empire, and the only protagonist who is left alive is the Russian soldier, Aleksei. An accurate and prescient depiction of the fantasies of the contemporary Russian power elite.
- <sup>v</sup> Joshua First, *Ukrainian Cinema: Belonging and Identity During the Soviet Thaw*, (London: I.B. Tauris, 2015) 9,20,78.
- <sup>vi</sup> [https://culture.gov.ru/press/news/minkultury\\_rossii\\_opredelilo\\_prioritetnye\\_temy\\_gospodderzhki\\_kinoproizvodstva\\_v\\_2023\\_godu/](https://culture.gov.ru/press/news/minkultury_rossii_opredelilo_prioritetnye_temy_gospodderzhki_kinoproizvodstva_v_2023_godu/)
- <sup>vii</sup> Reinhart Koselleck, *Futures Past: On The Semantics of Historical Time*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 9-26.
- <sup>viii</sup> Sergei Eisenstein, *Film Form, Essays in Film Theory*, (New York: HBJ Book, 1977) 126.
- <sup>ix</sup> Tom Roberts, "Simply an anachronism": repetition and meaning in Kira Muratova's Chekhovian Motifs", in *Studies in Russian & Soviet Cinema* (2013), 41. doi: 10.1386/srsc.7.1.39\_1
- <sup>x</sup> Lida Oukaderova, *The Cinema of Soviet Thaw. Space, Materiality, Movement*, (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2017), 158.
- <sup>xi</sup> Helen Ferguson, Silence and Shrieks: Language in Three Films by Kira Muratova in *The Slavonic and East European Review* vol. 83, no. 1, (2005), 58.
- <sup>xii</sup> Ben Singer, *Melodrama and Modernity*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), 44-48.
- <sup>xiii</sup> Ben Singer, *Melodrama and Modernity*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), 52.
- <sup>xiv</sup> Elizabeth A. Papazian, Ethnography, Incongruity, History: Soviet Poetic Cinema in *The Russian Review*, vol. 82, (2023), 68–90. <https://doi.org/10.1111/russ.12400>
- <sup>xv</sup> Stanley Cavell, *The World Viewed: An Ontology of Film*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1979), XXIII.
- <sup>xvi</sup> Stanley Cavell, *Cities of Words*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004), 24-25.
- <sup>xvii</sup> Stanley Cavell, *Cities of Words*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004), 26.
- <sup>xviii</sup> Stanley Cavell, *The Claim of Reason: Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality, and Tragedy*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979) 129.
- <sup>xix</sup> Stanley Cavell, *Contesting Tears: The Hollywood Melodrama of an Unknown Woman*, (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1996), 7.
- <sup>xx</sup> Анатолій Круглашов, Україна та Європейський Союз: ностальгія за майбутністю, *Політичні студії*, (2010), (4), 40-49.