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**Asteniceksij Sindrom
(The Weakness Syndrome)
(SOVIET-COLOR/B&W)**

Berlin An Odessa Filmstudio production. (Intl. sales: Primodessa.) Directed by Kira Muratova. Screenplay, Muratova, Sergei Popov, Alexander Tschernych; camera (Fujicolor/b&w), Vladimir Pankov; editor, Valentina Olejnik; production design, E. Golubenko; sound, Elena Demidova; production manager, Nadja Popova; assistant director, T. Borodina. Reviewed at Berlin Film Fest (Competing), Feb. 19, 1990. Running time: 153 MIN.

Nikolai.	Sergei Popov
Natasha.	Olga Antonova
Mascha (brunette).	Natalia Busko
Mascha (blonde).	Galina Sachurdaewa
Teacher.	Alexandra Ovenskaya
Iunikov.	Pavel Polischuk
Mother.	Natalia Rallewa
Nikolai's wife.	Galina Kasperovich
School director.	Viktor Aristov
Head doctor.	Nikolai Semjonov
Woman on the train.	Nadja Popova

■With its full frontal nudity and explicit dialog, "The Weakness Syndrome" makes "Little Vera" look like a vicarage tea party. It's a challenging film that's too long and sometimes indulgent, but it could well attract arthouse audiences the world over with its kaleidoscopic vision of a society in decay.

Femme director Kira Muratova, 55, whose work has often been shelved in the past, has come up with a caustic, unrelenting attack

on every aspect of the Soviet system today. Pic is technically fine, with thesping so naturalistic that it's sometimes hard to discern between actors and people taken off the streets.

The film was entered in the Berlin festival not by the Moscow Committee for Cinematography (as is usual) but by the Odessa Film Studio, which produced it. Sovexportfilm apparently isn't involved in marketing the pic (it's Primodessa Film instead).

The film opens with a 40-minute black & white segment centering on a woman doctor, Natasha (Olga Antonova) who's been driven almost mad by the death of her husband. She attends his funeral, then rails against mankind in general, refuses to help a sick man, and picks up a drunk on the street to have sex with.

Abruptly "The End" appears on screen; it was a b & w film. In color, a moderator appears before the screen with the leading actress and inviting the unimpressed audience to discuss it.

For the next 110 minutes, Muratova shows a series of barely connected vignettes with no linking plotline. It's an almost unrelievedly grim world where the subways are overcrowded and the shops are empty. People are violent or listless, angry and antisocial. Pupils pay no attention to the teacher, but speak in slogans they've learned in the past.

Near pic's end, a woman on a train (Nadja Popova) gives an obscene monolog addressed to the camera, using words worthy of James Joyce or D.H. Lawrence. Sequence apparently was responsible for the film's lack of distribution in the USSR, but the entire film would probably have been seen as exceptionally negative.

Moments of strange beauty mix with the gloom. A plump woman plays "Strangers In The Night" on a trumpet, and a young girl dances to music on a record player. But the woman is ignored by her lazy son, and the girl is beaten by her father. Even the isolated moments of pleasure have their downside.

Pic could be trimmed since some scenes go on long after the point has been well made. Western audiences are likely to be devastated and disturbed by Muratova's vision of her homeland. There are two references to Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev in the film: a man wearing a Gorby badge asks "Why do we fight?" during a typical scene of argument and dissension. Later, a man in a mental home starts: "Mikhail says..." and then lapses into silence.

For Muratova, "The Weakness Syndrome" is a considerable achievement unlike any previous Soviet film. It's a bitter, bleak film with little hope indicated, but the overall impression is of a dauntingly original and exciting pic which should cause a stir wherever it's shown. — *Strat.*