From the Instructor

Laura Brubaker's essay "Klimov's *Come and See* as a Work of Cinematic Response" was written in the fall of 2010 for a WR 100 seminar on Soviet cinema. It was submitted for the third and final assignment in the course, having grown out of an impressive comparison and contrast of Klimov's film with Andrei Tarkovskii's *Ivan's Childhood* that Ms. Brubaker submitted for her second assignment. (It was entitled "Objectivity and Subjectivity in *Ivan's Childhood* and *Come and See*.") Ms. Brubaker's argument concerning the two films' relationships to one another not only met the expectations of the second essay assignment in exemplary fashion, but it also clearly had the potential to develop into something broader and more sophisticated.

In such cases, especially when the writer in question is as talented and motivated as Ms. Brubaker, I permit students to continue developing their projects for the next assignment rather than starting a new one from scratch. This emphasizes the nature of the essay as a "project," not just an assignment, and it thereby simulates professional writing more organically than requiring three distinct "papers" does. It also allows students the opportunity to spend time cultivating their ideas and harvesting the fruit born of them. As the following essay shows, Ms. Brubaker, a remarkably gifted, diligent, and intellectually curious young woman, took this opportunity and made it golden.

— Ivan Eubanks

Laura Brubaker

Prize Essay Winner

Klimov's *Come & See* as a Work of Cinematic Response

The evolution of war films in Soviet Russia—from the overwrought propaganda of the Stalinist era, to the artistic antiwar pieces of Khrushchev's Thaw, to the more subdued films of Brezhnev's influence—illustrates the volatile cultural climate of the post-war Soviet Union. Among these films, Andrei Tarkovsky's *Ivan's Childhood* (1962) stands out as a masterpiece. So, too, does Elem Klimov's *Come and See* (1985). Released in the waning years of the Soviet Union, in the artistically liberal Glasnost period, Klimov's film commanded a view of decades of paradigms in Soviet war films, which were established and abolished and created anew. Rather than build exclusively on the work of his cinematic predecessors and contemporaries, Klimov chose to tell a war story as it had not been told since *Ivan's Childhood.* His depiction of a child in war, however, is hardly a mirror of Tarkovsky's. Nor is it an entirely new envisioning of Ivan's story. Rather, *Come and See* is an artful response to Tarkovsky's original work and, on a broader level, to Soviet war films in general. His is a story less psychologically nuanced but more jarring than *Ivan's Childhood*; it is "less 'celebratory' in tone" than its contemporaries yet with greater allowance for hope (Youngblood, "Remembered"). Klimov sought to tell a story old yet new and was able to do so in both subtle and profound ways.

From his rise to power in the early 1920s and through the Second World War, Stalin ruled the Soviet cultural scene. Epic propaganda films dominated this era, most notably Mikhail Chiaureli's *The Fall of Berlin* and the films of Sergei Eisenstein (Michaels, "Remembered" 212). Soviet war films took a turn for the more abstract and less bombastic during the Khrushchev-initiated Thaw of cultural and artistic restrictions. As

Denise Youngblood explains, filmmakers of this era "traded public issues for personal themes and made a series of 'quiet' war films," instigating a drastic turn from the grandiose tales so favored by Stalin. These films, for which *Ivan's Childhood* marked the end of an era, "stressed the psychological impact of the war on individuals" ("Post-Stalinist" 87). As is typical of films from the Thaw period, *Ivan's Childhood* does not feature any grand battles, nor does it go to any lengths to glorify combat. In this era of filmmaking, war is an ill, a disease that wreaks havoc upon individuals and societies ("Post- Stalinist" 88).

Rather than illustrate the physical tolls of war, filmmakers of the Thaw period chose to illustrate the psychological impact. Tarkovsky is a master of such illustration. Instead including of graphic depictions of the horrors Ivan has endured, Tarkovsky's subjective cinematography serves to place the viewer within the mind of his protagonist. The viewer is seamlessly transplanted into Ivan's dreams, sharing the loss both of his mother and of the conceptions of his innocence that were taken long before the film's narrative began. Tarkovsky's placement of the viewer within a character's mind is especially powerful in the church bunker scene. There are no German or Russian children—apart from Ivan himself—actually present, but they exist within Ivan's fantasy, and the viewer hears them just as clearly as Ivan does in his own mind. As per Vida Johnson and Graham Petrie's analysis, Tarkovsky's use of "subjective soundtrack and camerawork . . . conveys [Ivan's] fear and confusion" (72). Thus, the experience of finding oneself within a character's mind—sharing his thoughts and feelings rather than corporeal perceptions—creates a strong emotional reaction in the viewer. Furthermore, one's presence within a character's mind promotes a sort of psychological perspective allowing for deeper meaning and, as Vlada Petric describes, for the insinuation of "numerous layers of ineffable transcendental signification" within the narrative (32). From within the "layers" of Ivan's psychological distress, the viewer cannot help but feel as lost, empty, and utterly alone as Ivan himself.

Powerful as the psychological works of the Thaw era were, particularly *Ivan's Childhood*, Klimov's final film moves away from their methods in many respects. Yet in his departure from the previous filmmaking paradigms, Klimov did not completely ignore all that came before. *Come and See* is a direct response to those works that preceded it, both built upon the

established foundation and altering the pillars of that foundation in order to create something new. *Come and See* is very much Klimov's own powerful work, but it is a work that would not exist without—and cannot be considered entirely independent of—earlier war films in Soviet filmmaking history, especially *Ivan's Childhood*.

Klimov offers up several small tributes to *Ivan's Childhood* throughout his film. The opening scene, filmed on a lonely beach, hearkens back to the final scene of Tarkovsky's film. Later in *Come and See*, Florya stands looking over a well, reminiscent of Ivan's own actions some decades prior. Though Ivan's gaze drew the viewer into his dream, Florya's draws the viewer to regard an off-putting reflection of the boy—not as he is, but as the "progeriac" he becomes by the film's end (Michaels 215). Implicit in these references are the tools and devices both artists use to create their films, most notably a juxtaposition of the internal (subjective) and external (objective). Klimov and Tarkovsky are skilled in the use of such juxtaposition and employ it to create powerful films, though in different ways and to different ends.

In both *Come and See* and *Ivan's Childhood*, the trauma inflicted upon the main characters is portrayed in such a way that the audience cannot help but feel that they, too, have been traumatized. However, whereas Tarkovsky chooses to create this sense through sharing with the viewers his protagonist's own internal distress, Klimov traumatizes viewers by putting them not into the mind of the protagonist, but into the same traumatic *external* experience. The manipulation of viewers' perceptions of the physical sense can lead to a more profound and painful experience in viewing a film. Thus, the graphic portrayal of German war atrocities in *Come and See* is more deeply disturbing than the suggested situations in *Ivan's Childhood.* There is no attempt to save the viewer from any apparent physical detail of the murder of some hundreds of Byelorussian villagers. Indeed, the effort is made on the director's part to force the viewer into the same dreadful experience. As Walter Goodman states in his review of the film, "you feel it through your body as villagers are packed into a barn to be incinerated" (Goodman). Klimov's "heavy-handed" approach, as Goodman calls it, creates a painful realism in the film very different from Tarkovsky's nuanced dream references and subjective insinuations of Ivan's emotional pain.

Klimov goes further to make *Come and See* a more realistic cinematic experience than *Ivan's Childhood.* Directorially, he distances himself from the subtlety and ambiguity present in most post-Stalinist war films. *Ivan's Childhood* is marked by symbolic dreams and internalized turmoil—by an "estrangement" of the real that hints to the viewer that something is not quite right (Petric 30). This estranging "poetic imagery," as Viktor Shklovsky terms it, serves "to increase the difficulty and length of perception." After all, Shklovsky continues, "[poetic] art is a way of experiencing the artfulness of an object; the object is not important" (8). For Klimov, though, the object—in this case, a war and the slaughter of scores of innocents—is of the utmost importance. Thus, he relies on *explicit* depictions of horrific events to create maximum emotional impact. This simple change, from an internal to an external focus, renders *Come and See* significantly less ambiguous and more jarring than *Ivan's Childhood*.

This is not to say that Klimov totally avoids any use of estrangement or defamiliarization. Klimov creates a sense that something is not quite right many times in the film. Yet he creates this feeling not through deeply symbolic dreams as Tarkovsky does, but through a steady build-up of unease. Nothing is visibly awry in Florya's empty house, but the viewer is well aware that something is wrong. This conviction only deepens as the scene progresses; the sound of flies grows louder and the dolls lying on the floor are inexplicably off-putting. The viewer does not immediately learn what exactly is wrong in this scene, but the idea that something indeed is wrong is never in doubt; Klimov's estrangement is far less ambiguous than Tarkovsky's.

Ironically, Klimov addresses the allusive nature of *Ivan's Childhood* through subjective camerawork similar to that of Tarkovsky's film. However, whereas Tarkovsky uses subjectivity as a means to communicate his protagonist's psychological state, Klimov uses the subjective lens to influence the empathetic physical perceptions of the viewer, creating a deep and shocking impact. Klimov's subjective camerawork places the viewer into the "body," as Goodman says, of his protagonist (Goodman). Thus, the viewers rarely see anything but what Florya sees and often only as he sees it. Additionally, viewers often hear just as Florya does. When bombs rain down in the woods in the beginning of the film, the sounds of explosions are slowly replaced by a loud ringing that persists through several scenes.

The viewers' feelings of bewilderment and utter distress increase tenfold as they share in Florya's deafness. These decisions on the part of the director serve to create in the viewer a much more jarring sense of involuntary involvement in the film by means of simulating physical sensations shared by the character and viewer alike.

It is important to note that, while Tarkovsky allows the viewer to hear what Ivan alone hears in the church-bunker scene, this subjective aural experience is only made possible through Ivan's imagination and is therefore a shared psychological, rather than physical, experience.

For all the time spent looking through a subjective lens—be it physical or psychological—both *Ivan's Childhood* and *Come and See* mainly employ an objective point of view. The scenes manifest from the perspective of a third-party observer. From this personally disconnected vantage point, the viewer has the ability to see things that the protagonist cannot see, or as the protagonist cannot see them. In *Come and See*, this perspective often bestows upon the viewer a sense of not-quite-participant, of being present and yet disconnected from the events unfolding on the screen. This is especially the case in scenes in which the central characters are under attack, such as in the field in Bagushovka.

Tarkovsky uses this switch in perspectives to change the dominant feelings conveyed by the scene or to create new emotions entirely. The voyeuristic quality of the scene in the birch forest is momentarily suspended as the camera moves to follow Masha's own sight when she dashes through the trees. The mood suddenly switches from one of intrusion to feelings of panic and disorientation. The feelings are clearly conveyed, and, at the moment they're revealed, the viewer shares a deep emotional connection with the characters involved.

Klimov, however, switches between objective and subjective views to intensify emotions already present. The image of the burnt, old man on the ground would be disturbing enough if come upon objectively, but, when encountered from Florya's perspective, the discovery is even more gruesome. Feelings of claustrophobia mount as the viewer is pushed through the crowd of survivors, allowing for a shock when the crowd breaks, a shock that results in numb emptiness when suddenly confronted with the blackened and dying old man. Similarly, when the viewer-as-Florya is forced into the barn in the Nazi-occupied village, the scene

becomes radically more distressing. Observed as one of the masses, rather than as a camera suspended from a rafter, the realization of the inevitable sets in more firmly: not only are the villagers going to die, but the viewer is trapped and condemned as well. While Tarkovsky's method succeeds in clearly conveying many emotions, the range of feelings fails to approach the strength of one single emotion—be it fear, anxiety, or pain—that Klimov builds up over scenes and shots.

As Youngblood writes, Klimov simultaneously "mimics" and contrasts Tarkovsky's style in more ways than with this juxtaposition of perspectives ("Post-Stalinist" 94). When *Ivan's Childhood* reaches its conclusion, it does so through a broadening of its message achieved by the inclusion of actual war footage. The shots of Goebbel's murdered children draw Ivan's own execution into the broader sphere of lost innocence. Though the film focuses on the decline of Ivan, his is but a small part of a very large and very real war.

Klimov's inclusion of documentary footage has the opposite effect. In keeping with Klimov's apparent objective to create as powerful a film as possible, the footage at the conclusion of *Come and See* effectively concentrates the scope of the war, rather than broadly relating the themes of Florya's experience. When Florya comes upon the portrait of Hitler in the mud, an impulse to shoot the picture overcomes him. With every shot, original footage of Hitler plays rapidly and chronologically backwards. As Florya continues to shoot, Hitler comes closer to his initial rise to power. Though it could be argued that this inclusion of original footage serves the very same purpose as Tarkovsky's—that is, to bring things into a larger perspective and to relate the protagonist to the war on a greater scale—such an interpretation is inaccurate. Instead, Klimov's incorporation of the reversed footage of Hitler's life serves to bring all implications of the Second World War to an ultimately personal scale. With every bullet from his gun, Florya seeks to undo all the horrors that Europe has endured. Every shot turns back the clocks until Florya has erased Hitler, leaving the once-Führer nothing but a babe-in-arms. The viewer shares in this exhilarating experience. The sensation of placing the entirety of World War II into the hands of an individual is far more powerful than symbolically relating that individual's experience as something not at all exceptional.

The conclusion of *Come and See* is in more ways than one a direct address of the bleak finality of *Ivan's Childhood* and its other Soviet cinematic forebears. As Youngblood states, "Given the trajectory of Soviet war films over the past two decades, and the disillusionment and decline clearly evident in the last years of the Brezhnev era, it would have been surprising indeed if Elem Klimov's contribution to the cinematic dialogue had been anything other than grim" ("Remembered"). Youngblood goes on to describe just how grim of a film *Come and See* is, but she overlooks the optimism hidden in the film's final moments. As Goodman puts it, the film's ending serves as "a dose of instant inspirationalism." Having shot Hitler's pictorial effigy to the point of a baby picture, Florya finds that he can shoot no more. Though this man is responsible for all the suffering brought upon Florya and his countrymen, he is also a person. He is a child in his mother's arms just as Florya once was. Klimov firmly believed that Florya should "remain human" and not harbor the same brutality and "desire to kill" that led to the horrors that Europe was forced to endure ("Film Genre"). Refusing to continue the cycle of inhumanity, Florya puts down his gun and turns away, running to join the other partisans. Following their march, "the camera makes its way through the forest to the accompaniment of a choir that soars and soars until we get a glimpse of the heavens, not the most original moment in the movie," writes Goodman. Nonetheless, the moment does serve to impress upon the viewer that, after all the horrors these people have endured, they may be on their way to better things (Goodman).

Even as the partisans march through the woods to the somber notes of *Lacrymosa*, the viewer must be aware of the fact that Florya, unlike Ivan, is still alive. He has survived and will carry on. As grim as the rest of the film undeniably is, the ending at least allows for the possibility of hope, the possibility of a future.

Though Klimov did not succeed in releasing any more films after *Come and See*, his magnum opus declared to the world his directorial prowess. *Come and See* is but one of a long line of Soviet war films spanning the twentieth century, a lengthy tradition that already had a war-and-childhood masterpiece in Tarkovsky's film. Klimov was well aware of his cinematic predecessors, particularly *Ivan's Childhood*. He was not entirely satisfied with how those films told their story, though. The bombastic

propaganda and nationalism, or the quiet introspection, did not fit into his vision. Instead, he took a new approach: revising the premise of *Ivan's Childhood* and displacing both the story and the viewer from an ethereal symbology of a boy's loss of childhood into an experience of "an apocalypse rooted firmly in the real" (Wrathall 29). Rather than weaving the viewer into the protagonist's mind, Klimov rips the audience from where they sit and thrusts them into an unambiguous experience of fear and pain. Contrasts with previous films and filmmaking styles aside, *Come and See* is built on every film that came before it and reflects on those films in new ways, creating a story that is at once familiar and jarringly unique.

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LAURA JANE BRUBAKER is a COM sophomore studying photojournalism. She is the News Director for WTBU Radio and is also a writer and photographer for the local music website AllstonPudding.com. Laura is from Philadelphia and currently lives in Allston Rock City. This essay was written for Ivan Eubanks's course, WR 100: Soviet and Post-Soviet Russian Cinema.