The goal of this article is to demonstrate that the world-renowned Soviet film *The Cranes Are Flying* (*Letiat zhuravli*) transcends its immediate historical subject—the peripetia of World War II—and continues to offer itself to fruitful inquiry from the vantage point of the post-Soviet period. The film was released in the fall of 1957 and became a sensation first at home and then in the West, where it won the Palme d'Or at the 1958 Cannes Festival. In the words of the Russian screenwriter Gennadii Shpalikov (1937–1974), *The Cranes Are Flying* created a legend for his generation: “My legend is a simple one: back in 1957 I had never seen or known—and, moreover, did not wish to see—anything better.” The film appeared less than two years after the pivotal Twentieth Congress of the Communist Party (February 1956) and can be seen as a direct result of Khrushchev’s Thaw.

Mikhail Kalatozov (1903–73), one of the most talented Soviet filmmakers, had waited a long time for the right moment to make this emblematic film. His whole career in cinema is the typical one of a gifted artist trying to survive within the Soviet system by means of compromise, of a masterful teetering between aesthetics and...
ideology. Kalatozov was fortunate to have started out in Georgia, the home of one of the oldest and most prominent film traditions on the territory of the former Soviet Union. There he acted in and shot films by Ivan Perestiani and Nikolai Shengelaia, and it is, perhaps, this training that allowed him to overcome the antinomy between the avant-garde “poetic” cinema and the traditional “psychological” cinema that shaped early Soviet Russian filmmaking. Kalatozov’s first major feature, Sol’ Svanetii (Salt for Svanetia, 1930), has been recognized as a classic of pre-World War II Soviet cinema.  

Throughout his career, Kalatozov made a series of films that demonstrated innovative cinematographic techniques and his utmost concern with film form. They also dispatched ideological messages which must have satisfied the official Soviet circles. In 1943, Kalatozov was sent to the United States as an envoy of the Soviet film industry; an exposure to the Hollywood melodrama of the 1930s and 1940s figures in several artistic choices of Kalatozov’s post-World War II films. His Conspiracy of the Doomed (1950), starring the then recently repatriated chansonnier Aleksandr Vertinskii, was criticized in the Soviet Union for its cinematic experimentation—labeled “formalist”—but praised for the ideologically “correct” Cold War anti-American message. The best, most memorable sequences in Conspiracy of the Doomed deal with “ideological enemies”: Hungarian nationalists plotting a rising against the pro-Soviet regime, as well as their American patrons and the aura of jazz and night-clubs. Kalatozov’s formal quest—and this is especially true for the critical climate of the post-Soviet period—redeems the ideological strictures of his cinema. Trying to maintain a very fragile balance between innovative form and ideologically correct message, Kalatozov created several controversial films. Fruitfully ambiguous, they inevitably offer themselves to multiple readings.

The Cranes Are Flying tops the list of Kalatozov’s achievements. The reasons for that are partly historical—temporary relaxing of censorship and relative cultural liberalism of the early Thaw. At the same time, the film was the apogee of Mikhail Kalatozov’s unique creative union with Sergei Urusevskii (1908–74), arguably Russia’s greatest cinematographer. Prior to working together, both the director and the cinematographer had independently embraced very similar sets of cinematic techniques, and these proved to be extremely effective in The Cranes Are Flying. These techniques are often referred to as “emotional camera.” Aimed at a maximum in-

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4 These films include Muzhestvo (Courage, 1939), Valerii Chkalov (1941), Zagovor obrechennykh (Conspiracy of the Doomed, 1950), Vernye druz’ia (True Friends, 1954), and Krasnaia palatka (The Red Tent, 1971).


6 For the history of Kalatozov’s and Urusevskii’s creative union see ibid., 157–72. For a discussion of Urusevskii’s camera work see Maia Merkel’, Ugol zreniia: Dialog s Urusevskim (Moscow, 1980), 11–47. Urusevskii had emerged as a prominent figure in Soviet cinema by the end of the 1940s. Prior to his virtuoso camera work in The Cranes Are Flying, his credits included Vladimir Legoshin’s Poedinok (The Duel, 1945), Mark Donskoi’s Sel’skaia uchitel’nitsa (A Village Schoolteacher, 1947), Vsevolod Pudovkin’s Vozvrashchenie Vasiliia Bortnikova (The Return of Vasili Bortnikov, 1953), Grigorii Chukhrai’s Sorok pervyi (The Forty-First, 1956), as well as Pervyi eshelon (The First Echelon, 1956), the first film he shot with Kalatozov.
volvement of the viewer, they include rapid change of points of view and types of framing, use of short-focal lenses and hand-held camera, original light effects, and painterly treatment of landscape. However, while the film was a revelation to the Soviet mass audience, few critics in 1957 were prepared or willing to accept Kalatozov’s and Urusevskii’s language.7

The underlying spatiovisual principle of The Cranes Are Flying is introduced before the credits. Veronika Bogdanova (Tat’iana Samoilova) and Boris Borozdin (Aleksei Batalov), the two main characters, are walking along the embankment of the Moscow River at dawn on 22 June 1941, the day Nazi Germany invaded Russia. Boris calls Veronika’s attention to a flock of cranes flying north over their heads. The camera follows the eyes of the two inamorati in a swift upward movement. In a very low-angle shot the viewer (joined as s/he is with the couple by a point-of-view shot) beholds a V-shaped flock of cranes, a wedge whose vertex points to the direction of flight.8 Also found in the opening sequence—preceding the credits and therefore especially meaningful—is a series of “emotional” camera movements that are representative of the style of Kalatozov and Urusevskii. The film opens with a plan américain of Veronika and Boris hopping hand in hand.9 The figures grow smaller and smaller in a long shot of the embankment with the Moscow River to our right. After a cut we see a medium shot of the couple running down the steps, and a close-up of their kiss. The very low-angle shot of the flying cranes is followed immediately by a very high-angle shot of Veronika and Boris looking up into the sky. The very high-angle extreme long shot of Veronika and Boris puts the couple in perspective, inscribes them into the landscape of Moscow (the area adjacent to Red Square), and equates their size with the size of the cranes in the preceding shot. Thus, the first sequence of the film establishes a direct (shot-to-shot) link between the inamorati, the Moscow landscape of the last morning of peace, and the wedge of the crane flock moving north. The authors insist upon the significance of the image of cranes in the text of The Cranes Are Flying: the cranes figure in the title, in its first establishing sequence, and in the conclusion as the final shot. Why? What is the significance of the shot of cranes in flight for the poetics of the film?

The Cranes Are Flying is a filmic narrative of betrayal. Several readings of the film, especially those by Soviet critics, interpret the flying cranes as a metaphor of hope and renewal.10 Such associations of the wedge of migrating birds are deeply rooted in the Russian literary tradition. Consider, for instance, the remarks by both Dr. Chebutykin and Masha in act 4 of Chekhov’s The Three Sisters: Masha identifies

7 For an overview of the film’s reception in Russia and—to some extent—in the West see Bogomolov, Mikhail Kalatozov, 10–13, 162–63.
8 Cranes (also geese and pelicans) travel in flocks of perfectly cohesive geometrical form. Cranes fly over central Russia in late spring–early summer to nest in the north and return to the south in the fall.
9 Plan américain is a framing in which the scale of the object on screen is relatively small; the human figure seen from the shins to the head fills most of the screen. The hopping is accompanied by Moisei Vainberg’s allegro tune in the style of pre–World War II Stalinist optimism.
10 For instance, R. Iurenev’s characteristically retrograde readings of the film—spanning over two decades—were collected in his Kniga fil’mov (Moscow, 1981). See especially the essay with the tendentious title “Vernost’” (“Devotion”).
a flock of passing birds with joy, happiness, and hope: “Migrating birds are flying already. . . . Swans or geese. . . . My darlings, my happy ones.” The recurrence of the shot of the flying cranes at the very end of the film has been explained away by several critics as a pronouncement upon Veronika’s plight, something along the following lines: she made a terrible mistake, but the war itself was excruciating and that explains her betrayal; further, she paid a heavy price for her betrayal, and now that the war is over, there is a future again for her. In such readings the recurrence of the cranes at the end of the film translates a private metaphor which earlier stood for the love of Veronika and Boris into a public metaphor, pertaining to the destinies of all Soviet people who lived through the war. Despite the previous critical discussions of the wedge of cranes as a metaphor of hope and devotion (cranes are known to mate for life), to the best of my knowledge no one has sought a connection between the presumed meaning of the crane metaphor and the cinematic principles that engender it.

In his influential study of the novel, focusing on Cervantes, Stendhal, Flaubert, Dostoevskii, and Proust, René Girard has demonstrated that a novelistic narrative is based on the principle of “triangular desire.” While the mechanics of desire change depending on both the time and the particular author, the fundamental “systematic metaphor” of the narrative, the triangle of desire, remains. It always entails three elements, three vertices of a triangle: the mediator who sets up the model of desire, the subject who imitates the mediator’s desire, and the object of desire. An emblematic nineteenth-century novel, Stendhal’s *The Red and the Black* (1831), exemplifies a traditional narrative of rivalry. While forms of rivalry vary (war, sexual love, intellectual competition), each of Stendhal’s triangles involves two “competing desires.” The rivalry is between the subject and the mediator for the object of desire: “the mediator . . . desires the object,” Girard explains. “It is even this very desire, real or presumed, which makes this object infinitely desirable in the eyes of the subject.”

The fabula of *The Cranes Are Flying* centers on the tragedy of a young woman (Veronika) who is forced to be disloyal to her fiancé (Boris) by his cousin (Mark), whom she subsequently marries. Mark (subject) desires Veronika (object) and competes with Boris (mediator) for Veronika’s love. This is a good example of the way Girard’s triangular desire operates in traditional twentieth-century narratives, and, in fact, the film inherited its fabula from Viktor Rozov’s original stage play, *Vechno zhivye* (*Eternally Alive*, 1943). For Girard, the triangle of desire serves as a psychological model of interpretation. Girard’s triangles cannot be localized anywhere and have no physical reality or form. However, because this is a *filmic* narrative of war and desire, one might ask if the principle of triangular desire extends here to the cinematography. It is precisely in film, both a visual and a narrative art, that the spatial reality of the triangle of desire becomes significant. The wedge of flying cranes functions not only as a thematic metaphor of the relationship between

Veronika and Boris but also on a larger scale, as a condensed visual statement of
the film's structure.

In my analysis, I will treat the wedge of cranes as a triangle of desire with a
missing side opposite the vertex pointing to the direction of flight. Using the crane
triangle as a key structural unit of interpretation, I will read The Cranes Are Flying
“against the crane,” challenging some of the assumptions critics and viewers have
made about the film. I will be particularly concerned with identifying the camera
movements (as well as the use of sound and the composition of mise-en-scène) in
their relation to desire and ideology. I want to show that, having been born out of
Khrushchev’s Thaw, The Cranes Are Flying simultaneously allows for a number of
complementary interpretations, some of which may not have been apparent to the
overwhelmed Russian audience of 1957 or the Soviet critics.

The film’s sequences can be divided into two groups. Sequences of the first group
depict various triangles in the narrative of Veronika’s betrayal; the remaining se-
quences form the second group. Only the former group is interesting and innovative
in terms of the style of camera work (Kalatozov’s and Urusevskii’s famous swiftly
moving emotional camera with its alternation of angles of framing). The latter group,
composed chiefly of indoor sequences, employs medium shots and slow straight-on
angle movement of the camera. In this analysis, I will only consider those sequences
that are shaped by the fundamental triangular poetic principle of The Cranes Are
Flying. I will follow the schema proposed by the film critic Maia Merkel’ in her book
about Sergei Urusevskii. Merkel’ identified five chief space sequences to which the
viewers owe their visual shock (“potriasenie”): “Utro” (“Morning”), “Provody na
front” (“Seeing the Soldiers off to War”), “Bombezhka” (“Air Raid”), “Berezy”
(“Birches”), and “Popytka samoubiistva” (“Suicide Attempt”). In addition to these
sequences, I will concentrate on the final scene at the railway station in Moscow.

The opening sequence projects the principle of triangular desire and utilizes a
series of camera movements characteristic of the film’s style. In the triangular rela-
tionship between Veronika and Boris, one vertex is vacant, and one side is missing.
The open-sided structure of the relationship is potentially vulnerable, since the tri-
angular space is open to intruders and fillers (see the graphic representation of the
 crane metaphor in Figure 1). At the beginning of the film, lofty love functions as a
filler, while the system of communications between Veronika and Boris as lovers is
never developed. We see the inamorati hopping like children along the embankment,
to the accompaniment of an allegro tune, and reciting a jabberwocky-like poem:
“Little cranes little ships/ Flying in the skies./ Gray, and white,/ and long-nosed.”
Sexual overtones are virtually absent from the interactions of Boris and Veronika.
The war intrudes and eventually allows Mark, Boris’s cousin and a member of
his household, to occupy the vacant vertex. A coward, Mark has always craved
Veronika, but has been unable to impose himself upon the vacant vertex until Boris’s

14 See Merkel’, Ugol zreniia.
15 In the figures I use single frames for schemes of the film’s various triangles of desire, and double
frames for graphic representations of actual shots.
departure. Paradoxically, the coming of war charges this filmic narrative with desire, thereby transforming the naive and asexual wedge of the Veronika/Boris relationship (Figure 1) into a triangle of desire (Figure 2). Now the triangular mechanism of desire begins to function, the narrative begins to unravel, and the possibility of Veronika's disloyalty is actualized.

An engineer, Boris spends most of his time at work now that war has broken out. He has to cancel a date with Veronika. Mark functions as a self-serving messenger. The sequence starts with a medium close-up of Veronika leaning over the parapet on the embankment; she is waiting for Boris at their usual spot. The camera tilts up, and the figure running down the steps toward Veronika is out of focus. At first we are not sure whether it is Boris or Mark. A disquieting score by Moisei Vainberg also contributes to the sequence's growing tension. Mark is coming from the same direction whence Boris used to appear. The entire sequence of Veronika's encounter with Mark on the embankment exemplifies how the triangular metaphor of the film's narrative is underscored by the camera movement within the space of the shot. Mark is sitting on the parapet while Veronika is leaning over it. Mark stretches his hand to hold Veronika's. She runs over to the other side of the parapet (pan). Mark turns 180 degrees and blocks her passage. Thus, the camera has covered a triangular trajectory (Figure 3). Mark declares that he is unable to resist his desire. Veronika pushes him away. She walks into a narrow space between the two rows of
ezhi—antitank obstructions of iron and barbed wire. Here the camera makes a rapid transition from a plan américain straight-on shot of Veronika entering the space between ezhi to a high-angle helicopter shot of Veronika walking away and Mark watching her disappear. Again, the high-angle shot allows Kalatozov to put Veronika and Mark in perspective, to inscribe them (and to reinscribe her) into the changed wartime landscape of Moscow. Veronika is literally drawn into the triangular space of betrayal (Figure 4), which also represents the home front, surrounded by the space of war. Veronika is running away from Mark, who has occupied the vacant vertex of the triangle.

One of the most striking scenes in the film, the “farewell-without-goodbye,” unravels at a military collecting point. The agonizing effect is achieved by a system-

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16 It is worth noting that a similar camera movement occurs twice in the opening sequence of the film: when Veronika and Boris hop away along the embankment; and when they look up at the flying cranes and are subsequently shown from a high angle.
atic shift of point of view from external (eye of the camera) to internal (Veronika's and Boris's). The camera movements combine pan, tracking, and high-angle crane shots. The filmmakers use rapid transitions from medium shots of the crowd to medium close-ups and close-ups of individuals. The sound plays an important role in building up the tension. As the camera dollies the crowd, going from one group of people to another, more and more music and conversation enter the background. "Katiusha," a popular Russian song, becomes less and less recognizable, covered by more and more layers of other sounds. Eventually, we can no longer distinguish between various tunes and pieces of conversation. All we hear is the noise of the crowd. Noise of this sort—carrying no information per se while Veronika is searching for some information about Boris's location in the crowd—produces an unnerving effect. Order is reintroduced with the command "Stanovis'!" ("Form!") and, especially, after the band begins to play the historically charged and habitually heart-breaking march "Proshchanie slavianki" ("A Farewell of a Slavic Woman"). Veronika and Boris do not see each other. As columns of soldiers (Boris among them) proceed to move, the camera pans from Veronika to Boris and back a number of times. Veronika sees Boris and shouts his name. He neither sees nor hears her, as if literally belonging to a different spatial dimension already—the war space as opposed to the home front. The frequent shifts of plan and point of view, as well as the external medium and long shots of the turbulent crowd (soldiers and family) and the displaced voices and noises, prevent the viewer from fully identifying with the couple. The language of the film signals to the viewer that the link between the two inamorati is being severed. The young inamorati are first separated by a high iron fence, then by the columns of marching soldiers; again, a high-angle shot of the crowd puts Veronika and Boris in perspective. Then follows a close-up of Boris skimming the crowd and not finding Veronika. Then Veronika, trying to reestablish her link with Boris, tosses a bag of cookies at random. And, finally, we see a close-up of the cookies on the ground as the soldiers' boots crush them. The close-up symbolizes the end of innocent love and foreshadows Veronika's rape in a subsequent scene.

Crucial in terms of the structures of betrayal, the air raid sequence is highly representative of Kalatozov's/Urusevskii's triangular rendering of the cinematic space. In fact, the air raid scene and the episode of Boris's death in action form the longest sequence in the film, a central one. The sequence is preceded by two conceptually significant episodes. First, Veronika's parents are killed in their apartment during a Nazi air strike. This eliminates her family past and a major part of her identity. Right before the death of her parents, Veronika phones the factory where Boris used to work to inquire about him—she has not heard from him since he left for the front. Veronika's mother waits for her outside the telephone booth. As Veronika walks out of the booth, she and her mother enter a narrow space between two rows of ezhi (Figure 5a). The shot starts with a close-up of Veronika in the telephone booth. Then follows a medium shot of the triangular space between the rows of obstructions. The space between the rows of the obstructions may not be triangular in reality. However, because of the effect of linear perspective, the space between ezhi appears to be triangular on the screen.

After the death of her parents, Veronika moves in with Boris's family. In the
scene immediately preceding the air raid sequence, Veronika calls Boris’s factory again from the same telephone booth. The only change in the composition of the shot is Mark’s presence instead of Veronika’s mother’s; the triangular space between ezhi into which Veronika and Mark walk together is also the same. The camera movements are almost identical in the two “telephone booth” episodes (Figures 5a and 5b). The utilization of the triangular space in the two parallel episodes recalls that of Veronika’s encounter with Mark on the embankment. In the latter scene (Figure 4), Veronika walks alone into the triangular space between ezhi while Mark follows her with his eyes. Still reluctant to make his move, Mark watches Veronika melt into the long shot. In Figure 5b, Mark and Veronika walk together as the camera inscribes them into the triangular space. Thus the mechanism of triangular desire is sustained by cinematic means.

The air raid sequence—the most violent in the film—opens with a close-up of Mark’s hands playing the piano. First of all, note the characteristically triangular structure of the mise-en-scène in the piano room (Figure 6). The space behind the window stands for the space of war, the space of the air raid, of bombs and sirens. The piano room, wherein the sounds of sirens and Mark’s playing mix in the most distressing fashion, represents the locus of the triangular interaction between Mark,
Veronika, and Boris. Shown in an earlier sequence resting upon the window of a Moscow apartment, Boris is now outside the space of the piano room, in the war space—at the front. The war breaks into the room through the window, overwhelming Mark’s untimely recital and bringing Veronika and Mark into each other’s arms. The violent scene in the piano room is one of the best examples of the kind of camera and sound work in *The Cranes Are Flying* that encodes triangular meaning into the space of the screen. Before Veronika and Mark are thrown into each other’s arms by common fear, we see a series of shots of spasmodic motions around the room (pan with play of light and dark). Then we see a close-up of Veronika’s and Mark’s faces, and of Veronika’s alone, her eyes reading both desire and cowardice in Mark’s (high angle—low angle). Mark tries to kiss her, but Veronika dashes to the opposite corner which she had occupied before the air raid (swift camera movement). The central sequence is so discomforting because of the violence encoded by the camera movement and the accompanying sound effects: Veronika slaps Mark on the face, Mark chases her around the apartment. “No . . . no . . . no!” are the only words Veronika utters throughout the scene in response to Mark’s declaration of love. Then follows a close-up of Mark’s insane eyes that now signify sheer desire. When Mark carries Veronika’s “lifeless” body (presumably to the bedroom), the authors employ a superimposition of Veronika’s petrified eyes over the shot. The scene ends with a close-up of Mark’s legs walking on broken glass (symbolic of Veronika’s violated purity). The next shot—Boris’s combat boots stamping mud—emerges smoothly out of the latter. This exemplifies the kind of cut technique that Kalatozov and Uru-sevsckii use in the film to downplay the discontinuity of the cinematic space. The cut also restores the spatiovisual structure of betrayal obfuscated by Mark’s violence. Although it is only implicit that Mark rapes Veronika during the air raid, she emerges out of the scene as a victim of a vicious concurrence of a number of factors—the bombing, her being demoralized by the absence of news from Boris, and Mark’s violent and treacherous behavior. The continuity of space between the rape scene and the scene of Boris’s death magnifies the betrayal motif while playing down the fact of the actual rape. That the film obscures the fact of rape is due not only to the general taboo on sexual violence in Soviet films of the time; from the viewpoint of the structures of triangular desire, it is not the fact of rape that seems crucial but rather its public perception as a betrayal. Given that Mark is Boris’s rival over Veronika, the air raid scene foregrounds a double betrayal: Mark’s explicit betrayal of his cousin away at war, and Veronika’s implicit betrayal of her fiancé. Characteristically, during a breakfast scene following the air raid scene, Mark sits next to

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17 Close-ups of legs also seem to be among the authors’ favorites. They occur six times in five different scenes: Veronika’s and Boris’s, when the two are hopping in the first sequence; soldiers’ legs walking on cookies; Mark’s legs walking on glass; Boris’s legs stamping mud; Veronika’s legs in the suicide attempt scene; and dancing legs at the actress Monastyrskaia’s party.

18 To the best of my knowledge, the term “rape” was first applied to the air raid scene by Mitchell Lifton, review of *The Cranes Are Flying*, Film Quarterly 12.3 (Spring 1960): 43. The psychology of rape in the film became the subject of Brett Cooke’s “Acquaintance Rape in Kalatozov’s *The Cranes Are Flying*” (paper presented at the Conference of the AATSEEL, Toronto, 28 December 1993). Cooke’s paper testifies to a current trend of reevaluating postwar Soviet cinema from the vantage point of our critical and cultural awareness in the 1990s.
Veronika as her intimate and announces to the family that they are getting married. Although Veronika wears black and appears withdrawn and oblivious to her new lot, Boris's older sister throws a spoon and runs out of the room. Later in the film, she continues to show contempt not only for Mark but also for Veronika, blaming her for having been disloyal to Boris.

The scene of Boris's death, with its memorable hallucinatory montage, is the only actual battlefield scene in the film. The latter circumstance has allowed critics both in Russia and in the West to argue that The Cranes Are Flying deviates from a traditional war-theme filmic narrative. The scene finalizes the process of Boris's transformation into sheer memory. The vertex of the crane triangle formerly occupied by Boris is now the locus of Veronika's and the viewer's memories of him. In subsequent episodes of the film, Veronika refuses to believe in Boris's death ("Missing in action does not mean dead"). Also, the camera privileges a viewer's perspective from without over Veronika's point of view from within. Veronika's project throughout the remaining sequences is a desperate attempt to break out of the triangle that chains her to her memories of Boris. A victim of triangular desire, she cannot ever leave the boundaries of her own triangle.

Veronika's last major try—her suicide attempt—occurs after an episode in a military hospital (one of the more important structures of betrayal in the film), in which Veronika faces an account of betrayal that is on the surface explicitly symmetrical to her own story. The dark dramatic irony of the design makes Dr. Fedor Ivanovich Borozdin (Boris's father and surgeon-in-chief of the evacuated hospital) forget about Veronika's presence while he pronounces his monologue condemning betrayal by women at the home front. The difference between Dr. Borozdin's and Veronika's own stories is that the former assumes a volition on the woman's part, while Veronika was forced to have been disloyal to her fiancé. Boris's father, here the mouthpiece of condemnation, is torn throughout the film between his great despair over the loss of his son and his belief in Veronika's innocence (he blames wartime circumstances rather than Veronika for her infidelity while also obfuscating the issue of her rape by Mark). Instigated by the message of Dr. Borozdin's speech, Veronika rushes out and runs toward the railroad. The film offers enough psychological evidence for us to conclude that Veronika's mental state is unstable. In the scenes preceding the suicide attempt, Veronika acts like a manic-depressive and talks of her desire to die.

The scene of Veronika's suicide attempt is, perhaps, the finest in the film in terms of the perfection and unity of style. To begin with, the filmmakers chose a canted frame for the scene. This by itself enhances the unnerving effect and the tension produced by the medium shots of Veronika running toward the train station

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19 In this episode Veronika wears black for the first time; she will wear black from now on until the victory scene at the very end.

that alternate with close-ups of her feet stamping the snow. Secondly, Urusevskii’s use of wide-angle lens and his hand-held camera render the erratic pace of a person beside herself.\textsuperscript{21} When the train on the screen collides head-on with the viewer (and the canted frame works best here), s/he physically senses the proximity of death and the great tension of the entire scene. The viewer is joined with Veronika at the end of her suicide attempt scene and firmly identifies with her. Veronika does not kill herself. Instead, she rescues a little boy from under the wheels of a military truck. Veronika’s foundling, Bor’ka (a haunting diminutive of Boris) immediately ousts Mark from the vertex of the crane triangle. The shots of Veronika carrying the little Bor’ka home along the river embankment recall the shots at the beginning of the film where Veronika and Boris walk together along the Moscow River. Thus, a new structure of desire is formed (Figure 7; cf. Figure 2) as result of the suicide attempt sequence. Mark exits after Bor’ka’s appearance and we never see or hear of him again.\textsuperscript{22} Bor’ka’s presence temporarily fills the former triangle of betrayal with positive meaning, with hope. However, Bor’ka merely actualizes one of the film’s numerous terrifying symmetries (Bor’ka-Boris), and the problematic final scene of the film bears no sign whatsoever of the boy’s impact upon Veronika’s triangular plight.\textsuperscript{23} Like his predecessor Mark, the little foundling also disappears from the diegetic space. Likewise, his function is to compete with Boris (memories of Boris) for Veronika’s love.

Keeping in mind the introductory comments on the geopolitical-historical dimensions of this Thaw film par excellence, as well as the previous observations regarding the balancing nature of Kalatozov’s project, I would now like to turn to the final scene of the film. The train station scene gains a rather controversial status when

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=0.5\textwidth]{triangle_diagram}
\caption{Figure 7}
\end{figure}

\textsuperscript{21}I cannot help thinking about Veronika as being Karenina-like in the scene. The brilliant performance of Tat’iana Samoilova may have influenced Aleksandr Zarkhi’s choice of her for the part of Anna Karenina in his 1968 eponymous film.

\textsuperscript{22}In Rozov’s stage play, Mark surfaces again in the last scene.

\textsuperscript{23}In addition to the Boris-Bor’ka symmetry, the filmmakers employ symmetry in the two stairway sequences, in the two crowd sequences (“off to the war” and “back from the war”), and so on. Bogomolov also discusses Bor’ka as symmetrical to what he calls a “mythical” boy (Mikhail Kalatozov, 173).
Why Are the Cranes Still Flying?

read against the “crane.” The war is now over. Right before the establishing shot of the crowd at the railway station, we see a medium shot of Veronika at the embankment against the idyllic background of the Moscow River. The viewer here recalls the opening scene of the film, which is also set at the embankment near the Kamennyi bridge. Veronika is talking to Volodia, one of Boris’s comrades-in-arms. She wears a white dress, which is meant to restore the aura of her prewar innocence. Veronika still refuses to believe in Boris’s death. The train station scene, concluding the filmic narrative, half-rhymes with the earlier crowd scene at the collecting point where Veronika last saw Boris. In the earlier scene, Veronika’s private misery joins with the public misery of the crowd. The final scene is more complex because of its masterful signification of Veronika’s private grief set against the public joy of the crowd.

From the genre perspective, The Cranes Are Flying is a historical melodrama. Those critics, both in Russia and in the West, who define film genres in terms of a set of rigid binary oppositions—tragedy/melodrama, truth/lie, heroic/antiheroic, history/fiction, and the like—have referred to the film as “flawed” and not entirely credible. Given the film’s mutable generic status, does the happy end (the final scene) contradict the narrative of betrayal? To decide, it seems fruitful to look at the elements of triangulation in the final scene, while also keeping in mind that it ends with a shot of the crane triangle—exactly the same shot as the one shown before credits. The presence of the triangle of desire would mean that the structures of betrayal, so consistent throughout the film, extend to the last scene. This, in turn, would signal that the filmmakers do not abandon their own formal system, but rather complicate and obfuscate it to allow for a multiplicity of interpretations and also cater to the complex and equivocal historical context of the mid-to-late 1950s. To illustrate just how loaded the context of the film’s inception, production, and reception really was, it would suffice to put in perspective the words of Boris’s closest comrade-in-arms, Stepan, as he addresses a jubilant crowd at the train station. “We won and stayed alive!” the centerpiece of Stepan’s speech, sounds like a victory-time rhetorical cliché of 1945. However, if one considers that the relatively pacific years 1945–47 were followed by the second wave of Stalin’s terror, Stepan’s words about “staying alive” gain a new layer of significance. In 1957 “staying alive” meant even more than in 1945, when the film’s conclusion takes place.

Captured by Veronica’s eyes, a train carrying the victorious soldiers appears on the screen. The reference to a train sends the viewer back to the scene of Veronika’s attempted suicide and refreshes the entire narrative of betrayal in the viewer’s memory. When Veronika is making her way through the crowd of soldiers and their families, she still hopes to see Boris alive, that is, to convert her memories of him into the reality of his being alive. The camera movements here combine occasional close-ups of Veronika’s face with medium high-angle and straight-on shots of her as she plows through the crowd. Also employed are the point-of-view shots of the crowd, skimmed by Veronika’s eyes. At one point, Veronika mistakes an officer for Boris.

and hastens to embrace him—the camera makes a swift turn that communicates the agony of false recognition. Veronika’s zigzagging in the crowd is triangular from a spatiovisual point of view. Finally, Veronika sees Stepan and hears from him that Boris is not coming back. Thus, the hope filling the crane triangle since the episode with little Bor’ka is now converted into emptiness, into a void. We have arrived at the crane triangle that is congruent with the vulnerable structure of Veronika’s relationship with Boris (Figure 8; cf. Figure 1).

One more factor allows us to contextualize further the analysis of the final scene. The loss of millions of men in the war created a serious demographic problem—the lack of entire age groups of adult males. Hence, Veronika’s plight at the end of the film was representative of a large group of Soviet women left single by the war. Alone with tormenting memories of their loved ones, these single women were still young enough to have a new family. Then, Veronika’s giving out flowers to chance men (as well as a female officer) in the train station crowd structurally signifies her attempt to fill with meaning the void created by her acceptance of Boris’s death. Veronika hopes to fill the triangular void with meaning by finding someone to occupy the vacant vertex of the crane triangle.

The shot of a crane flock, flying over Moscow and beheld by Veronika and others in the crowd, sums up three possible readings of the crane metaphor. First, for a general audience, especially a Soviet audience of 1957, it represents a happy end of a historical melodrama. On the surface, the crane triangle as the crowning shot of the optimistic conclusion transcends the suffering of Veronika. The cranes—heading north over Moscow just as in the opening shots of the film—signify that Veronika has redeemed her betrayal of Boris in the eyes of the public. In fact, Dr. Borozdin—Boris’s father and a patriarchal figure—joins Veronika as she watches the cranes in flight. He puts his arm around her, symbolically absolving her of guilt and giving her a fatherly blessing to live. To the viewer’s satisfaction, a refreshing and revelatory

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lyrical note concludes this wartime story of love and betrayal about an individual, an ordinary woman, typical of her generation.

Second, for the purposes of Soviet propaganda, the crane metaphor stands for victory over the powerful Nazi enemy (Churchill’s famous V gesture) and sends a message to the world about the “strength and unity” of the Soviet people.

Finally, for the reading against the “crane” offered in this article, the crane metaphor encodes the tragedy of Veronika. Ultimately, this filmic narrative of a young woman’s love and betrayal communicates a feeling of a terrible postwar psychic void. Prior to her suicide attempt in an earlier sequence, Veronika speaks to her neighbor of her desire to die. She also says that one should pay to the bitter end for one's mistakes. In the final scene, Veronika’s psychic void forces her, a Red Army’s collective bride in a white dress, to give out flowers to unknown soldiers, both male and female, in a railway station crowd. As the cranes fly overhead in a triangular formation, Boris’s father leads Veronika away, as though intent on withdrawing her from the triangular shackles of desire.

In summary: The cinematography of The Cranes Are Flying has been characterized as “emotional camera”; it incorporates the use of various swift camera movements, contrast of plans and angles of shooting, and disturbing clashes between the characters and the objects of the surrounding cityscape/landscape. The absence of a stable point of view in the film results in a complex mechanism of the viewer’s identification with the characters and allows for a double and sometimes triple identification. For instance, in the final scene one can simultaneously empathize with Veronika, feel a part of the jubilant crowd, and join with the camera eye when it does not express Veronika’s point of view. In light of the film’s rich political, historical, and cultural context, the issue of reception by different audiences (directly related as it is to the problem of the viewer’s identification) deserves greater attention than the span of this discussion has permitted; the receptions of the film by the Soviet audience of 1957, the American audience of 1958, and a contemporary audience of the 1990s, differ considerably.

The cranes are still flying because of a near-perfect harmony of the film’s poetics—its formal means and its aesthetic goals. The wedge of cranes as the multifunctional metaphor of the film’s structure allows for a variety of simultaneously coexisting interpretations.

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26 In 1958 the film was shown in the United States as part of the first cultural exchange program facilitated by the Thaw. See Crowther, review of The Cranes Are Flying.

27 For a useful discussion of the film’s creative potential and artistic longevity see Bogomolov, Mikhail Kalatozov, 162–63.