

Dina Iordanova, 'Letter Never Sent: Refining Fire,'  
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## ***Letter Never Sent: Refining Fire***

By [Dina Iordanova](#)

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The famed collaboration between director Mikhail Kalatozov and cinematographer Sergei Urusevsky, which, with its distinctive combination of effective melodrama and a wild, powerful visual style, helped make Kalatozov the most successful Soviet cinematic export of his generation, in fact spanned only seven years and resulted in just three films. Two of these—1957's *The Cranes Are Flying* and 1964's *I Am Cuba*—are quite well-known. The third, 1959's *Letter Never Sent*, is less familiar to international viewers, but it is a remarkable depiction of perseverance in the face of extreme challenge, a tale of humankind's resolute dedication to the task of conquering the wild and overpowering the hostile forces of nature.

Urusevsky's black-and-white photography, which presents the fragile protagonists against a backdrop of unruly waters, blowing winds, and raging fires, is superb and bridges formally his work in the earlier and the later film.

The cinematographer had employed a wealth of invention (round camera rails, subjective shots taken by actors) for the drama *The Cranes Are Flying*, the first Soviet film to honestly tackle the emotional experience of World War II, and it had been an amazing success, winning the Palme d'Or in 1958. *I Am Cuba*, a film glorifying the radical social change that the Cuban Revolution had brought about just a few years earlier, would see such technical innovation come fully to the fore. *Letter Never Sent* paved the way for this by expanding on the cutting-edge methods of *The Cranes Are Flying* and introducing new ones—pioneering shots made with a handheld camera and other complex techniques involving focal length, camera angles and movement, and lighting.

Based on a story by Valeri Osipov (and coscripted by playwright Viktor Rozov, who also wrote *The Cranes Are Flying*), *Letter Never Sent* can be broken into two thematically and stylistically different sections. The first is a tale of exploration, filled with scenes of systematic work: A party of four geologists—three men and a woman—embarks on an arduous expedition to locate diamonds in the wilderness of the Central Siberian Plateau, which finally yields a promising vein of the precious stones. This earlier part has as a narrative backbone the unsent letter of the film's title, a long epistle to the wife of Sabinin, the group's leader (Innokenti Smoktunovsky, who would later gain fame for his roles in Grigori Kozintsev's *Hamlet* [1964] and Igor Talankin's *Tchaikovsky* [1970]), which provides a fragile link between the isolated protagonists and the world at large. Sabinin's letter is a mixture of diary and philosophical treatise, the scenes of him composing it often superimposed with visions of loving glances and caresses in the calm light of a city home, or

with images of flames that both echo the campfire he sits next to and signal the conflagration to come. There is also a second unsent letter, part of a subplot that involves a romantic triangle between the young Tanya (Tatyana Samoilova, fresh off her lead role in *The Cranes Are Flying* and being touted as the next major Soviet star), her bespectacled boyfriend, Andrei (Vasili Livanov, in his first movie), and the more mature Sergei (Yevgeny Urbansky, already famous as the protagonist of Yuli Raizman's *Communist* [1957]). Sergei is drawn to Tanya but must suppress his feelings; he reveals his secret in a note to her that's never meant to be read but comes out into the open by accident and triggers certain high-minded exchanges on the topics of love and socialist morality. This subplot features scenes that come close to depicting sexual anxiety and erotic attraction, a rarity in Soviet cinema.

No sooner have the geologists celebrated the success of their expedition and begun preparations to travel back to civilization than disaster strikes, in the form of a forest fire. This catastrophe launches the second part of *Letter Never Sent*, the story of their desperate struggle for survival, an existential treatise on human fragility in the face of nature's power. The four set off on a journey through the inferno that lasts several days and soon leaves one of them dead and another injured. Communication with their base is lost, and they are completely cut off, though at first there are moments of hope that search parties will arrive. For the rest of the film, the survivors will drag themselves through outlandish landscapes—first burning, then charred and rainy, then frozen—determined to live in order to pass along the map showing the location of their valuable find, to bring to humanity the prosperous future it charts.

The depiction in *Letter Never Sent* of such selfless, heroic deeds in the service of progress for all aligns the film, at least in part, with the tradition of socialist realism; it fulfils the principle of *ideinost*, the element of the official Soviet aesthetic doctrine that required that a work of

art be rooted in Soviet ideology. And in line with Maxim Gorky's 1934 definition of socialist realism, it asserts the importance of cultivating an individual's capabilities "for the purpose of his triumph over the powers of nature." This kind of moral ascent is revealed in particular in the hallucination Sabinin has toward the end of the film, while lying delirious and near frozen to death, a vision, in glorious sunshine, of the future progress brought about by the group's discovery: a huge construction project on the river, an inspiring socialist dream of cultivation, with large machines and buzzing laborers. Kalatozov had worked in this vein before: 1941's *Wings of Victory*, about the Arctic explorer Valery Chkalov; 1953's *Hostile Whirlwinds*, about Felix Dzerzhinsky, the founder of the KGB; and 1955's *The First Echelon*, a saga about the cultivation of virgin soil in Kazakhstan and the first Kalatozov project in which Urusevsky participated, having been brought on to the production by his fellow cameraman Yuri Yekelchik, are all considered to fit neatly into the socialist realist paradigm. In 1951, he won the Stalin Prize, at the height of the premier's cult of personality. And he would return to straightforward socialist realist work with *I Am Cuba*, with its glorification of the triumph of its working-class protagonist.

*Letter Never Sent* also contains elements that set it apart from socialist realism, however. Its dramatic plot reversal being triggered by the accident of natural disaster rather than a crisis resulting from mounting tensions among the characters is unusual. Allowing three out of four characters to perish, as the film ultimately does, is equally uncharacteristic. And the narrative even engages in indirect mockery of Soviet officialdom when it depicts the ironic dissonance between the congratulations coming over the radio from the scientists' superiors and the actuality of their desperate plight.

Kalatozov had a special attraction to depictions of standoffs between man and nature. His early, Georgian-language *Salt for Svanetia* (1930), an ethnographic film on the lives of

people in a remote mountain village, shows this eternal struggle, as does *Wings of Victory*. His interest in such plots peaked in 1969, with his last film, the international coproduction *The Red Tent*, about the tragic 1928 expedition of Umberto Nobile to the Arctic. Made on a large budget and shot in lavish Technicolor by Leonid Kalashnikov, with such stars as Sean Connery and Claudia Cardinale, *The Red Tent* is similar to *Letter Never Sent* in the somewhat ambiguous bleakness of its outlook—both films let protagonists die through no fault of their own, but both also have endings that allow for the possibility of redemption through triumph for a cause—though it fails to match the earlier work’s visual intensity.

The opening five minutes of *Letter Never Sent*, a sequence of five long takes (none shorter than thirty seconds in duration), can be seen as a primer on Urusevsky’s cinematographic mastery. In the first shot, the camera moves up and away, showing the group of waving geologists from the point of view of the helicopter that has just dropped them off, details of their faces at first clearly visible but the figures becoming smaller and smaller, until they are just dots in the landscape. The third shot in the sequence, showing the geologists searching disorientedly through the woods, reveals a dizzying choreography, the handheld camera turning and following their probing moves, approaching and then receding from the actors.

Throughout the film, Urusevsky’s camera scrutinizes the protagonists’ expressive faces for an almost intrusively long time, in extreme close-up, and often in profile. The representation of nature in *Letter Never Sent* is as important as the acting, however, and the images of landscapes are indeed unforgettable. All the elements—earth, water, air, fire—feature prominently and propel the plot. The superior location footage alternates with weaker scenes shot at the Mosfilm studio, the latter easily recognizable from their static backgrounds. Even some of the studio scenes, though, are complexly executed. Most notable is the minute-long sequence involving Tanya and Andrei hiding in the rain and ending up in a confrontation

with Sergei, which is exquisitely designed and features the three actors engaged in complicated moves across the screen. Still, it is the elaborate location shots that are truly remarkable and linger in the mind long after the film's close. One that is particularly arresting, an over two-minute-long single take, shows Andrei and Sergei moving through soggy wooded terrain on a hunting party and involves unpredictable, rapid camera movements—up and down, back and forth—and a jumpy retreat during an intense confrontation between the two characters.

Rather than relying on editing, these takes are extensively choreographed; often, obstructions (branches, fire, water) pop up as if accidentally in the frame between the camera and the actors, forcing the camera and the viewer's gaze to observe from a new angle. Many such moments are not necessitated by the narrative but have found their way in as exciting exercises in intricate and sophisticated staging. Thus, the accusations of an obsession with form at the expense of substance that were leveled at Urusevsky and Kalatozov after the release of *I Am Cuba* (which takes this premeditated style to an extreme) were perhaps not unfounded. But what photography!

Much of the imagery of *Letter Never Sent* can be seen as being in direct dialogue with a range of classic Soviet films: The black silhouettes of the geologists as they file across the screen against a dramatic sky and under a black sun or through charcoaled trees regularly bring to mind scenes from Lev Kuleshov's *Po zakonu* (1926). Sabinin's visions of the future are reminiscent of the finale of Alexander Dovzhenko's *Aerograd* (1935). The scene with Tanya wasting the last rifle cartridge looks like one from Grigori Chukhrai's *The Forty-First* (1956). (And even though Kalatozov and Urusevsky could not have seen Masaki Kobayashi's three-part *The Human Condition* [1959–1961], made during the same period as their film, the

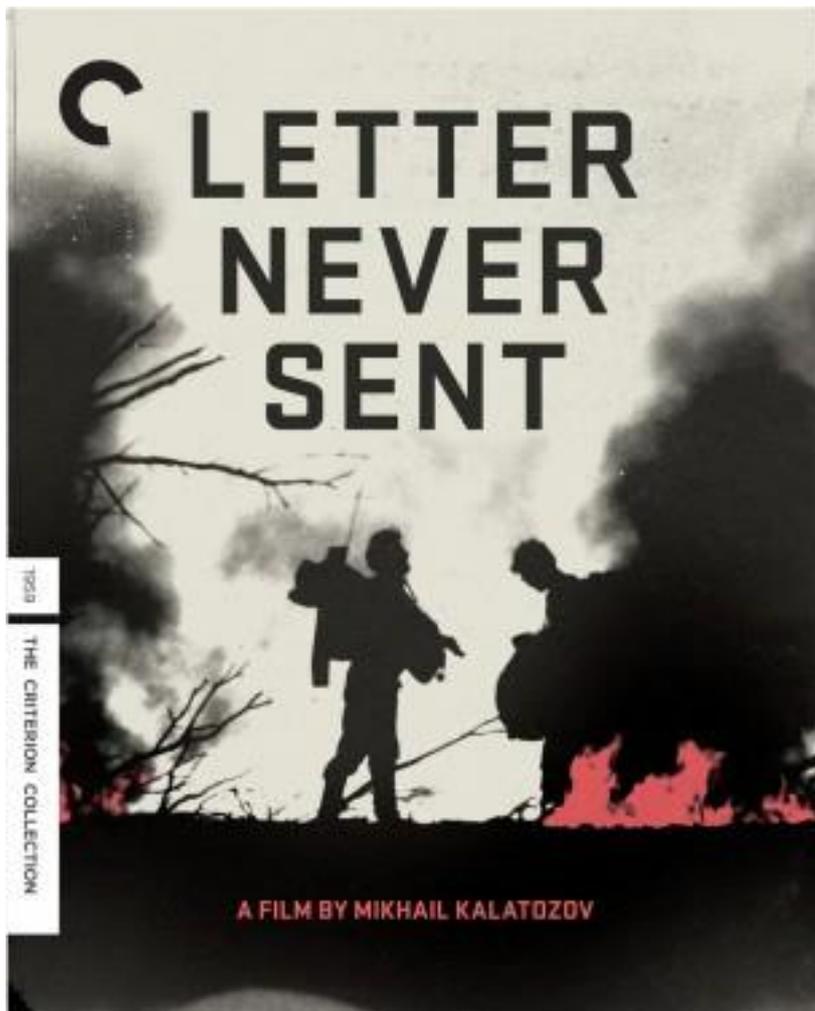
desolate scenes of Tanya and Sabinin toward the end have much in common with its aesthetic.)

Andrei Tarkovsky's debut feature, *The Steamroller and the Violin*, was released the year after *Letter Never Sent*. In his second film, *Ivan's Childhood* (1962), the influence of Urusevsky's cinematography is clearly visible—in images of rippling water and piercing rays of sunshine, a sexually charged scene near a trench, characters making their way through shallow water and branches. The continuously moving, elaborately planned camera work that sets the pace of the film comes from Urusevsky and would live on throughout Tarkovsky's oeuvre and beyond.

*Letter Never Sent* was nominated for the Palme d'Or at Cannes in 1960 and had an international release, but it has never been as well-known as its predecessor. It became a favorite film of an entire generation in the Soviet Union, however, its romantic representation of geologists making the field particularly popular. Still, even if critics praised the dedication of the scientists, some suggested that the characters were underdeveloped, and so too the link between the romantic and realistic episodes. The film's recent rerelease in Russia triggered extensive discussion; while viewers praised the photography, some pointed out a lack of realism in the film and criticized the somewhat meaningless heroism (why do protagonists have to die in time of peace?).

Regardless, *Letter Never Sent* is a film that stalwart cineastes—particularly those who love the perpetual surprises of vertiginous camera work—will likely always feel immensely drawn to. It is a master class of sorts, one that lays bare the building blocks of a dazzling style that remains unsurpassed in the history of cinematic art.

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