

## ***Come and See: Elem Klimov's Intimate Epic***

During my recently concluded sabbatical leave, I decided to prepare for my return to teaching and research after more than four years as a full-time administrator by watching 20 movies a month for a calendar year. Of the 240 films I viewed with varying degrees of attentiveness, none proved more compelling than Elem Klimov's *Come and See* (1985), a harrowing depiction of the German invasion of Byelorussia in what the Soviets called The Great Patriotic War, known to Americans as World War Two. I cannot recall what prompted me to order this film from Netflix, but I do know that I had not read anything about it and was quite unprepared for its stunning effect, even when viewed on a small screen. In light of its impact, I was surprised to discover at the outset of my research how little had been written about the film, although I have subsequently discovered that *Come and See* is held in the highest regard by historians and scholars of Russian cinema. This paper represents a first attempt to assess the aesthetic dimensions of Klimov's masterpiece.

Most articles to date have concentrated on the film's anti-war ideology and its significance as an historical marker of a particular moment in Soviet history: near the end of the period of Brezhnev's "stagnation" (*zastoi*) and on the cusp of *glasnost*. My own critical approach to *Come and See* is more formalist. I am drawn to Klimov's deployment of an array of cinematic techniques—most prominently close-ups, moving camera, and sound track—to memorialize both the sufferings of the individual survivor, a village boy of about 14 who joins the partisans, and the anonymous tens of thousands of victims of Nazi atrocities as the army burned its way through rural Byelorussia. In its

depiction of the unremitting horror of this dark chapter in Soviet history and, particularly, the bestiality of the German enemy, *Come and See* relies on the established conventions of socialist realism; in contrasting this epic dimension with the experience of the youthful protagonist, Flor, who is overtaken by the tragedy, Klimov boldly employs the aesthetics of poetic realism. His film becomes an “intimate epic,” at times lyrical and at other times bombastic in its invitation to “come and see” through the eyes of its haunted witness to the Byelorussian massacre.

Denise J. Youngblood has documented the longevity of the myth of the Great Patriotic War in countless Soviet films during four postwar decades, beginning with Mikhail Chiaureli’s *The Fall of Berlin* (1949) in which Stalin is depicted as the heroic liberator of Nazi Germany. Perhaps surprisingly in light of “Stalin’s return to strict cultural and social control after the relative freedom of the war years” (Youngblood, “A War Remembered,” 844) as well as the long tradition of Soviet epic filmmaking established by Eisenstein and Dovzhenko in the 1920s, several films produced during the decade following Stalin’s death in 1953 deconstructed the heroic mythology associated with the war and concentrated on personal stories away from the fields of combat. The most enduring of these products of Khrushchev’s initial period of de-Stalinization known as “The Thaw” were Mikhail Kalatozov’s *The Cranes Are Flying* (1957), Grigorii Chukhrai’s *The Ballad of a Soldier* (1959), and Andrei Tarkovsky’s first feature, *Ivan’s Childhood* (1962). The latter film, in particular, with its story of a twelve-year-old orphan serving as a scout for the Red Army and its incorporation of newsreel footage, seems to have influenced Klimov’s conception of *Come and See*.

We have the director's own testimony for the personal source of the film's searing depiction of wartime misery. Klimov has recounted how his own boyhood experience of being evacuated along with his mother across the Volga River in flames during the siege of Stalingrad in October, 1942, a memory he likened to burning in hell (Ramsey 31), influenced the filming of *Come and See*. Undoubtedly, he was also profoundly affected by the accidental death in 1979 of his wife, the filmmaker Larissa Shepitko. He and the screenwriter Ales Adamovich worked for several years on the project, adapted from Adamovich's account of the Nazi destruction of Byelorussian villages, *The Story of Khatyn*, before receiving approval to begin production in 1984 to commemorate the 40th anniversary of The Great Patriotic War. That the screenplay, originally titled "Kill Hitler," did receive official funding from Goskino, the State Committee for Cinematography, indicates the gradual easing of censorship that heralded the coming era of *glasnost*. "It is hard to imagine a movie less 'celebratory' in tone than this one," Youngblood has commented, "or one that is truer" (Youngblood, "A War Remembered," 852).

Although undoubtedly epic in length (142 minutes) and occasionally torpid in pace, *Come and See* achieves a formal narrative structure through the repetition of certain significant visual motifs. The first of these images, prominent in the opening sequence and repeated three additional times at pregnant moments, is the intercut shot of a German reconnaissance plane high overhead, an ominous reminder of the presence of occupying forces and a symbol of the fatality looming over the land. Flor initially spots the plane as he and a friend play at war on the beach, digging through the sand to look for dead soldiers' rifles so that they can join up with the partisans. The plane appears again just

before the Germans bomb the countryside where the partisans have recently left Flor behind, for a third time when Flor's two partisan companions are killed by a land mine, and finally after the genocidal destruction of the village of Perekhody that marks the film's prolonged climax.

This horrific slaughter, in which all the citizens are rounded up in a large barn that is then set on fire by the Nazi soldiers, echoes on a grander scale the annihilation of Flor's own village much earlier in the film. Klimov only allows us brief glimpses of the earlier carnage—piles of corpses outside the boy's house unnoticed by Flor in his haste to locate his family—which prefigures the holocaust to come that will be seen with an unrelenting gaze. These two sequences also include distinctive representations of Hitler, the first a ghoulish effigy sculpted in mud by the local partisans and refugees from Flor's destroyed village, the second a framed photograph of the Fuhrer displayed by the invaders of Perekhody and discarded in a mud puddle by the partisans after they capture a handful of the guilty in the aftermath of the tragedy.

Two other repeated elements of the film's visual design serve not only a structural function but also as self-reflexive reminders of Klimov's invitation to "come and see." Thus he pairs two scenes depicting photography of the combatants, both of which incorporate the film's hapless protagonist, Flor. In the first, just before the large Byelorussian unit (including armed women) heads off into the woods in search of Germans, a comical camera man wearing a fake Hitler mustache and disheveled aviator's cap takes a group photograph of the armed militia. At the last moment, the young recruit Flor, wearing a coat two sizes big for him and carrying his newly found rifle, is summoned into the front of the shot. Klimov's camera tracks back to the photographer's

position and carefully frames a balanced portrait of the hundred or so partisans as a patriotic Russian chorus is heard on the sound track. The cinematic presentation here follows the tradition of socialist realism: the collective will of the Soviet people is enshrined in this stirring long shot, the solemnity of the moment reinforced by the music and the nearly frozen poses of the gathered masses. *[Insert #1]*

We may remember this glorious beginning to the defense of Byelorussia when, nearly two hours later, we witness the taking of a very different photograph following the devastation in Perekhody. In the aftermath of the barn burning, Flor is dragged front and center into the picture of four Nazi soldiers who put a gun to his head as their companion snaps his Leica for a souvenir. The smoke from the burned village clouds the background; a flash glints off the goggles of the soldier on the right, masking his face. Flor, who had relaxed on the ground and proudly displayed his weapon in the partisan portrait, now kneels and stares into the camera in sheer terror. To underscore the contrast with the earlier scene, Klimov does not move his camera to assume the German photographer's position, and no music is heard—only the diegetic sounds of the mopping up operations. As the soldiers leave the frame, Klimov's camera stays with Flor in a long take as the boy slowly drops into the dirt, black smoke surrounding him in the equivalent of a cinematic fade. *[Insert #2]*

The self-reflexive function of these two scenes is compounded by a series of extreme close-ups of Flor and Glasha, a slightly older girl who briefly becomes his companion after they both have been abandoned by the partisans in the film's first movement. Glasha has been the camp girlfriend Kosach, the group's leader, and when Flor first sees her in the woods they both are lonely and weeping, on the edge of hysteria.

As they meet, Klimov has them stare directly into the camera while they engage in a strange dialogue. Glasha seeks to seduce Flor; she steps even closer to the camera, her face filling the screen: “Here I am. Here. I want to love. To make babies.” [Insert #3] In a matching close-up, Flor stares back at her and into the camera, uncomprehending. The spell is broken and they revert to childish laughter and go off together, Hansel and Gretel seeking home, but suddenly the German planes attack and they must find refuge from the paratroopers and the ensuing rain. In an idyllic interlude which we will discuss in more detail later, Klimov lets us see the innocence of youth for the last time. He carefully frames a close-up in shallow focus of Flor enjoying a natural shower by shaking the treetops. In this single shot, the director confirms Ingmar Bergman’s description of the human face as “the film’s distinguishing mark and patent of nobility” (qtd. In Donner 242) [Insert #4].

The remainder of *Come and See* is punctuated by privileged close-ups of Flor’s face as it undergoes the ravages of war. His transformation from innocent “babe in the woods” to traumatized refugee begins in the next sequence, when he discovers his village has been overrun and his family slaughtered. He and Glasha struggle through a muddy marsh to reach the island where the surviving villagers have gathered. Klimov records the orphan’s agony in his contorted, mud-covered face, which is doubled by a low-angle close-up of the nearby skull being sculpted in mud to resemble Hitler [Insert #5]. The villagers cut Flor’s hair and ritually bury his shorn locks. Klimov then cuts to a startling close-up of the boy we saw happily bathing not ten minutes earlier, again perfectly centered and staring directly into the camera [Insert #6]. Flor has aged ten years in those ten minutes. When he looks once more into the camera at the film’s conclusion, again

with no defined object of his gaze within the diegesis, he has become a progeriac before our eyes [*Insert #7*]. We see Glasha, too, at the end of the film, though at first she is barely recognizable, having disappeared from the narrative for more than an hour. Now she returns in the aftermath of Perekhody, victim of a gang rape by the plundering Nazis. Her arrival is signaled by a faint sound from the whistle that dangles from her bloody mouth. She stares at Flor—and at us—in another perfectly balanced close-up that matches the one in the woods so long ago. As a reminder of that moment, Flor mutters her previous lines, barely audible: “To love. To have babies.” [*Insert #8*].

As I have suggested, these repeated close-ups function both as structural units organizing the sprawling narrative, intimate moments set against the sweeping historical melodrama, and as markers of the personal ravages of war. But in a movie titled *Come and See*, they serve a self-reflexive purpose as well. Flor’s and Glasha’s unblinking gaze indicts the spectator’s non-intervention. Beyond measuring their suffering, these extended close-ups serve as an opportunity for our pained contemplation and as a rebuke of our ineffectual response. In the face of their lost innocence and beauty, we can only be appalled.

Without the sequence in the forest after the partisans march off to battle and the German planes destroy their encampment, we might have no counter-vision to the prolonged ordeal that culminates in the genocide at Perekhody. By incorporating this idyllic interlude, however, Klimov employs the aesthetics of poetic realism—a lyrical evocation of intimacy and tenderness tinged with melancholy—to intensify the ultimate tragedy in the wake of “what might have been.” The effect is similar to the more prolonged but similarly aborted relationship of the couple brought together by war in

*Ballad of a Soldier*. Without attempting to strike a balance, Klimov thus synthesizes the personal elements from some of the “Thaw” films that depicted a natural world removed from the combat where intimate relationships remained possible with the epic scope of the more traditional Soviet war films. Every discussion of *Come and See* I have found focuses on the cinematic representation of the climactic holocaust, a sequence that extends for nearly a quarter of the film’s running time, but none examine in detail the Edenic sojourn in the woods, a scene of remarkable beauty, mystery, and poignancy. The setting and tone of this fragile interval evokes the memory of another film about a peasant boy caught up in the unfathomable horrors of the war, Louis Malle’s under-appreciated *Lacombe Lucien* (1974). In both instances, near the beginning of *Come and See* and at the end of *Lacombe Lucien*, the directors seem to impose an artificial tranquility—outside time, outside of history—to memorialize the displaced lives of their youthful protagonists.

The sequence in *Come and See* begins with Flor retreating from the abandoned partisan encampment and accidentally stepping on a bird’s nest, crushing the unhatched eggs. In his already agitated state, this violence against nature seems to unhinge him as his sorrow at being left behind turns into tears. Although it consumes only a second or two of screen time, the close-up of the smashed nest and single squirming hatchling upsets the spectator as well. At some unconscious level we recognize that this moment has not been staged: the chicks have truly been sacrificed to the story. On the diegetic level, we may comprehend that the smallest and most innocent of nature’s creatures are also victims of war, and that Flor has been the unwilling instrument of their fate. This

moment, which immediately precedes Flor's meeting up with Glasha, will be doubled with similar effect and meaning later in the narrative.

Following the haunting exchange that begins their friendship, German planes strafe the countryside, leaving Flor temporarily deaf. Klimov alters the soundtrack for the remainder of the forest idyll—natural sounds and dialogue are muffled and distorted by a high pitched ringing—to position the spectator inside Flor's consciousness. After barely eluding German paratroopers on the ground, the pair survives the attack and Flor builds a hut from fallen branches to protect them from the rain. Shivering from the shock, Glasha joins him in a bed of pine straw and the two spend the night entwined in their wet clothing under Flor's oversized coat. A single crane wanders outside their tent, and Klimov frames the strange bird in a prolonged close-up, creating an effect similar to Terrence Malick's intercuts of exotic wildlife in his World War II film, *The Thin Red Line* (1998). In this momentary respite that will be extended the following morning, Flor and Glasha are granted for the last time the sense of living in harmony with nature, Adam and Eve far removed from the world of war. The new day dawns sunny, though a light rain freshens the landscape; Klimov frames a beautiful low angle shot of the towering treetops deflecting the golden light. Dressed in Flor's cap, Glasha performs an exuberant and fetching Charleston atop a tree stump for Flor's grinning approval; afterwards, she is bathed in a magnificent rainbow as she smiles with pleasure. Klimov consecrates these images of pastoral bliss with the return of the wondrous crane, which now seems an apotheosis of the crushed hatchlings at the beginning of the sequence.

Malle depicted a very similar scene at the conclusion of *Lacombe Lucien*, only to abruptly end his film with a freeze frame and a notice of the protagonist's death sentence.

Klimov, too, aborts this expressionistic interlude by sending the couple back on the road to the realities of war. Although they are soon to be separated, he does allow Flor one last experience of shelter and comradeship—the very last time Flor will laugh—when he and a partisan steal a peasant farmer’s cow. As they drunkenly share some fresh milk in the open field, a firefight suddenly breaks out and Rubezh, the older militiaman, is killed instantly. Amazingly, the cow wanders contentedly nearby, unharmed. Flor catches hold of the cow’s rope when a second firefight breaks out. In perhaps the film’s most emotionally painful moments, the cow is hit this time and drops to the ground with a terrifying groan. Klimov cuts to an extreme close-up of the cow’s eye rolling in its socket as flies gather and the sounds of its death throes penetrate the silence [*Insert #9*]. Once more, this particular image summons us to *come and see*. Why is it so intensely painful? Perhaps because, as in the case of the ruined bird’s nest in the forest scene, we believe that this sacrifice is not shammed. The cow has died before our eyes, its pitiable gaze frozen in our memory. Under a full moon, Flor crawls to the animal’s side and sleeps; in the mist of the next morning, Klimov frames another carefully composed tableau, with the sounds of birds breaking the solemn silence. The road to Perekhody lies ahead, and the aesthetics of poetic realism now give way to the tradition of socialist realism for the remainder of the film.

The conclusion to *Come and See* in which Flor fires a succession of rounds at the portrait of the Fuhrer while the film cross-cuts to newsreel footage of Hitler’s rise to power played in reverse has drawn considerable attention. [*Insert #11*] The final documentary image is a portrait of the infant Adolph with his mother, at which point Flor holds his fire. The meaning of this expressionistic sequence seems clear, even banal:

history cannot be undone. Although the technique itself is arresting (Martin Amis uses the same narrative-in-reverse in his novel *Time's Arrow*, 1991), the effect, at least for this viewer, remains rather superficial. Far more enduring is *Come and See*'s final close-up, the same low angle shot of Flor aiming his rifle, but with a slight shift of his eyes away from the Hitler portrait in the mud puddle to direct his gaze, weeping now, one last time towards the camera. In this "look back," we confront not simply the ravaged face of a child grown old before our eyes but the simultaneous alignment of the space of filming and the space we occupy (Vernet 49). We are implicated in the tragedy; Flor stares not at the bullet ridden image of Hitler but at us. In this last intimate moment, the shock of mutual recognition seems to extend beyond the screen before Flor is seen disappearing among the reorganized partisans who march away from the camera and deep into the woods, accompanied by the strains of Mozart's *Requiem*. Thus, Klimov's apocalyptic vision, which proved to be the conclusion of his filmmaking career, and our own search for insight into the nature of war recede to a shared vanishing point.

#### Works Cited

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