

Please note: The photo-essay simply tells the story of the film in intermediate-level Italian. This is a basic, literal translation to assist Italian learners understand the text. In writing the photo-essay, we aimed for a more fluid Italian and wrote a translation to match it. We hope that this language-learning tool will be engaging and enlightening. It's no substitute for material written at a native-language level that explores the film in depth!

The images are an important part of the photo-essay. Even if you don't understand Italian, please read this translation alongside the Italian version on the blog, so that you can see the screenshots and clips that go with the text. These visuals help us to know the movie better: they not only enrich the story, but they also show camera movements, editing, the symbols chosen by the director and thematic ideas. You will also have access to the video clips and links to other references in the blog itself.

Thank you, and enjoy!

The Cranes are Flying

Mikhail Kalatozov, Director (1957)

Sergei Urusevsky, Director of Photography

What are we talking about?

Boris and Veronica are carefree, young sweethearts in Moscow during the Second World War. Boris enlists and is sent to the front; Veronica goes to live with Boris' family. In different ways, they experience the hardships of war.

PART I

Getting to know them better

The Cranes are Flying opens with two young sweethearts – Veronica and Boris – gaily skipping along a bridge by a river. The girl kicks up her heels; she twirls her sweater over her head. In the background: light, lyrical music. They continue along the length of the bridge, skipping off into the distance.

We meet up with them on the other side of the bridge, still skipping. Suddenly they stop and look up: a flock of cranes is flying in formation. The girl recites a poem to the boy: “Cranes like ships, sailing in the sky. White ones, gray ones, with long beaks they fly.” Words from a time when two sweethearts can skip along without a care in the world.

In a beautiful high-angle shot, we see the sweethearts get drenched from a sprinkler. In a little while, we'll see a similar shot, but evoking a completely different mood.

The couple arrive at Veronica's apartment building and go through what must surely be a ritual: in an intimate and beautifully choreographed scene, on the stairway, they talk about their next meeting and whisper good-byes.

Veronica gestures Boris to hush. A dog barks and Boris dashes under the stairs to hide from a neighbor who is coming out.

Finally, they make their plans, Veronica vanishes into her apartment and an exhausted Boris collapses on the floor outside another door, until another barking dog chases him away.

Veronica takes off her shoes and tiptoes.

She peeks into the room where her parents are sleeping, passes through and gets to her own room. Veronica drops her shoes and flops onto her bed. In one of several shots displaying the synchronicity between the two, Boris does the same in his own room.

Watch the two scenes juxtaposed here (video).

Caption: A beautiful high angle shot of Boris' family at lunch the next day.

Boris is not at lunch. His sister, Irina, expresses her disapproval: Boris' late night activities are going to end up in a wedding, she says. Boris' grandmother defends him, saying he works hard and should be able to sleep late on Sunday.

Suddenly we hear a loudspeaker from the street. The Soviet Union is at war! Cousin Mark, runs to tell the sleeping Boris. But Boris is too sleepy to pay attention. Anyway, he will know about it soon enough ...

The next scene opens on Veronica waiting for Boris at their meeting place, on the stairs at the bridge. But it's Mark who comes running down the stairs. He tells her that Boris has to work and can't meet her. He tells her that she needs to live a normal life in war time. He himself doesn't expect to be drafted because he's talented. He'll dedicate a symphony to her.

Mark touches Veronica's arm. She moves it away. She tells him that he should be ashamed of the way that he follows her around and she walks away from him.

This high-angle shot contrasts with the earlier, more joyful one with the sprinkler, at the film's opening. This time the secondary element isn't refreshing water, it is barricades and Veronica has her back turned in rejection of a different boy: Mark.

At his workplace, Boris and his friend are talking as they dig. Which of them will go to war? The friend says Boris should be exempted because he's a talented artist.

The two sweethearts are in Veronica's apartment, setting up blackout curtains at the windows. They talk about the war. Veronica insists that Boris won't be drafted because of his talent. She asks if he might enlist; he's evasive. Turning serious, he calls her Veronica instead of his nickname for her: Squirrel. She doesn't want to have this serious talk. She covers her face with a curtain around her face to hide from the truth: there's a war and Boris will go fight.

Veronica tells Boris that when she's with him, she is not afraid of anything. But that will not be enough to keep Boris home.

In the film's only shot of an actor looking directly into the camera, Boris makes eye contact with us, the spectators. He is wondering how he will tell this girl what we have already guessed: he has already enlisted and will soon be off to war.

Veronica chatters on about their wedding. She says she'll wear a white dress and long white veil, like the one her grandmother wore, and Boris will wear a black suit.

Boris' friend Stepan arrives. Veronica is delighted to see him and runs to another room to get them a special treat. While she is gone, Stepan tells Boris the news: they are to report for duty at 5:00 that evening. Veronica comes back with cherries, but she can tell that something is going on.

At first, Stepan says that their call to report came in. Then he reveals that they both enlisted.

Veronica can't believe it. What will happen to her? Stepan leaves.

Boris tries to explain. He didn't want to tell her because her birthday will be the next day. Nothing will happen to him, he says. He'll come back and they'll live for a hundred years. He wants to kiss her, but she turns her face away. "We'll say good-bye later."

Back at home, Boris prepares Veronica's birthday gift. It's a stuffed squirrel with a basket of tiny nuts. Boris writes a note, puts it in the little basket and covers it with the nuts. He asks his grandmother to give it to Veronica the next day. And he asks her to help Veronica out if things become difficult during the war.

Boris' father comes home. He is furious that Boris has enlisted, like a foolish boy looking for adventure. The family drinks a toast to Boris. Some girls from the Plant Committee and the Communist Youth League come by with gifts in his honor. But Boris excuses himself and goes to his room.

There he sits at his desk, takes out a photograph of Veronica and gazes at it.

Caption: Watch this amazing tracking shot (video) of Veronica as she goes by bus to find Boris.

Meanwhile, Boris is saying good-bye to his family.

When he leaves, his grandmother runs to the stairs to watch him one last time. Father sits at the table, unable to believe that he has lost his son. He leaves the room and she leans against the doorway in a pose of grief.

Suddenly, the doorbell rings. It's Veronica, who has been unable to find Boris amidst all the crowds and the tanks. The grandmother invites her in and takes her to Boris' room, where she gives Veronica her birthday gift: the stuffed squirrel. Veronica is delighted! The grandmother says there's a note, but Veronica doesn't see it hidden beneath the nuts.

He must have forgotten it, says the grandmother. He'll write to you. Suddenly Veronica remembers that she needs to find Boris, so that she can say good-bye. She rushes out to find him.

Boris, Irina and the girls from the Plant Committee are at the assembly station. Boris looks all around, trying to see Veronica. Irina reassures him: "Don't worry. She'll come."

“But how will she find me in this crowd?” The young man climbs up to the top of the wrought iron fence and looks at the crowd to find Veronica.

This tracking shot (video) – lasting nearly a full sixty seconds – is reminiscent of Dino Risi’s sets in *Il sorpasso*, which are loaded with *Italianità* and typical Italian characters. Here, amidst the crowd of Russians seeing off their men (and boys), we’re shown a woman in a babushka stroking her husband’s head; a little girl kissing her daddy; a vendor calling out something about vegetables; a man and woman doing a dancing to accordion music; and people crying and dabbing away their tears.

The tracking shot suddenly breaks and Veronica comes running into the scene, carrying packages.

And then we see her in a tracking shot, while she searches for Boris along a wrought iron fence. The scene parallels the sequence with the previous scene, the one with Boris, perhaps even along the same fence. The director has used parallel scenes before – those of them jumping on their beds – to show the bond of these two young people, the synchronicity of their lives.

Finally, Veronica catches sight of Boris! She calls out to him, but he doesn’t hear her. We follow both of them in alternating tracking shots: Veronica pushing her way through the crowd; Boris marching and scanning the crowd for her. At last, he looks down, sad and defeated.

At that point, it’s clear: Boris and Veronica will not get to say farewell.

Some time has passed. The next scene opens on Veronica telephoning Boris’ family. She speaks to his grandmother and asks whether she has heard anything. No, no one has received a letter from Boris.

The next set is beautifully designed around the theme of wartime. It’s the first of many we’ll be seeing. In this case, barricades run the length of the street and people pile up sandbags along the side.

Veronica and her mother talk about the war. The girl has decided that she’ll go to work in the munitions factory. At the sound of an air raid warning they hurry back to the apartment.

Veronica’s parents want her to go down to the air-raid shelter, although they themselves refuse to leave the apartment. Her mother packs some things for Veronica. Grabbing the squirrel that Boris gave her, she goes down to the shelter on her own.

In the shelter, Veronica meets the two girls from the Plant Committee whom we saw earlier in Boris' apartment. Again, Veronica laments that she hasn't heard from Boris. The girls reassure her: it's the war. The mail is very slow.

Notice the beautiful lighting here – and elsewhere in the film – by cinematographer Sergey Urusevsky.

Back aboveground, Veronica sees a stream of firetrucks headed towards her building. She runs along with them, zigzagging through burned-out rubble and between tongues of flame. Her building has been half-destroyed. She dashes up the stairs – the same stairs where she had said goodbye to Boris not so long before. As she runs, burning material falls from the upper stories. The fire is all around her.

At the top of the stairs, she opens the door of her apartment. What she sees, framed in the doorway, is the bombed city landscape. Her family's apartment has been destroyed; her parents have vanished into thin air.

Veronica will stay with Boris' family. The father tells Boris' cousin Mark that they must take care of her. That will mostly be Mark's responsibility because he and Irina are working in the hospital day and night.

One evening Mark and Veronica are home alone. He plays piano and complains that the war has prevented him from performing in Tchaikovsky Hall.

At the sound of planes, Mark tells Veronica they should go to the shelter, but she refuses. Mark plays the piano loudly to drown out the sound of the planes and the sirens. Suddenly, there's a crash as the window glass explodes into the room. The lights go out. Veronica flies into Mark's arms. He leads her to the side of the room, where she crouches, covering her face in her hands and screaming. Mark looks out of the window, but another detonation shatters the remaining glass. She runs to him in panic. Gusts of wind blow the curtains into the room and the room is lit by jolting flashes with each new explosion. Watch the entire scene here (video); noticing the use of sound and the movements of the camera that convey the dramatic power of the scene.

They fall into each other's arms. Mark kisses Veronica passionately, but she pushes him away.

With the sound of wild piano music and crashing bombs in the background, Veronica backs away from Mark, moving past the open window where the curtains billow and bright flares of light continue. She tries to leave the room, but he won't let her.

He says that he loves her, again and again. Each time, she says no, slapping his face.

She tries to run out of the apartment, but he stops her. His pursuit of her is marked by a cacophony of exploding bombs, smashing glass and crashing piano music. He insists that he loves her. She slaps him over and over, saying "No! No!" until she stops, exhausted. He picks her up and carries her into the bedroom.

The scene closes with a shot of Mark's feet walking over the broken glass and a dissolve into Veronica's face.