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40th Anniversary Review: *Come and See* (1985)

Directed by: Elem Klimov

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Production companies: Belarusfilm, Mosfilm

Running time: 142 minutes

Country: Soviet Union

Languages: Belarusian, Russian, German

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Just over 40 years since its release, it is safe to say that Elem Klimov's *Come and See* (1985) remains as harrowing and as relevant as ever. Set in WWII during the German occupation of Belarus, the film follows fourteen-year-old Flyora (Aleksei Kravchenko) as he leaves family and village life to join a partisan unit. What he witnesses and experiences thereafter is a nauseating cocktail of brutality, grief, and chaos.

Alongside the ever-present threat of encroaching Nazi soldiers, the Belarusian pastoral scene subverts and becomes a threat itself. No longer a place of domesticity or refuge, the destruction of nature occurs simultaneously with the destruction of those living within this space. Birds' eggs are trampled underfoot, fields are destroyed by bombs, trees are splintered by bullets, and bogs drag you in, clinging to your skin and pulling you under. The film's use of silence both facilitates this sense of conflict and unnerves the viewer; it is more unsettling than the sound of explosions and gunfire. Occasionally, sounds from the natural world infiltrate this silence, creating moments of tense anticipation disguised as tranquillity. Flyora navigates this environment, encountering fellow partisans, grieving wives, and fragmented families along the way with their cries adding to this soundscape.

It therefore comes as no surprise that *Come and See* is viewed as one of the most distressing, yet significant war films ever made. But what makes this film elicit such strong reactions?

Western audiences have become comfortable with a specific type of Hollywood war film. We see all-American faces artistically ‘dirtied up’, the odd cut or bruise marring their faces whilst they charge through a battlefield in slow-motion. Dramatic music plays, well-timed explosions go off in the background, the good guys win, the bad guys are defeated, and the soldiers return home to reunite with their families. Klimov demonstrates that in war, there are no winners.

What *Come and See* shows is something raw; a human being pushed to the brink of becoming inhuman. Witnessing Flyora’s transformation from a naïve young boy, giddy with the prospect of fighting, to a shell of his former self, traumatised and aged beyond his years, is an uncomfortable experience. The almost animalistic pain and anguish that he experiences is more relatable than any Hollywood war film for one simple reason: it is not outside the realm of possibility.

However, it is not only Flyora’s trauma that disturbs and challenges the viewer. We are also forced to grapple with perpetrators committing atrocities without hesitation and without remorse. The blatant disregard for human life is depicted vividly throughout the film. Whole villages are massacred, with bodies found piled haphazardly on top of one another. Men, women, and children are crammed into a barn and burned alive by Nazi soldiers. As a result, we are not only forced to confront Flyora’s psyche, but also that of the perpetrator. We question how they can commit such horrors, how they can laugh and take pleasure in it. The end of the film further highlights the reality of these acts, with the statistic ‘628 Byelorussian villages were burned to the ground along with their inhabitants’ being displayed on the screen.

The filming of *Come and See* took a heavy toll on both cast and crew. In an interview, Klimov reflected on the impact filming distressing scenes had on Kravchenko, only fifteen at the time, stating ‘Thank God that boy...didn’t go mad’¹. According to Klimov, Kravchenko found filming scenes inside the wooden barn the most difficult, allegedly telling Klimov ‘I nearly lost my mind in there. I nearly lost my mind’².

Come and See was and continues to be a damning warning. In the most brutal and stark way, we see the impact of war on the average human; something, it can be argued, we have become desensitised to. Flyora’s final look into the camera, to us, showing both a body and mind ravaged by war awakens us from this sense of detachment and we are unable to look away.

Bibliography

Crawley, Michael, ‘*Come and See (1985) – Interview with Director Elem Klimov – Documentary*’, YouTube video, January 7, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dp5RgXiqyXs> [accessed 10 March 2026]

¹ Michael Crawley, ‘*Come and See (1985) – Interview with Director Elem Klimov – Documentary*’, YouTube video, January 7, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dp5RgXiqyXs> [accessed 10 March 2026].

² Crawley, *Come and See*.