

AND UP SHE WENT: THE MORAL VERTICAL IN *WINGS*

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Abstract

This article is dedicated to the film Wings (1966) directed by the Soviet director Larisa Shepitko. With its story of a World War II veteran, Nadezhda Stepanovna Petrukhina, Wings makes for an interesting case when looking at women's and veterans' status in the Soviet society of the 1960s, and morality and memory culture, speaking more generally. As Nadezhda Stepanovna is a former fighter pilot who continuously returns to the sky in her daydreams, Wings is also an excellent case for a critical discussion of the meaning of the airspace. Aviation and airspace hold certain connotations in Russian culture (not necessarily excluding other cultures) that open up for a different kind of reading of this film, in particular because of the intersections between gender, space and memory. Hierarchies are often presented through a metaphor of verticality in Russian culture. By examining different notions of verticality, both physical and metaphorical, in Wings, I argue that this film can not only be read in a new way, but also bring new perspectives on the established theory of women's position in Russian culture as morally superior to men. This again can be linked back to the spatial understanding of Russia, as the term Motherland in Russia particularly strongly makes a connection between femininity and motherhood, on the one hand, and space and land, on the other.

Keywords

Russian cinema; Larisa Shepitko; Russian culture; Power vertical; Verticality; Film Studies

The main question of this article is what role the airspace and the act of flying play for the identity and self-realisation of the protagonist, Nadezhda Stepanovna Petrukhina, in the film *Wings* (Shepitko 1966). The airspace seems to be filled with liberation from society's double standards towards women, and with the opportunity for self-expression, showing strength and competence. This reading is based on a theoretical approach exploring notions of verticality. By advancing the concept of moral vertical, it changes the interpretation of this particular film and adds to the theories of what functions women have in Russian culture.

Wings

Larisa Shepitko (1938–1979) had already directed one full-length feature film, *Heat* (1963), as part of her graduation from the prestigious Gerasimov Institute of Cinematography, but it was *Wings* that established her as a film director.¹ In *Wings*, Shepitko showed depth and maturity, which was a remarkable feat, considering this was her second film and she was only 28, and this added to the film's success. *Wings* gave her

¹ The Gerasimov Institute of Cinematography (or VGIK) was founded in 1919, and is one of the oldest film schools in the world. A long list of famous directors have both taught and studied at VGIK, including Sergei Eisenstein, Kira Muratova and Andrei Tarkovsky.

an important position as a director in the 1960s and 1970s' Soviet Union: Lynne Attwood labels her as "one of the most celebrated Soviet directors of the 1970s" (Attwood 1993: 82).

The title of the film was initially meant to be *The Guard Captain* (*Gvardii kapitan*) but was in the end changed to *Wings* (*Nachalo* 1965: 47). In doing so the title to a large extent builds on an already widespread metaphor and gives the audience certain expectations even before seeing a single scene or while knowing nothing of the plot. Wings, whether they are a part of an airplane or a body part on a bird, anticipate flying, a venture people often link to feelings of freedom and escape. This is a befitting title for underscoring the symbolism one can find in this particular film, as I will present below.

The story of the film is about a school principal, city soviet council member and war veteran, Nadezhda Stepanovna Petrukhina (played by Maya Bulgakova). She struggles to find her place both professionally and socially, instead returning to the daydream of flying among the clouds. During the course of the film she is shown in dialogue with co-workers, students, acquaintances, fellow veterans, a romantic interest and her adopted daughter—all in a contemporary setting. She is also shown together with the big love of her life in two flash-backs that take place during World War II. The storyline is driven not so much by action but by characters, or rather one character—Nadezhda Stepanovna. The film shows a series of events from Nadezhda Stepanovna's life, filled with everyday challenges to which she is already accustomed. Still, these events build up to the dramatic climax when Nadezhda Stepanovna needs to make a decision, whether to adapt to the standards of contemporary society or continue to live the way she believes to be the best and truest. In a long and intense sequence Nadezhda Stepanovna ends up doing what I would describe as hijacking a small airplane (she is the only person in it), and taking off into the mist. The very last scenes in the film are shot from a pilot's perspective, tumbling in the sky, before the screen is whited out and the text "The end" ("Konets") appears.

With the active use of close-ups to capture facial expressions, and how these change (as opposed to dialogues or actions), the audience is invited to engage their own interpretative skills to understand what is happening. This allows for possibly very different experiences of the film and of Nadezhda Stepanovna, and it should be taken into account when various analyses of the film are read. The aforementioned dramatic peak of the film, with the hijacking of the airplane, serves as an example of how the film leaves it to the viewer to interpret what happens (for details, see below). In his article "The Art Cinema as a Mode of Film Practice", David Bordwell directly addresses open endings in films: "With the open and arbitrary ending the art film reasserts that ambiguity is the dominant principle of intelligibility, that we are to watch less for the tale than the telling, that life lacks the neatness of art and *that this art knows it.*" (Bordwell 1979: 61) Even though Bordwell in his article for the main part draws on a comparison of various Italian, French and American films and film auteurs, the above-cited part seems to fit the case of *Wings* too. In my opinion, the complexity of *Wings* is its strongest feature, precisely because of what Bordwell describes as a respect for the complexity of life and how life is experienced (Bordwell 1979: 60-61). Thus, when my interpretation of the film, especially of its ending, might differ from the majority, my goal is not to prove how my interpretation is more precise. Rather, I try to make the argument that with my method and my theoretical approach, this is a more suitable and fruitful interpretation, which will add to the understandings of representations of space and morality in films.

Even if Nadezhda Stepanovna is shown through most of the film as a woman capable of smiling and laughing, it is evident that the place she is longing for is the air, and the cockpit of a airplane. Twice in the film Nadezhda Stepanovna is shown when daydreaming: she is looking up in the sky, and then we see scenes of flying. These seem to be moments of daydreaming rather than recollections of the past, as there is no real story or context around—it is simply scenes of flying from a pilot's perspective. There is a third sequence that is similar to the first two, but this is more clearly a memory. Here we see how her beloved Mitia (played by Leonid Diachkov) is shot down during an air raid that they are doing together. The camera focuses either on the faces of the pilots, or outside looking at the two airplanes. The finale, where Nadezhda Stepanovna has taken off, is closer connected to the first two daydreaming sequences in perspective, and this leads me to think that the thematic context also should be linked closer to the daydreaming rather than the traumatic memories. Of course, they are not completely separate, as the daydreaming includes nostalgia and parts of the trauma, but I still claim that the ending has more in common with the daydreams, the everyday escapes, rather than with a wish to reunite with her true love in death. Some support for this reading can be found in Denise J. Youngblood's observation: "Regardless of her intentions, she [Nadezhda Stepanovna] is beaming with happiness as she ascends into the clouds (heavens)" (Youngblood 2007: 180).

Yet the most common interpretation is that the finale implies a suicide, linking it to the trauma of war and the death of her beloved, rather than the daydream of self-realisation: "Shepitko chose to leave it to the audience to decide whether she [Nadezhda Stepanovna] would kill herself [...] The film narrative, however, leaves little doubt concerning the end of Petrukhina's cinematic 'road to life'". (Kiziria 1990: 143) A similar thought is even stronger formulated by Mikhailova and Lipovetsky:

Shepitko clearly implies the suicide of the former 'warrior' woman unable to find her place in 'normal' Soviet culture, for her identity has been formed by the discourses and practices of extraordinary mobilization. Unwilling to break herself to fulfil the constrictive gender demands of peacetime, Petrukhina simply leaves for the only freedom she knows—one secured by her wartime connection to death. (Mikhailova and Lipovetsky 2012: 183)

But the air is not a space exclusively linked to trauma, nostalgia, war and death for Nadezhda Stepanovna. The only time we see combat action is when Mitia is shot down, and this is obviously highly dramatic and traumatic. Yet her daydreams are filled with seemingly harmonic escapes between the clouds, too, leaving Nadezhda Stepanovna with a smile on her face when she returns from the daydream. Thus the airspace seems to be also filled with a liberation from society's double standard towards women, and with an opportunity for self-expression, showing strength and competence. The airplane allows Nadezhda Stepanovna, who is already established as having a moral upper hand, to position herself physically above the rest of society. The end, when we see her taking off but not land (or crash), lets her stay forever above the rest not only metaphorically, but also physically. This is a powerful way of emphasising her position in relation to the people and the society around her.

Initially Nadezhda Stepanovna may seem to have little choice in a society that so forcefully constricts and limits her both professionally (she is not allowed to pursue a

military career) and socially (through social norms and codes, limiting her freedom of movement and expression and leading to a controversial and ambivalent ending). Yet it is also possible to think she is not a victim in the sense that society dooms her, but that she breaks out and establishes herself above the narrow-mindedness of what it means to be a woman and a veteran. Throughout the last scene there is a lot of close-ups of Nadezhda Stepanovna's facial expressions as they change from nostalgic to insecure, determined, bold, happy, sad, melancholic, rebellious and victorious—quite an emotional roller coaster! She does not seem like a defeated woman as she fires up the engine and takes off in what has got to be difficult flying conditions, keeping in mind the heavy fog on the airfield and the airplane model she has not flown before.

One must remember that Nadezhda's name is symbolic, as 'nadezhda' in Russian means 'hope'. Knowing that Shepitko used spiritual symbolism—or, more precisely, Christian metaphors in other works too, most famously in *The Ascent* (1976), where the story of a World War II partisan mirrors the passion of Christ—can it be claimed that Nadezhda Stepanovna in *Wings* is a modern-day saint or divine creature that in the end returns where she truly belongs, i.e. to sky or heaven? Shepitko's 1978 interview to the Bavarian TV seems to support this, as she says in the 29th minute of the recording about the film's final scene: “[Petrukhina] has come back to heaven, to herself, to her talent, to what she was born for, so to speak, because this is her natural vocation” (see Khrenova et al 1999).²

If Nadezhda Stepanovna goes to heaven and therefore can be seen as a saint-like creature, is she a moral standard and authority at all, and if so, how and to whom is she morally superior? It is clear that the viewers are expected to sympathise with Nadezhda Stepanovna: she is shown as a humorous woman, who cares for people around her but is a bit clumsy in certain situations. Clumsy in a way that she ends up acting too authoritatively, pushing people away. Through her, and her encounters with people around her, Soviet society is portrayed as rather unwelcoming of people like her, i.e. women veterans, who are not ashamed of their past. Rather the society is shown as having double standards and being hypocritical: Nadezhda Stepanovna's portrait hangs in a museum together with other war heroes, but she cannot eat dinner without a male companion in a restaurant after 6pm on Sundays. And of course there is a scene when Nadezhda Stepanovna explains to her daughter (played by Zhanna Bulatova) how people of her generation feel the responsibility to serve their country, implicitly saying that her daughter's generation does not share this ethics—but instead is quite selfish. This conflict between generations reflects the consequences of de-Stalinization, during the so-called Thaw under Khrushchev.³ In her article “The Post-Stalin Era: De-Stalinization, Daily Life and Dissent”, Miriam Dobson presents a discussion on how the post-Stalin era is treated by academics, showing that there are considerable differences in the interpretations, particularly of the so-called dissidents (Dobson 2011). Yet, a characteristic of this period that seems less contested is the shift to a more individualistic way of thinking—in *Wings* this is particularly verbalised by Nadezhda Petrukhina's daughter. In referring to works by Vladimir Shlapentokh and Greg Castillo, Dobson

² I am grateful to Dr Candyce Veal for bringing my attention to this interview.

³ Following Stalin's death in 1953, there was a period of relatively more liberal policies towards critical opinions and cultural expressions, as well as a condemnation of the Stalin regime—led by Khrushchev. After 1964, when Brezhnev seized power, the governmental control grew stricter again.

writes: “Both works suggest that the end of terror enabled people to withdraw into a discrete and protected private sphere.” (Dobson 2011: 912) Olena Dymytryk, for her part, discusses the notion of Communist morality (using *Wings* as a case) and shows how the Soviet authorities addressed the individual in their pursuit of instilling “proper” moral ideals and behaviour: heterosexuality, pronatalism, and traditional gender roles (Dymytryk 2017: 5). With this perspective, the conflict between Nadezhda Stepanovna and society in general seems to be rooted in the Stalinist past, and thus Lilya Kaganovsky and Dymytryk argue that it is her Stalinist past that is alienating her from her surroundings (Kaganovsky 2012: 491-497; Dymytryk 2017: 8). However, Nadezhda Stepanovna is shown as a woman who is true to herself, acts selflessly and has integrity. It is not what Kaganovsky lists as her Stalinist features that makes Nadezhda Stepanovna a sympathetic and morally superior character. She is a role model, which also includes a moral aspect. Her superiority seems to be in relation to society, presented through others, like her daughter, the school children in Nadezhda Stepanovna’s care, and the man refusing her entry to the restaurant.

Verticality in Russia

Shepitko’s *Wings* can be mapped upon the Russian cultural tradition of conceptualizing and representing verticality in words and images. When looking at Russian history, there seems to be at least one very strong feature that represents continuity: the aspiration for a strong top-down leader. There is an influential view that in order to get an overview and to gain and maintain control over such a vast territory that Russia has evolved into, there needs to be a power vertical—a hierarchical structure of power, expressed through the metaphor of verticality. As an introduction to the established notion of power vertical in Russian culture, I’d like to quote Lara Ryazanova-Clarke:

The occurrence of the <Power Vertical> phrase in contexts involving legal documents and the institutions that produce them provides further legitimization and normalization of the phrase. In many contexts of use, agency is omitted or backgrounded [...]. A lack of clarity in the signification of agency blurs the notion of responsibility for building or strengthening the vertical. Thus, the вертикаль [vertical] can be construed as having its own impetus and inevitability; like some natural force, it works by itself, builds itself and reinforces itself. (Ryazanova-Clarke 2009: 299-300)

This understanding of the Power Vertical as something that is seen in the Russian discourse “like some natural force”, not rooted in the individuals at the top, political institutions, or certain ideology, but a natural given, allows for some interesting connections to be made between space, history and power, but also between morality and gender. If the notion of verticality is a well-established way of understanding hierarchies in Russia, then this notion should be used to further explore hierarchical structures and symbols in Russian culture—especially visual culture, as verticality is easily presented visually.

The verticality in *Wings* can be found in many spatial and metaphorical representations, but the most striking ones are connected to the air and ground, and to social hierarchies and religious connotations. This way Shepitko’s work may serve as an example of how

notions of verticality, and the natural force of this notion, is not only found in the context of hard power and politics in Russia, but also in other cultural spheres.⁴ And as I have argued above throughout my analysis of *Wings*, the vertical perspective is adding to our interpretation and discussion about Russian culture, including the role of women in it.

Women in Russian culture

Perhaps the most influential Western work on women in Russian literature is the book *Terrible Perfection* by Barbara Heldt (1987). In the introduction Heldt writes:

There is no novel of gradual female development, of rebirth or transformation as we find in Austen or Eliot; while some male characters learn and grow through intellect or experience, the changes in women are mysterious givens of nature, of Womanhood. The heroines of male fiction serve a purpose that ultimately has little to do with women: these heroines are used lavishly in a discourse of male self-definition. (Heldt 1987: 2)

There are several interesting points in this quote and in the argument made in *Terrible Perfection* that women in Russian culture primarily are used as an impossible standard of virtues and morality. I will pay extra attention to the point that this is mainly a conclusion based on the analysis of male presentations of women, and the description of a hierarchy placing women above men morally. David Gillespie continues Heldt's argument in his book on Russian cinema, but he also adds: "Women remain unthreatening, subservient, domesticated, returning to the fold or doomed to a life of loneliness." (Gillespie 2003: 99) It is not entirely clear whether Gillespie makes this statement of behalf of all the film directors (except Kira Muratova), or if he, like Heldt, argues that this has to do with a specific male way of presenting women. When Gillespie describes *Wings*, he makes the argument that Shepitko, unlike male directors, is not merely treating women as symbols:

Larisa Shepitko's *Wings* still looks like a remarkable film and its central theme of the role and place of women in society has not aged. [...] Nadezhda is seen as little more than a museum exhibit and she can, in the end, only escape by getting in a plane and flying away. [...] Shepitko's film offers a convincing and sympathetic picture of female loneliness and social alienation. [...] In male-directed films of these years the status and role of women generally was secondary to more symbolic or 'bigger' issues. (Gillespie 2003: 88)

It should then come as no surprise that, in a documentary about Larisa Shepitko, directed by her husband Elem Klimov after her death, the director herself explains how her gender was a central part of how she created films, confirming Gillespie's observation:

I'm giving you my word that there's nothing, there's no frame in my film, not a single one, that doesn't come from me as a woman. I've never engaged in copycatting, never tried to imitate men, because I know very well that all the

⁴ On the other hand, notions of verticality, similar to the ones I describe being present in *Wings*, can also be found in films made outside of Russia, e.g. the American *Flight* (Zemeckis 2012). When I write that this notion of verticality exists in a Russian sphere it does not exclude the existence of this notion in other cultural spheres.

efforts of my girlfriends, both older and younger than me, to imitate men's cinema were just nonsensical, because all this is secondary. But I make a distinction between ladies' and men's cinema. There's no women's and men's cinema. There's ladies' cinema and there's men's cinema. Men, too, can do perfectly well the ladies' sentimental needlework. But a woman, as one half of the origins of humankind, can tell the world, reveal to the world some amazing things. No man can so intuitively discern some phenomena in human psyche, in nature as a woman can. (Larisa Shepitko in Klimov 1981: 7:54)

In this quote Shepitko clearly establishes herself as a woman, with a particular (essentialist) female gaze. It is curious, then, that Attwood describes how Soviet film critics at the time saw her as a director who transcended gender. Attwood ascribes this critique to “a society in which women are consistently undervalued, [where] the greatest professional praise a woman can get is, evidently, to be disassociated from her gender.” (Attwood 1993: 83-84)

As a comparison and contrast to Shepitko, Attwood presents Kira Muratova (1934–) and Lana Gogoberidze (1928–), all three of whom began working as directors in the Khrushchev era and, according to Attwood, in different ways explored the so-called ‘Woman Question’ in at least one of their films (Attwood 1993: 82, 84). The period of transition from the Thaw to the Stagnation—the term often used to describe the Brezhnev era—was not only distinguished by female directors bringing fresh perspectives to the screen: “In the 1960s [...] the newly emergent notion of a ‘women’s culture’ in the Soviet Union intersected with the notion of auteurism” (Kaganovsky 2012: 484).

In her article, Kaganovsky places both Kira Muratova and Larisa Shepitko (using the example of *Wings*) in the 1960s’ Soviet context of auteurism during the period of transition, and also as strong examples of directors, who made deeply feminist films, closely related to Western feminist auteurs of the 1970s. These films were feminist in the “ways of seeing”: the character, the story, but also how images and sequences were structured, as well as the use of camera (Kaganovsky 2012: 484, 499). In 1975 Larisa Shepitko participated in a UNESCO-organized international symposium for women in cinema. Of the 28 participants listed in the report of the event, Shepitko was the only Soviet participant. The rest predominately came from the West, with five participants from France and four from Sweden (see “*Women in Cinema*” - *Report of an International Symposium, St. Vincent, Valley of Aosta, Italy 23-27 July 1975* 1976). In an essay by Shepitko published in the Soviet film magazine *Sovetskii ekran* she expresses the importance of female filmmakers and feminist films both at an international and a national level (Shepitko 1975).

Although I think Gillespie has a good observation of how Shepitko has managed to create a very complex woman in Nadezhda Stepanovna as a contrast to the general portrayal of women in male-directed films, he does not seem to leave Nadezhda Stepanovna with much strength in his analysis. It is likely he sees the ending as a tragic one where Nadezhda Stepanovna is “doomed to a life of loneliness” as she chooses not to “return to the fold”. But based on the analysis I have made above, with a strong emphasis of the spatial dimension, I argue that this statement needs to be nuanced.

One of the main points in my analysis is the connection between Nadezhda Stepanovna’s spatial placement in the air and her figure as morally superior. By applying Heldt’s approach, this is part of making Nadezhda Stepanovna not only less like a woman,

but less like a human, and rather establishes her as a terribly perfect and impossible creature. Yet Heldt is not the only one to notice the moral hierarchy of men and women in Russian culture. As Maya Turovskaya puts it in her article “Woman and the ‘Woman Question’ in the USSR”,

She [the woman] performed the function, primarily, of a moral standard. The ‘Russian at the rendez-vous’—that is, the man—was generally portrayed as her inferior in this sense. If one does not bear in mind this female halo, this idealization of the women, it is impossible to understand the image of the Russian woman, which is part of our national heritage. (Turovskaya 1993: 135)

Turovskaya points towards a hierarchy where women are superior to men. While Heldt presents the same as a negative, I rather get the opposite impression from Turovskaya’s statement. Larisa Shepitko is also pointing towards a special connection between women, nature, and human psyche, as she describes women as superior to men when it comes to presenting certain psychological issues on film. What these psychological issues are is not explicitly mentioned in Shepitko’s quote above, but through Shepitko’s films it is reasonable to assume that tough moral dilemmas are one such issue.⁵

From this hierarchy of women and men with regards to morality it is possible to define a certain moral vertical, in addition to the power one. This theoretical approach can shed new light on women’s status and role in the Russian societal space. When I see Nadezhda Stepanovna as a saint-like figure and a moral role model, it is not based on the consequences of her actions: from handling conflicts between her students it is not clear that the effects of the principal Nadezhda Stepanovna give the best outcome. Rather Nadezhda Stepanovna is a role model when it comes to acting in a moral way: she cares for people around her and she stays true to her values even when they alienate her from society.

A take on why women have this function of morally superior beings is the connection to the personification of Russia as a mother. This is linked not only to the term ‘Rodina’ (‘Motherland’), but also to various other cultural expressions and interpretations of Russia as a mother, or sometimes as a young woman with suitors. Daniel Rancour-Laferriere argues that the personification of Russia as a female is particularly strong compared to the personifications of other nations. (Rancour-Laferriere 2000) The historical development seems to show that the terms Rodina and ‘Otechestvo’ (‘Fatherland’) have coexisted for a good 300 years, with Otechestvo dominating the 18th century. Then and up until the Great Patriotic War, as Russians often term World War II, the two terms became somewhat equal. Since after WWII, Rodina has dominated. (Stockdale 2010) In the 20th century, it seems as if there has been a difference between Otechestvo (standing for the government and the state) and Rodina (representing the land), and thus the argument went that you can change your Otechestvo, and it has to deserve your loyalty, whilst Rodina is predetermined and cannot be changed, whether you like it or not.

⁵ Both Turovskaya and Shepitko seem to have an essentialist stand on gender differences. While this is deserving of critique in itself, for now their positions will be handled as examples of perspectives these women have on women’s position in Russian culture.

To quote the Russian thinker Fedor A. Stepun (1884–1965), “betrayal of one’s fatherland for the sake of one’s motherland is not only permissible but perhaps even obligatory”. Again, this can be linked to the traditional understanding of culture as something masculine and nature as feminine. This might also provide a link between morality, nature and the feminine: your loyalty and responsibility is towards the land in the understanding of the land as a mother. Stepun’s statement is adding values to nature, as he places nature above culture when it comes to who deserves loyalty and protection: as nature has given you your life and life conditions, it cannot be bad, and is therefore good and morally superior to culture, which can be corrupted. Women can then be seen as personifications of the land, and personifications of everything good.

While this, and therefore the notion of moral vertical, might be a way of placing women on a pedestal in a patriarchal structure—which is probably a valid argument in many examples presented by Heldt in her book—I do not really see Nadezhda Stepanovna being placed on a pedestal by either director Shepitko or actress Maya Bulgakova in *Wings*. From this emerges the question of what then the moral vertical is and how it works: if it is not only or necessarily part of a patriarchal structure, then what is its relation to this structure and to the power vertical? This is a discussion that will not be further explored here, but as the question almost springs forward from my argumentation, it deserves mentioning.

Conclusion

From looking specifically at space and verticality in *Wings*, the airspace reveals itself as a non-judgemental and liberating place for the protagonist Nadezhda Stepanovna, as this is where she gets to use her competence and skills, and express her identity. It is also the place where she belongs in a more symbolic way. Nadezhda Stepanovna is morally superior to her surroundings, but keeps being constrained by them, and she often ends up in conflicts. As the saint-like figure that she is, in the end she resumes control and takes back her space—the airspace—above the society that does not accept her.

The notion of verticality as a representation of hierarchies in Russian culture adds to our understanding of Russian culture in a relevant way. Therefore it deserves a deeper exploration and application as a theoretical approach. The power vertical is an especially well-established understanding of how political power is organised in Russia. And as shown in this paper, the vertical approach is also useful in analysing certain films and gender issues.

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