

*The Cranes Are Flying* is a 1957 drama about the Soviet Union's involvement in World War II. The director is Mikhail Kalatozov and the film stars Aleksey Batalov as Boris and Tatiana Samoilova as Veronika. Aleksey Batalov was a well-known actor of the time and had appeared in four prominent films before *The Cranes Are Flying*, the most famous being the powerful 1955 anti-war film, *Mother*, directed by Mark Donskoy. Thus, Batalov had his experience in dramatic and noble roles. He maintains a very positive outlook throughout the film, striking resemblance to a prototype character of Russian and beyond films: that of the powerful, handsome, optimistic and virtuous man (a Russian counterpart being Sergei Stolyarov in 1931's *The Circus*, as well as American actors such as Henry Fonda).

Tatiana Samoilova was a relatively new actress at the time, having only appeared in one film: 1955's *The Mexican* directed by Vladimir Kaplunovskiy. She was only twenty-two when *The Cranes Are Flying* came out, and her portrayal of Veronika earned her a lasting legacy as a star, leading to huge future roles, such as Anna in 1967's *Anna Karenina*. However, due to the Soviet regime, Samoilova was not allowed to leave the Soviet Union and become a world-renowned star in Hollywood. In effect, she was relegated to beloved stardom in the Soviet Union exclusively.

The cinematographer was the famous Sergey Urusevsky, who also worked as cinematographer on an earlier Kalatozov film, 1964's *Soy Cuba* as well as many other prominent films. *The Cranes Are Flying* was one of Kalatozov's most celebrated works, both publically acclaimed as well as escaping Stalin's oppressive eye with his convenient death occurring four years before the film's release. *The Cranes Are Flying* was Kalatozov's twelfth film and secured his spot as a beloved, genius Russian director.

Stalin's successor Nikita Khrushchev instilled much more liberal policies regarding art censorship, allowing Kalatozov's film its rightful success in popularity. Beyond public acclaim and governmental acceptance, the film also won top prize at the 1958 Cannes Film Festival.

The overarching and most central reason for the film's strength and popularity lies in its individuality of characters in an atmosphere of previous socialism, Communistic, and whole-focused Russia. Not only did Russia's 1953 and previous general mind set differ greatly from the mentality of the film, but more importantly, war films in general, especially World War II, such a hot topic for films right around this time. Thus, Kalatozov's film succeeded in redefining Russia's priorities and techniques in all genres of film, but also redefined the mission and purpose of war films in general, securing the film's place in the importance of film, not merely Russian film, history.

The beginning of the film showcases this individuality most strongly with Veronika's character, a female character unlike any in previous Russian history. Her character is a fresh one in cinema in general, but shares some traits with American films where it wasn't uncommon to have a prototype of bold, outspoken, sassy and spunky women. Veronika's character is portrayed more deeply and with great care however. Through her character, we see an extremely vivid and clear account of what it's like to be a woman in wartime, and just how important that role is. The film focuses even more on her story than the actual soldiers, proving that war is everyone's story not just the generals and soldiers in uniform who arrange or blindly fight battles. Though individualistic in nature by focusing very distinctly on Veronika's lens of the war, the audience, in the process, walks out with empathy for every woman in war, for every

fallen Veronika and every astute Boris. Kalatozov accomplishes an all-embracing heartfelt understanding for people experiencing war through an individualistic approach.

Compare this with a film like *Battleship Potemkin*, which is completely anti-individualistic and it is clear that *The Cranes Are Flying* seeks to gain entry into the audience's heart in sympathy with real people, while *Battleship Potemkin* seeks to arrest the audience's mind in a state of mature, brotherly, all-for-one ideal allegiance to a cause or idea. This shift in purpose of films coincided perfectly with Russia's need for change after Stalin's death and World War II. Back to Veronika, as stated before, her individuality gave a new face for Russian cinema. In fact, it could be argued, the first real "face" at all, as all previous films contained characters who didn't portray real people at all but acted more as puppets for Communistic, Stalin-like beliefs. This wasn't bad filmmaking at all, but a completely on purpose, premeditated attempt to propagandize the minds of the Russian people and make every citizen see himself merely as a part of the whole, and this whole as an ideal, beautiful body of people living only for the good of all and not of themselves as individuals. An example includes Nonna Mordyukova's character in Aleksandr Askoldov's film *The Commissar* (though interestingly *The Commissar* came out ten years after *The Cranes Are Flying*) as well as Lyubov Orlova's character in Grigori Aleksandrov's 1936 extremely Communistic film, *The Circus*. Veronika, on the other hand, looks almost selfish and absurd in her anger at Boris for going to war, and for all her issues with, God forbid, caring about who she marries and has to spend her life with. Here is a woman who is, unbelievably, thinking only of her personal life and future. How revolutionary for the time.

This caused, of course, backlash from conservatives who found Veronika to be unseemly and immoral in her unending individualism. But more importantly, her character reverberated in the hearts of women across the world who were quick to relate to the pain and importantly, anger, involved in losing loved ones to the war as well as the lack of real rights regarding choosing one's husband. Veronika's character needed to be extreme in order to really get this message across, and thus Kalatozov really didn't overstep any boundaries in his portrayal of a woman, who in many ways, was a prisoner of war.

Certain scenes really reflect messages of the film, especially dealing with purity and innocence and the inevitable loss of the two due to war. For example, Veronika starts the film off wearing white and is portrayed as a very energetic, lively, healthy and modest young girl. Her chastity, purity and innocence are markedly pointed out by her refusing Boris to walk upstairs to her apartment, the stairs obviously symbolizing a willingness to have premarital sex with her fiancé, Boris. Because she always refuses him since they are not married yet, their relationship is seen as especially pure, young and innocent.

The early scene with Boris of the pure, reserved and content Veronika of course contrasts sharply with her later character, after she is raped by Boris' cousin Mark (played by Aleksandr Shvorin), a pianist. After she is raped (in an extremely dramatic and artfully done scene), she just as Russia herself, loses her purity and is physically desecrated like the land of Russia itself. The fact that the rape scene occurs literally as many bombs are going off right next to them indicates the purpose of this parallel, enhancing Kalatazov's technique of putting side by side the individual with the whole

state of Russia, exploring how the two undergo the same struggle only with different real-life scenarios.

After she is raped, Veronika's outfits change from a stark white to an unending covered up black, as if she is in mourning and feels the need to protect and cover herself up from the dangerous world. Though she always retains hope and belief that Boris is indeed alive (despite his MIA military status) she is grieving her stolen girlhood and innocence. Even though she is supposed to be helping out the soldiers by working in a factory and doing all she can for the cause, she can barely stop herself from daydreaming and sulking all day about Boris and her horrible situation with Mark. This emphasizes her seemingly gluttonous, indulgent individuality that bothered some peoples' reception of the film. However, Veronika's self-absorption and care for herself struck a chord with real life women and created a much-needed relatable woman character in cinema.

Another scene that deals with Veronika's purity occurs at the film's conclusion. The scene ties up and resolves all the turbulent themes explored throughout by the simple wardrobe of Veronika and the symbolic flowers she holds and gives to people. When everyone assembles at a train station to meet all their loved ones returning from war, Veronika searches desperately for Boris. However, she never finds him because he's dead. Nonetheless she is dressed in all white for the first time in the whole film since the beginning couple of scenes of youthful love with Boris. This symbolizes a yearning for transformation, of course in parallel to Russia's concluding the war and mind set geared towards a purifying renewal and constructive process.

Thus, the film ends leaving the audience with positive expectations about the future of Russia and all the characters in the film; that is, despite all the horrors endured

by war, we as a collective people and nation have the ability to purify and renew ourselves if we put our mind to it. This lesson is clinched by Veronika giving away her flowers at the end. She is letting go of her past and literally giving her love away instead of bottling it all up saving it for a Boris who will never come back. The only way to let go of her grief is to love the people as a whole and to stop being attached to a dead man she'll never see again. Through this she will purify herself and she is clearly aware of this necessary transformation because the film ends with her extremely happy and smiling as she gives away flowers instead of continuing to sulk without Boris. The scene contains many other details that further this renewal and purification process. For example, a relatively old man holds up a very newborn baby and kisses its pure white bottom. Thus, the baton is handed from one generation to another, and life simply goes on with vitality and healthy babies no matter how many bombs have been dropped and how many lives destroyed in the war. Flowers themselves, besides purity, represent the simple pleasures of life. Anyone can afford to pick a flower and they die just like people. They smell good and are great gifts to show love for others. They are not fancy and rare or very special treats, but rather represent the simple, sweet everyday pleasures all humans from all classes can enjoy.

The score of the film was composed by Moisey Vaynberg and provide an intensely dramatic dialogue with the plot of the film. The most remarkable music is found in the rape scene between Mark and Veronika. It explores how music can make one forget their troubles but also literally make one dangerously deaf to others' screams and tortures as well as deaf to the horrors of war when used as an escape tool. Mark initially tries very hard to insist that Veronika and him leave their lodging when bombs start going

off right outside their door. However, Veronika stubbornly refuses (this stubbornness is another hallmark of the new, individualistic strong-women character type of Veronika) and thus Mark and her are stuck in the apartment. To make the situation bearable, Mark starts playing piano louder and louder to block out the horrifying sounds of bombs going off right next to them. However, of course, no amount of strength on the piano can compete with the strength of bombs (thus, war shatters art and anything constructive). Mark's struggle to overshadow the bombs and the danger felt by both of them obviously excites him sexually, because after a bomb goes off so close to them that glass shatters everywhere, he finally leaves the piano and corners Veronika. Done without words, the rape scene is all the more powerful as the only elements are Mark's glaring eyes and the musical score of the piano as well as the bombs going off.

Veronika's pain throughout the film is often portrayed indirectly, which only enhances the audience's realization of the alienation she feels from everyone. For example, though Boris' father Fyodor Ivanovich (played by Vasili Merkurjev) is portrayed as a good, upstanding man, even he cannot help but instinctively despise Veronika for what she "did to Boris" by getting raped by Mark. This is shown when he comforts a soldier whose wife cheated on and left him while at war. Fyodor describes how she is the lowest of women and deserves no respect or sympathy from anyone. The audience acutely feels Veronika's pain as she watches Fyodor speak these words with obvious neglect or empathy to Veronika's feelings. Overall, the film is striking in its emotionality and arresting plot and provides a unique, personal lens on World War II.