

*“Hitler’s greatest weapon against us is our fear.”*

Commander Kosach, *“Come and See”*

When most people think of the scariest movies they have ever seen, they often think of *The Exorcist*, or perhaps *Alien*. Horror in the modern mind is most typically induced by supernatural specters and haunted places or objects, the sort of unknown evils that menace the innocent until satiated or expelled. Movie horror is the masked killer, stalking in the darkness, or a grizzly terror from beyond that kills without remorse. But what is true horror? What causes real fear?

*Come and See* is a 1985 film from Soviet Russia, directed by Elem Klimov and based on a book by Ales Adamovich. The film is set in Nazi-occupied Belarus in 1943, amongst the rural villages and poor farmers of the war torn country. Adamovich wrote his book, *Khatyn*, based on his experiences as a runner for the Belarusian Partisans, along with the stories and accounts of his fellow fighters during the war. Belarus during World War II was the site of untold atrocities committed by the Nazis during their *Bandenbekämpfung*, or “bandit fighting”. Under the pretense of putting down rebels, the Nazis would label all partisans in the country as “bandits”, and take their vicious revenge against them in the most heinous of ways. Anyone and everyone, regardless of age, sex, or creed was considered fair game for the Nazi death machine. Through their hatred, hubris, and lust for revenge, the SS had become the ultimate villains; uncaring, unhuman, and seemingly unstoppable.

The film follows a teenage boy named Flyora, beginning with his fortuitous finding of an abandoned rifle in a sandpit. Flyora is young and thirsty for adventure, with his ultimate goal being to join the partisans and fight the Nazis, but he cannot join up unless he has a weapon. While he searches, he and his younger friend are harassed by an old man, seemingly upset that they are searching for weapons. The old man claims they will be found out and punished for their scavenging, and even as Flyora and his friend happily march away from the sand, concealing the rifle in the former’s pant leg, an ominous hum rumbles from the sky above. Throughout the gut wrenching events of this film, Flyora is menaced by an *Fw 189* spy plane, a twin boom reconnaissance aircraft that always seems to show up before terrible things happen. Flyora ignores this portent of doom, for the moment, and leaves his mother and twin sisters to join the partisans, clad in an oversized suit and wearing a blissfully ignorant smile. By the end of this film, Flyora will be unrecognizable, with his youthful countenance and excited grin replaced by unnatural age and unimaginable stress.

Just like a scary movie, *Come and See*, gives us relatable protagonists that we want to see live and succeed. Flyora is young and idealistic, with a youthful infatuation with the partisan's commander, and a schoolboy crush on young girl named Glasha. Glasha seems to be in a relationship with the commander, despite her being a similar age to Flyora, and because of her proximity to the fighters in the partisan group, she has a cynicism beyond her years. Both of these characters deserve to live out a normal, safe adolescence, and despite their attempts to do so in their few moments of peace, they are constantly pulled back into the real world of terror and death. These two are not hapless coeds being stalked by a masked killer in the woods, rather they are analogs for every child thrust into war by forces they can neither control nor fully comprehend. Their effectiveness as protagonists stems from our own fear of the same forces in our lives; the horror of knowing that there are powers that wish us terrible harm and that there is nothing we can do to stop them.

*Come and See* features perhaps the greatest villains of the modern world, an antagonist that comes with built-in fear and disgust. The SS in *Come and See* are treated much like a monster would be in a more traditional horror movie, with the viewer seeing only the results of their actions for the majority of the film. They are talked about like mythical devils by the victims of their crimes, with Flyora's friend even putting on a demonic voice when he imitates them. Throughout the film, it is heavily implied that the Germans enjoy what they are doing, with swerving tanks and empty liquor bottles suggesting drunken revelry as they cause our characters to suffer. And this is no plot device from Klimov, as it is well documented that Belarus was a place where the Nazis sent their most unpleasant and brutish soldiers, and it is further well known that Nazi executioners would drink heavily to try to endure the mental anguish brought on by their crimes. The build-up in horror finally manifests in the dreaded village scene in the latter half of the movie, when we finally get to see these villains face to face. Their debut is more horrible than can be described here, and no amount of foreknowledge can prepare the viewer for those harrowing images, especially when one remembers that each and every vision of horror in *Come and See* actually happened, more than once, and more terrible than what could be depicted on the screen.

With relatable protagonists and truly terrifying villains, the direction of this film could have easily been minimalistic and even academic, but the final ingredient of this horror masterpiece is that so often underestimated factor, atmosphere. *Come and See* is bleakly and beautifully shot, with gorgeous wides showing foggy fields and soaking forests, juxtaposed with uncomfortable closeups of both victims and villains alike. Klimov subverts the typical jump-scare reveal of cliched horror films by building up the horror and heavily implying a terrifying image before almost clinically panning to the payoff. When Glasha and Flyora are fleeing Flyora's home village in search of his

family, we already know the fate of the ghostly hamlet's inhabitants, and we feel the sting of anticipation as Glasha glances over her shoulder. She sees the pile of corpses behind a barn, the pile of corpses we already knew would be there, but that nonetheless sends a chill of terror down our spines. In addition to his visual mastery, Klimov expertly uses sound to convey the growing dread and rising tensions across the narrative. The first section of the film begins with almost boring sound design, up until the point when the Nazi paratroopers finally arrive. Flyora is deafened by an artillery barrage, and we spend a large portion of the middle of the film hearing everything in swirling, distorted timbres. This is the part of the story that sees Flyora violently ejected from his fantasy of how his life would be, and while he is literally deafened by explosions, he is figuratively blinded by his own denial. It is not until he is forced to see reality (the old man from the beginning in his death throes from being burned alive) that his hearing returns. The sounds we hear from that point on build from ambient rumbles to a horrifying cacophony of blaring music, roaring flames, and terrified screams.

Elem Klimov and Ales Adamovich give what is likely the most realistic and faithful depiction of real horror that could possibly be presented on film. The viewer feels the terror of reality when they see the dreadful events portrayed, because, not only did such events really happen, but knowing this to be true implies they could certainly happen again. Klimov expertly utilizes the medium of film to give us as close as look at its subject matter as any of us should dare wish for. *Come and See* is so much more than horror, and a myriad pages could not fully convey the depth and importance of this work, so if you have not seen it, you must endure the terror and seek to understand what you see when you accept this film's eponymous invitation.