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Icons, Landscape, and the Boundaries of Good and Evil

Larisa Shepitko's The Ascent *(1977)*

Jane Costlow

SOME OF THE FINEST Russian films of the Soviet era focused on World War II. In the four and a half decades during which they were made, these films ranged from glorifications of Soviet heroism, to psychological studies of traumatized veterans, to explorations of the moral and emotional dilemmas of what Americans might call the "home front." The boundary between war zone and home front was never as clear in the Soviet Union, where Nazi forces occupied vast stretches of land, effectively pushing Soviet borders to a line that ran just west of Moscow.[1] Larisa Shepitko's *The Ascent* (*Восхождение*), released in 1977, takes place in this vulnerable and dangerous terrain, somewhere in Nazi-occupied Belarus. A violently contested borderland, this is a landscape of life-and-death choices, in which characters must make extraordinarily difficult decisions under torture and threat of death. Shepitko's camera emphasizes the brutality of winter and the danger of the landscape itself, but also focuses with penetrating compassion on her characters' faces, caught in moments of communion, epiphany, and torment. Landscape and faces are the visual medium of the film's ethical and psychological drama; understanding how Shepitko crafted this profoundly unsettling narrative about the boundary between good and evil, choice and necessity will form the focus of this chapter. Shepitko's film draws richly on key archetypes of Russian identity: a landscape understood as the "homeland" or "motherland"; human faces shot in ways that evoke Russian icons. References to these archetypes, however, confound more than confirm any conclusions about heroism and identity. Shepitko's unflinching vision captures a terrain of choice not unlike the physical landscape of her film: the few landmarks that suggest direction are quickly covered over or obscured by driving snow; characters must chart their paths through an unremittingly hostile landscape, guided less by absolutes than by compassion and an ethic of care. The clarity and gentle grace of Shepitko's own filmic eye becomes a kind of compass in this difficult terrain.

Larisa Shepitko and *The Ascent*

Larisa Shepitko was born in 1938 and died in 1979, in an automobile accident while returning from a film shoot.[2] She entered the All-Union Film Institute in Moscow at age sixteen, insistent on studying to be a director despite pressure to follow the more conventional female route into acting. She studied for a year and a half with Alexander Dovzhenko, one of the giants of early

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Soviet filmmaking.[3] For Shepitko, Dovzhenko represented integrity and allegiance to film as a vehicle of conscience; despite enormous ideological pressure in the 1930s and '40s, he had continued making films of artistic value, many of which incorporated elements of visual lyricism and Ukrainian culture.[4] Shepitko made five films in her tragically brief life. Her 1963 diploma film *Heat* (*Зной*) is based on a novella by the Kirgiz writer Chingiz Aitmatov; the 1969 *Motherland of Electricity* (*Родина электричества*), based on a short story by Andrei Platonov, was filmed in Astrakhan using nonprofessional actors. Intended as one part of a film triptych celebrating the fiftieth anniversary of the Revolution, Shepitko's film, like Platonov's extraordinary story, was too unheroic for the authorities, who had the film shelved.[5] Her 1966 film *Wings* (*Крылья*) focuses on a female fighter pilot struggling with the tedium and conformity of provincial Soviet life. At the time of her death, Shepitko was making a film based on Valentin Rasputin's *Farewell to Matyora*. This 1979 novel draws an idyllic portrait of Siberian village life, implicitly challenging the cultural and environmental consequences of Soviet industrial development. Each of these films suggests Shepitko's desire to make probing films about complex subjects, revisiting key aspects of late Soviet identity: war veterans and the experience of war; meanings of *motherland*; the social contract of postwar Soviet life, with material comforts supposedly won by war but with palpable costs to the human psyche and the natural world. All of Shepitko's films have the capacity to seduce viewers with their visual beauty, and then to discomfort them with unresolved and probing questions.

The Ascent recounts a foraging expedition that ends with death rather than sustenance. The film opens in a punishingly cold landscape of field and forest, shot by Shepitko as a minimalist study in white on white, with skeletal traceries of black and gray. Rybak (Vladimir Gostyukhin) and Sotnikov (Boris Plotnikov), two partisans sent in search of food, shoot a farmer's sheep, only to abandon it after Sotnikov is wounded in an encounter with Nazi police. Rybak gets his comrade to a village house where their presence endangers a woman and her three children. Sotnikov, ill clad and racked by fever, gives away their hiding place when he coughs. He, Rybak, and the woman who had sheltered them are taken prisoner; Sotnikov is questioned and tortured by a Russian named Portnov (Anatoly Solonitsyn) who has turned collaborator and is doing the Nazis' dirty work. Rybak accepts Portnov's offer to work for the *Polizei*, the Nazi police forces, rather than suffer the fate that awaits Sotnikov: execution by hanging. Branded with a Soviet star, Sotnikov survives his final night in an underground cellar with three others who will hang with him. Shepitko's camera transforms the suffering Sotnikov into a Christ-like figure with enormous, suffering eyes. He begins his journey to the hanging (filmed to evoke associations with Golgotha and Christ's Passion) by declaring his desire to die for the others. The Germans spurn his offer, and all of the prisoners, save Rybak, are hung. The hanging scene is presented as a montage of close-ups shot with expressionist intensity, backed up with tonally and emotionally discordant music by Alfred Schnittke. The camera moves slowly among the faces of those in attendance: women in shawls and headscarves, a weeping young boy in a Soviet cap, a cluster of German officers talking among themselves, an anguished Rybak. When there is nothing left but swinging feet, we head back down the hill to *Polizei* headquarters with the Nazis and their collaborators; in a moment of grotesque pathos, Rybak tries and fails to

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hang himself in an outhouse. In a film that has focused repeatedly on tragic, suffering faces, the camera conveys one more—the distorted grimace of Rybak as he tries to slip the belt over his head. The final frames of the film return us to the film's beginning, as we, like Rybak, get one last glimpse of the world his choice has apparently separated him from forever: a broad, flat landscape with an Orthodox church in the distance, slowly obscured by blowing snow and streaks of white.

Empathy, Heroism, and Betrayal: Rybak or Sotnikov?

Much of the critical discussion of the film focuses on Rybak's choice—and the apparently stark and clear contrast between Sotnikov, the film's Christ figure, and Rybak, the film's traitor. Andrei Goncharov declares that the film "is about sacred things: the Motherland, loftier values, conscience, duty, spiritual heroism," while Valerii Golovskoi sees the film as being about "practical and impractical heroism," claiming that Shepitko is "entirely on the side of Sotnikov."[6] After the hanging, as Rybak begins his descent down the hill and back to Nazi headquarters, an old woman snarls a whispered "Judas" at him. Her condemnation is quick, direct, and in some sense justifiable—and certainly ties in with the Golgotha imagery of this sequence. But this, I would suggest, is a condemnation that we as viewers aren't invited to share, at least not without a strong measure of uncomfortable recognition that we ourselves might be closer to Rybak than to Sotnikov. Olga Denisova hints at a more complex perspective, one that sees betrayal in more diffuse terms: "Larisa Shepitko's film is about traitors. About how different they were, how many different factors could lead a man to betrayal. . . . Each of the film's heroes, except Sotnikov, is either a traitor or ready to become one."[7] The woman's denunciation, the sanctification of Sotnikov, the final anguished separation from the beloved landscape: all of these might turn our hearts against Rybak. But much of the film has worked to forge identification with this Judas. Such identification makes it hard wholly to condemn him; the film asks for compassion and empathy rather than judgment. Such empathy is also key to the viewer's feeling the full force of Shepitko's desire to implicate *us* in this drama.

Shepitko's film is based on the story "Sotnikov" by Vasil Bykov, published in 1970 in the progressive journal *Novyi mir*.[8] Shepitko first read the story while hospitalized with a concussion during pregnancy; as she read it Shepitko "grasped that this was a story about the questions most troubling her: the mortality and spiritual immortality of man, the choice between life and conscience, moral maximalism akin to heroism, amoral conformity that slips into betrayal."[9] Bykov, a Belarusian writer and World War II veteran, published a number of stories and novellas in the early 1970s, philosophical and psychological studies that presented the war "in a completely new light," posing ethical dilemmas whose resolutions were far from clear.[10] In translating Bykov's story for the screen, Shepitko retained much of his plot, but her narrative sequence and the visual and aural repertoire of film make the film very much her own. Bykov's title suggests that Sotnikov is the story's hero, but it is told in alternating first persons—a chapter in Sotnikov's voice followed by one in Rybak's. Readers' sense of identification and empathy, in other words, is evenly distributed, if not slanted toward Rybak, especially in the first half of the story, in which Rybak is a capable and patient pathfinder,

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saddled with a dangerously sick and poorly equipped companion. Working in film, Shepitko handles the matter of identification and empathy differently. While Bykov's tale begins with the men already en route, *The Ascent* opens with landscape and the partisan band, giving us a vivid sense of who and what Rybak and Sotnikov are defending (something Bykov does with flashbacks). Shepitko launches her film with scenes that emphasize the extraordinary difficulties of life and movement for the partisans and the civilians who are with them: we see their faces in close-up, asking us to consider how the drama of Rybak and Sotnikov emerges from that place and those people.[11]

In this opening sequence Shepitko uses visual strategies that mark the film as a whole: landscape, faces, and the periodic breaking of the boundary between character and audience. Jagged streams of white ripple against a gray background, a saw-toothed band of white marks the right limit of the screen. Whistles of wind are interrupted by machine-gun fire. We see an Orthodox church in the distance and more blowing snow. There's a slow montage of images: great crevasses of snow; a line of trees in the distance; telephone poles at awkward angles; and finally, a classic landscape of winter Russia—a row of birch and one lone oak with leaves still hanging on its branches. More whistling wind, machine guns, German voices. For a minute or more there are no human forms in this landscape—and then someone rises from the white, looks slowly about, and gestures for others to run for the woods' protective cover. The sound of German voices is replaced by Schnittke's score, a chorus of swelling voices that builds, wave-like, and into which is finally cut the sound that will become a hallmark of the film: humans laboring through heavy snow.

This is a landscape that is inherently hostile: it's a killing field. The body's dark contours are themselves a form of visual betrayal; standing up means giving yourself away. Movement is extraordinarily difficult, and direction is often obscured. Even someone who knows the landscape (like Rybak) can get lost; at several different moments he wonders aloud, "Where the hell is that village?" Once the opening skirmish has ended, Shepitko brings us into a forest grove where the partisan commander orders a halt for rest; once everyone has collapsed into the snow, backs against the sheltering trees, the film makes one of the transitions that will be its hallmark: from acute physical danger and alarm to a moment of stillness and almost mystical communion. The commander tells the keeper of provisions to "get out what's left"; a scruffily bearded man in a worker's cap draws a tiny bag from under his coat, spills its contents into a pot, and begins to share what there is.

This shared "meal" is shot as a succession of faces, faces that—like Sotnikov's later in the film—we might call iconic. Knit together into a communal scene of suffering and care, the frames evoke a shared communion. Each man, woman, and child is given a ration of seeds from a spoon (used in Russian Orthodox liturgy to distribute wine at Eucharist). The spoonfuls fall into open hands whose stillness suggests almost preternatural endurance. Again and again the camera rests in close-up on faces. We watch men and women lost in meditation, slowly masticating their meager handfuls of seeds. Sometimes they lean together, sometimes they are separate; in a particularly powerful image, one man separates a single seed to place on the lips of a man recumbent, injured, perhaps dying. In two arresting final frames the people we are

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watching are no longer lost in thought or attending to each other; they are looking at *us*, across the fourth wall of the screen.

Figure 5.1. The forest meal in Larisa Shepitko's *The Ascent*. **Courtesy of Mosfilm.**

The faces that Shepitko frames in this opening are echoed throughout the film in moments when the camera rests on the human face—in moments of meditation, epiphany, and anguish. After being shot, the wounded Sotnikov lies on the snow, looking up into a distant sky, where a veined moon floats; later he rests against a tree and looks toward us, his focus resting first on the distance (at a mist-shrouded sun that we, too, are shown), and then in close, at ice-covered branches. And throughout the night that Sotnikov and others spend in a cellar, awaiting their death, we are shown his increasingly gaunt and ethereal face. These faces are reminiscent of icons, religious images fundamental to Orthodoxy, whose cultural significance in Russia cannot be understated. While Sotnikov's is perhaps the most obviously iconic image, *all* of the faces in the film are seen in reference to holy images, including the face of the tormentor Portnov and that of the anguished Rybak at the film's end.

Sotnikov is, however, the film's most obvious icon. By the end of the film, in the night spent in the cellar with Rybak and the others, Sotnikov's already gaunt face has turned into an icon not merely of suffering but of illumination. As Denise Youngblood puts it, "[b]y this point in the picture, Sotnikov is openly portrayed as Christlike, through the staging, editing, and especially the lighting of the extreme close-up shots of his suffering face, lit with a holy

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glow."[12] In the final moments before the guard thrusts open the doors of the cellar, we become increasingly aware of the extent to which the light in Shepitko's canvas emerges from human faces, hanging like beacons in the darkness—and most insistently from Sotnikov's face, until the luminescence of his regard, directed straight at us, occupies all but the tiniest corner, where we see the nose and chin of the village elder, gazing down at Sotnikov.[13] Alfred Schnittke's score accompanies this sequence in a mounting braid of voices, seemingly chanting, and the bell-like sounds of a celeste.[14] The luminous severity of Sotnikov's face at the end does indeed suggest that he is Christ-like—but the visual reference can be made even more specific: these frames give us Sotnikov in a fashion that mimics a particular icon, the Christ Not Made by Human Hands (*Spas nerukotvornyi*) with its huge eyes, direct *en face* composition, and severe gaze.[15]

Figure 5.2. The suffering Sotnikov. Courtesy of Mosfilm.

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The iconic quality of Sotnikov's face also derives from how Shepitko handles light sources throughout the scene. Most dramatically in the final frames, light comes *from the faces themselves*. Icons, for the Orthodox, are not paintings but images of the divine, sometimes called "windows to Heaven." They are not intended to be realistic representations. Their aim is to show forth not material form but the divine light as it is manifest in the human.[16] As such, the light they make visible to us comes not from somewhere in the natural world but from the divine itself. Icons represent the possibility of transfiguration, a form radically changed through the light of the divine.

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Shepitko's film often seems to study the human face as though it alone might hold the answer to the riddle of human identity. "Human scum," says Portnov, "that's what man is." Is Portnov right? Are human beings "scum"? The film's response to this is not spoken but seen: Sotnikov's transfigured face but also the faces of partisans, women, and children, or even Rybak's own tormented visage at the film's end. *All* of these faces challenge Portnov's claim that humans are but scum.[17] The image the film ends with is not, however, a transfigured face; it ends not with ascent but with descent. During the scene of hanging, Sotnikov is virtually sanctified, but after the hanging, Rybak follows the Nazis and their Soviet collaborators back down the hill, into the compound where he had spent the night imprisoned with those who have just died. The film ends with the character who has been denounced as a Judas, in a world that is deeply compromised; viewers are left, with Rybak, in the "fallen" world. Three visual images in particular shape these final moments of the film: Rybak's anguished face; a long, stark shot of the dark cellar from which Sotnikov and the others had emerged; and the final frames of landscape. Each of these echoes the film's central concerns—but they also return us to the man who is, in a sense, at the moral center of the film, not Sotnikov but Rybak.

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Figure 5.3. Christos Acheiropoietos (Christ Not Made by Human Hands; *Spas nerukotvornyi***): A twelfth-century Novgorod icon from the Assumption Cathedral in the Moscow Kremlin. Tretiakov Gallery, Moscow/Wikimedia Commons/Public Domain.**

Throughout *The Ascent* Rybak is the film's caregiver and sustainer. He is the peasant to Sotnikov's intellectual, a man who lives deeply in the present, defined by his physicality and endurance. Stockier and sturdier, Rybak moves more confidently through the landscape than the frail, intellectual Sotnikov. Sotnikov seems ill prepared for their venture, both because he's

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sick and because he's ill clad. Rybak bemoans his companion's clothing and sickness, but despite this remains patient with Sotnikov to the point of endangerment. When Sotnikov is shot, Rybak turns back to save him, even though saving him involves dropping the sheep they're taking back to camp. Turning back to take care, however, seems to be deeply a part of Rybak's constitution.

Figure 5.4. The despairing Rybak. Courtesy of Mosfilm.

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The weight of guilt for ultimate betrayal falls on Rybak, a weight we see him bearing at the end of the film. Rybak's face turns to an anguished grimace when he looks (in two extended shots) at the empty cellar from which he had so recently emerged. That vision of the cellar's empty blackness seems to prompt his next act, an attempted suicide. With an increasingly agitated track of German voices singing, fragments of Russian ("I want to eat"), and Schnittke's intense and powerful music, Rybak tries to hang himself with his belt. Twice we see him make a loop over the outhouse roof beam, then slip it over his head. The first time the belt simply slips off the beam; the second time he can't force the belt over his head—and we see an

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extended shot of his distorted, pained face. When he emerges from the outhouse, he is left staring dumb-faced out through the compound gate, through which a horse has just pulled a cart. We alternate between shots of his profoundly expressive face, with its mixture of pain, regret, and horror that is truly beyond words, and the landscape toward which he is looking. Shepitko finally takes us out toward where Rybak may not go: into the bleak wintry landscape that had opened her film.

What we are presented with in these final minutes of the film is the absolute anguish of a man who realizes the full weight of what he has done. That "weight" can't yet be put into words—perhaps never can be—so we see icons, images that help us grasp the horror of his situation. This is a soul, truly, in torment, and we must be witness not just *to*, but *with*, him. Each of these moments might be given a name; the empty cellar recalls what is no longer there: the companions, Sotnikov and the others, who are now dead, who had been icons of human beauty only a few hours earlier. And if we consider the symbolic thread of Christian imagery in the film, this is also an empty tomb, one that registers for Rybak not as a symbol of hope but as a seal of absolute loss. The face we see as he attempts and fails to commit suicide, or weeps in anguish, is an icon of absolute suffering, Shepitko's portrait of despair. The world from which he is separated is the landscape of the film, what he had known better than anyone else, that he had been able to navigate and find shelter in. It is also, symbolically, the motherland, a Russia he is now cut off from. Shepitko brings the viewer down from the exalted death of martyrs, leaving us with Rybak to await the solitary "dog's death" Sotnikov feared when he was wounded. With Rybak, she brings us back into the compromised world, a world in which survival means a betrayal of conscience.

The Landscape: Motherland as Borderland between Life and Death

The landscape of this film is extraordinarily rendered. Part of what is so arresting about *The Ascent* is, in fact, its rendering of the natural world; there is a visceral quality to Shepitko's filming of this motherland. The film was shot just outside of Murom, an ancient city 185 miles east of Moscow, which for Shepitko and the whole film group became "Belarus in the winter of 1942." Shot in January, conditions were brutal: it was often as much as forty below during the shooting. This punishingly cold landscape is what is being fought for: just before he is led to his death, Sotnikov answers the question of who he is by responding that he has "a mother, a father, and a motherland [*rodina*]." Put that way, the land becomes a political abstraction, something it never is in this film: in Shepitko's vision the land is a medium of both experience and identity, beloved terrain (as when Rybak stands silently in a burnt-out farmstead, pondering a small mirror that is all that's left of a woman he had loved), space of ever-present danger, and paradoxical site of near-mystical revelation. The film opens and closes with that scene of an obscured landscape, with the church in the distance a reference point and cultural icon, what in someone else's hands would be a visual banality. At the center of the film, on the other hand, is an enigmatic moment of immersion in the landscape, a scene both intimate and exhausting.

When Sotnikov is shot by German soldiers, we see him both giving fire and preparing to die: he will shoot himself rather than be taken prisoner. Rybak has made it into the woods, but he

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hears the gunfire, realizes Sotnikov is in danger, and returns for him. The sequence begins with a startling and eerie vision of the moon; it continues through an almost impossibly arduous scene when Rybak drags his wounded companion through heavy snow. The physicality of this sequence is almost unbearable; the viewer is tormented by the slowness of Rybak's efforts until both men can finally catch their breath in a clump of ice-covered bushes. The floating, beautiful moon is then replaced by another visionary, almost mystical sequence. Sotnikov stares vacantly into space, his back against the tree. We initially see him through a net of branches encased in ice; our eyes track his as their focus shifts from the distance to the near foreground. With Schnittke's unearthly music increasingly agitated in the background, Sotnikov suddenly lashes out at the branches between him and us: thrashing with a piece of wood, he bursts into violent action and then as suddenly sinks back into inertia. Rybak returns from scouting out where they are, only to discover that Sotnikov has been frozen to the tree: in an extraordinarily intimate sequence, Rybak gently cups Sotnikov's head in his hand, blowing gently on the back of his neck.

Rybak's isolation at the end of the film contrasts not only with the communion of the opening but also with the physicality and intimacy of this remarkable scene. The two men's closeness is resolutely nonerotic but deeply tactile. The sequence veers back and forth between submission and struggle: Sotnikov seems mentally to retreat into some space of interiority that intensifies the otherworldly calm of his face.[18] Shepitko frames Sotnikov first against the snow and then the tree, as though he is dissolving into the more-than-human world. While the camera lets us see what Sotnikov is watching (the moon, the sun), we also see his gaze refocus, from looking *beyond* the icy branches to the branches themselves. His striking of the ice-laden branches is a gesture as powerful and visually arresting as it is inscrutable, quickly followed by Rybak blowing gently against Sotnikov's neck. Denise Youngblood has suggested that this moment marks a transition for Sotnikov, an epiphanic moment in which he "has accepted the certainty of his death."[19] If so, then this pivotal moment in Sotnikov's journey involves not anything otherworldly, but a profoundly tactile immersion in the natural world—in the very *rodina* (motherland) for which he is fighting. The physical, almost maternal intimacy of Rybak only intensifies our sense of that immersion.

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Figure 5.5. Intimacy in a punishing landscape. Courtesy of Mosfilm.

The Horrors of War

The American critic Susan Sontag, in her discussion of the role of photographic images in understandings of war, points to *The Ascent* as evidence of what narrative can bring to that understanding: "A narrative seems likely to be more effective than an image. Partly it is a question of the length of time one is obliged to look, to feel." In the original version of this essay, published in the *New Yorker*, Sontag concluded this way: "*The Ascent* [is] . . . the most affecting film about the horror of war I know."[20] When she revised the essay for inclusion in her book *Regarding the Pain of Others*, she changed the word *horror* to *sadness*: "*The Ascent* [is] . . . the most affecting film about the sadness of war I know."[21] The shift, which I take to refer to a kind of ambivalence on Sontag's part, seems deeply right: Rybak's death, and the final frames of the film, leave us caught between horror and sadness, both connected to the fate of this decent, caring, life-giving man. We experience the horror and sadness with such intensity and immediacy in part because of the "length of time" we have been made to look and feel—not just *at*, but *with* these characters. The woman who calls Rybak "Judas" has not come to love him as we have, and that makes all the difference.

As I noted at the beginning of this chapter, by the time the film was made, Soviet war films as

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a genre included a wide array of approaches. Particularly in the period of "the Thaw"—from the mid-1950s to Krushchev's fall from power in 1964—a new generation of Soviet directors had expanded the genre significantly beyond straightforward renderings of heroic sacrifice.[22] Shepitko was cognizant of the fact that she was making a war film for a generation that had by and large not experienced the war firsthand. Soviets watching the film in 1977 were citizens of an ideological state in which survival was regularly at odds with individual conscience. In this sense, Rybak's story might be their own, the enclosure at the end a paradigm of their own lives. How many comfortable citizens of Brezhnev's stagnant Soviet Union could be made uncomfortable by the counterpoint of a Russian voice saying "I want to eat," while all the while, in the distance, the motherland is obscured? Shepitko herself commented that the film went "beyond a war picture" and would achieve its aim to the extent that it was directed *at our own days*.[23] When Shepitko's characters look out across the screen, not at some mystical vision or into a vague beyond, but straight *at the viewer*—are they calling their descendants to a moral accounting?

Eight years after *The Ascent* was released, Shepitko's husband, Elem Klimov, released his harrowing film of the Nazi occupation of Soviet Belarus, *Come and See* (*Иди и смотри*, 1985). Klimov's film is about monsters, all of whom are German. Shepitko's film is not about monsters but about desperate situations that lead good men and women to spiritual disaster. When we see Rybak's distorted face at the film's end, we see one last icon of pain, human suffering, and desolating isolation. Sotnikov is given the chance to die a martyr's death rather than dying "like a dog, in a field" because Rybak saved him. No one has saved Rybak from the choice he had to make—and which he makes, in some sense, in complete consonance with his character. He has chosen life and care throughout the film. The film ends with pity rather than judgment, and with that final glimpse of the motherland. The horror of the film isn't war as such but situations we like to call "inhuman." Surely it was intentional on Shepitko's part that the end of the film takes us back down the hill. It ends, that is, with descent rather than ascent, into the world where all her viewers live: a place of compromise and enclosure, where even Rybak's intimate caring might seem an icon of a laudable world.

Notes

1. World War II is commonly referred to in Russia as the Great War of the Fatherland. Vast stretches of the western Soviet Union were occupied by Nazi forces, including the whole of Belarus, where the film is set. For a discussion of Soviet war films, see Denise J. Youngblood, *Russian War Films: On the Cinema Front, 1914–2005* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2007).

2. Sources used in this brief account of Shepitko's biography include Elem Klimov, ed., *Larisa: Vospominaniia, vystupleniia, interv'iu, kinostsenarii, stat'i: Kniga o Larise Shepitko* (Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1987); Andrei Goncharov, "Shepit'ko, Larisa Efimovna," Chtoby-pomnili.com, accessed January 4, 2013, http://chtoby-pomnili.com/page.php?id=162; Josephine Woll, *Real Images: Soviet Cinema and the Thaw* (London: I.B. Tauris Publishers, 2000).

3. Along with Sergei Eisenstein, Vseovolod Pudovkin, and Dziga Vertov, Dovzhenko was one of the great Soviet filmmakers of the 1920s. Dovzhenko is best known in the West for *Earth* (Земля, 1930), a beautifully rendered evocation of the passing of traditional peasant life with the arrival of collectivization and mechanical agriculture; *Earth* justifies David Thomson's designation of Dovzhenko as "the first intensely personal artist in Russian cinema." See David Thomson, *The New Biographical Dictionary of Film* (New York: A.A. Knopf, 2004), 257.

4. George Liber emphasizes Dovzhenko's ability to navigate the treacherous waters of Stalin-era censorship, but also suggests

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that in the process Dovzhenko engaged in considerable self-censorship. See George O. Liber, *Alexander Dovzhenko: A Life in Soviet Film* (London: British Film Institute, 2002), 25.

5. Denise Youngblood suggests that Shepitko's *Motherland of Electricity* was "banned for its alienated style and desacralization of the sacred subject of electrification." See Youngblood, *Russian War Films*, 155.

6. Goncharov, "Shepit'ko, Larisa Efimovna"; Valerii Golovskoi, *Kinematograf 70-kh: Mezhdu ottepel'iu i glasnost'iu* (Moscow: Materik, 2004), 264.

7. Olga Denisova, "*Voskhozhdenie* Larisy Shepit'ko protiv *Proverki na dorogakh* Alekseia Germana," Olga Denisova: Knigi, April 30, 2009, http://vyritsa-lend.livejournal.com/17580.html.

8. *Novyi mir* played a major role in the period of liberalization known as "the Thaw," and continued to be a vehicle of relatively progressive thought even after Krushchev's downfall.

9. Goncharov, "Shepit'ko, Larisa Efimovna."

10. N. N. Shneidman also notes the extent to which Bykov's treatment of the war differed from mainstream Soviet war literature. See N. N. Shneidman, "Soviet Prose in the 1970s: Evolution or Stagnation?" *Canadian Slavonic Papers/ Revue Canadienne des Slavistes* 20, no. 1 (1978): 67–68.

11. There are other ways in which Shepitko's film differs strikingly from the story: *The Ascent* significantly extends the scene of interrogation and torture (the film's "naturalistic" treatment of violence occasioned some criticism), and her deployment of Christian symbolism, while it is rooted in Bykov's story, is much more elaborate.

12. Youngblood, *Russian War Films*, 182.

13. This sequence also calls to mind the work of Georges de la Tour, a seventeenth-century painter whose work is referred to in the films of Andrei Tarkovsky, a contemporary of Shepitko's.

14. Bells have a particular significance within Russian Orthodoxy, where they are the only instruments used in churches—the liturgy itself is sung without accompaniment.

15. Shepitko's framing may also allude to the "Savior of the Fiery Eye." In the Fiery Eye icon Christ's gaze is directed at the viewer, while the eyes of the nerukotvornyi spas look to the viewer's right. *See* Leonid Ouspensky and Vladimir Lossky, *The Meaning of Icons* (Crestwood: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1982), 69–72.

16. "[A]n icon is an external expression of the transfigured state of man, of his sanctification by uncreated Divine light" (Ouspensky and Lossky, *The Meaning of Icons*, 38).

17. Jason Merrill gives an insightful account of the interrogation scene, relating the onesided "dialogue" of Portnov and Sotnikov to Dostoevsky's treatment of human nature, freedom, and evil in "The Grand Inquisitor." See James Merrill, "Religion, Politics, and Literature in Larisa Shepit'ko's *The Ascent*," *Slovo* 18, no. 2 (2006): 156–160.

18. Several moments in this sequence are reminiscent of Tolstoy's *War and Peace*, where Prince Andrei lies wounded at the battle of Austerlitz, staring up into a vast sky. The scene from Tolstoy's great epic is echoed in other Soviet films of World War II, including *The Cranes Are Flying* (in which the hero looks upward into a whirling grove of birch trees as he falls) and a scene in *Fate of a Man* by Sergei Bondarchuk (1959) in which a soldier escaping from a Nazi prisoner of war camp briefly hides in a hay field; there's a long, stunning shot of him lying in the field, as the camera lifts skyward, followed by a shot from his point of view, looking up toward the sky itself.

19. Youngblood, *Russian War Films*, 180.

20. Susan Sontag, "Looking at War," *New Yorker*, December 9, 2002, http://www.newyorker.com/archive/2002/12/09/021209crat_atlarge?currentPage=all.

21. Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (New York: Picador, 2003), 122. Originally published as "Looking at War" in the *New Yorker* on December 9, 2002, the essay was republished in 2003 as *Regarding the Pain of Others*.

22. By 1964, as Denise Youngblood puts it, "wonderful and innovative war films, rich in genuine humanity and pathos, had graced the screens for a number of years." (Youngblood, *Russian War Films*, 140). Her discussion includes, among others, *The Cranes are Flying*, *The Fate of a Man*, *The Ballad of a Soldier*, *Clear Skies*, and *Ivan's Childhood*.

23. "Moe proizvedenie—nash fil'm." (Klimov, *Larisa*, 130).

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