

Ivan's Childhood and the Crisis of War

Year : (1962)

Director: Andrei Tarkovsky (as Andrey Tarkovskiy)

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Cinema is one of the strongest medium of expression in contemporary times and has been an effective vehicle in conveying a copious range of ideas and emotions. World War II has been such a platform for expanding the possibilities of cinema which configured within the framework of both propagandist as well as experimental cinema. The Great Fatherland War or the Great Patriotic War as World War II was referred to in the former Soviet Union is central to the history of the land and have been represented through countless museums and monuments that dot Russia and other Soviet republics, which essentially aims to represent and keep alive and commemorate the sacrifices which perhaps left twenty to twenty-seven million dead and all of Europe in smouldering ruins. The haunting reality of the war, the space of the tragedy, the scale of the disaster and the scale of heroism was adequately invented as a subject for socialist realist cinema both during and in post Stalinist era. Naturally there existed a palatable difference between the representation of war with the old order and the new order. The entirety of the old order both in fiction and films was engaged wholeheartedly in support of the war effort and functioned as a tool for Stalin's propaganda machinery. Youngblood makes the following observation in this context,

Initially, films were predictable tales of heroic resistance tailored to the particular calamity of the war experience in the Soviet Union. They were surprisingly realistic in the sense that partisans, rather than the regular army, loomed large with women rather than men serving as protagonists, reflecting the harsh facts of war and the enormous loss of male lives at the front

in the first six months of the conflict. The classic example of this kind of war propaganda is Fridrikh Ermler's *She Defends Her Motherland* (USSR, 1943), the most famous of the "heroine" films. ... In *Motherland*, the beloved Soviet film star Vera Maretskaia plays a woman determined to avenge the deaths of her husband and child by becoming an uncompromisingly ruthless partisan leader- no gentle stay-at-home widows here" (86). The end of the war which also registered an emphatic victory of the Allied Powers shifted the centre stage of the war hero to Stalin which is reflected in Mikhail Chiareli's *The Fall of Berlin* (USSR, 1949). The film creates the cult of Stalin as the liberator of the German people from the shackles of Nazism (Youngblood 86). With the death of Stalin 1853, the era of Khrushchev initiated a process of de-Stalinisation, opened avenues and possibilities for creative exploration and a probe into the shortcomings of Soviet life and society. What followed was a period of reconfiguring of war films which aimed to produce an honest assessment of histories of World War II in which involved filmmakers experimented with personal themes and made a series of "non-violent" war films. The most iconic among them are Mikhail Kalatozov's *The Cranes Are Flying* (USSR, 1957), Grigorii Chukhrai's *The Ballad of a Soldier* (USSR, 1959), and Andrei Tarkovsky's *Ivan's Childhood*. The films stress the psychological impact of individuals, who also represent a collective whole, and the behaviour of the protagonist of these films projects a disturbed state of mind which is a far cry from the robust heroes and heroines of the war-era films. The purpose of these films was to break the myth of the war hero and delve into issues of subtler significance; the protagonists had shed their superhuman image and were sympathetic characters that were human and the emphasis was on finer emotions rather than war achievements. The projection was realistic, like for example, the heroine in *The Cranes Are Flying*, who when her soldier lover is away at war marries another, or the protagonist in *The Ballad of a Soldier* spends his brief stay with his mother to help her with her household chores. *Ivan's Childhood*, in the war backdrop focuses

on the lost childhood of the orphaned boy. It is important to mention here that, "...although their antiwar themes made them seem to some Western critics as yet more Soviet propaganda, peace activism was considered dissident behaviour in the Soviet Union. These movies cannot, therefore, be read as reflections of the dominant ideology, and all encountered varying degrees of censorship, even in that time of comparative cultural relaxation" (Youngblood 88).

Of these films I have chosen to closely examine *Ivan's Childhood* from the postStalinist generation of war films. *Ivan's Childhood* is Tarkovsky's first feature film and is a masterly representative of the war films of this era and genre. What is particularly a signifying feature in the film is the complete absence of real battle or combative scenes. Nor does the narrative follow any particular structure or pattern in the classical sense. Tarkovsky was twenty-eight years and had just graduated from the Gerasimov All-Russian State Institute of Cinematography when he made *Ivan's Childhood*. The script was based on Vladimir Bogomolov's novella by the name of Ivan and Tarkovsky realised the cinematic potential of the film as a medium to effectively narrate the monstrosity of war. Tarkovsky makes the following comment on the film:

It opened up possibilities for recreating in a new way the true atmosphere of war, with its hyper-tense nervous concentration, invisible on the surface of events but making itself felt like a rumbling beneath the ground. A third thing moved me to the bottom of my heart: the personality of the young boy. He immediately struck me as a character that had been destroyed, shifted off its axis by the war. Something incalculable, indeed, all the attributes of childhood, had gone irretrievably out of his life. And the thing he had acquired, like an evil gift from the war, in place of what had been his own, was concentrated and heightened within him.

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The film traces the twelve year old Ivan who has witnessed sorrow and extensive violence with the Nazi invasion in which every member of his family has been killed. The film is set on the eastern front during the Second World War and follows the young boy Ivan. He works as a spy for the Russians and crosses the treacherous Russian borders with ease and agility. In this role he has to undertake the arduous tasks of swimming across the river to collect information on the Germans. As he reports back to the headquarters he is able to provide very specific information about the number and location of the German soldiers, their armament and other relevant information. The film uses the method of flashbacks to effectively convey the sense of the lost childhood of Ivan. The film heavily relies upon visual and cinematic memory system of the boy to convey the sense of trauma and loss the boy has faced and continues to face. In fact the film opens with a dream sequence with a close-up of Ivan standing behind a tree and then begins to run through the grass chasing a butterfly. Laughing and happy he is called by his adoring mother, when the sudden sound of a shot transfers the audience and Ivan back to reality. Similar dream like sequence are spread across the narrative accentuating more and more the isolated condition of the boy. Once Ivan awakens from his dream he struggles through a stark river forest in the midst of desolate looking birch trees. This particular location is central to the film as it is the place where Ivan essentially reconnoitres, crossing back and forth across the German lines. The bare branches of the tall and dark trees add to the threatening starkness and sparse appearance and the vulnerability of Ivan's trade as a spy. The earlier playful, happy and contented face of the young Ivan is taken over by the stubborn and defiant look of Ivan as he waits at Galtsev's quarters weak and tired for the army seniors Captain Kholin and Captain Bondarev who are also his father figures. His tone and countenance is of defiance and he refuses to be spoken down to. The army is the only "family" that he has and the Russian officers try their level best to convince him to abandon his dangerous mission across the river in order to retrieve information vital to the Russian's offensive strategy.

However, Ivan is not the one to be convinced and even runs away from the military school where he had been admitted in order to join the partisans. With his childhood innocence robbed and constantly haunted by memories of childhood, Ivan's only driving emotion is to avenge the death of his family which he believes will be fulfilled by serving the Russian army as a spy. The film prepares itself and the audience for what is going to be Ivan's last journey into the marshland, which remains inconclusive and in the end, when the Soviet Army has successfully liberated Berlin, the young officer (Galtsev) who is the only surviving member of the group of soldiers known to Ivan discovers that the Germans had captured and murdered Ivan. The last lingering moment in the film is the photograph of the young Ivan found among the German files which carried the look of defiance and obstinacy emblematic of his lost innocence and childhood.

Jean Paul Sartre wrote an article on Ivan's Childhood after it won the Golden Lion at the Venice Film Festival in 1962, in which he makes very crucial observations about young Ivan,

Ivan is mad, that is a monster; that is a little hero; in reality, he is the most innocent and touching victim of the war: this boy, whom one cannot stop loving, has been forged by the violence he has internalised. The Nazis killed him when they killed his mother and massacred the inhabitants of his village. Yet, he lives. But somewhere else, in that irremediable moment where he saw his neighbour falling. I have myself seen certain young, hallucinated Algerians, moulded by the massacres. For them, there was no difference whatsoever between the nightmares of the waking state and the nocturnal nightmares. They had been killed, they would have wanted to kill and to get used to killing. Their heroic determination was, above all, a hatred and escape in the face of unbearable anguish. If they fought, they fled the horror in the combat; if the night disarmed them and if, in their sleep, they returned to the tenderness of their age, the horror was reborn and they relived the memory they would want to forget. Such is Ivan.

The image of a happy childhood with which the movie begins soon enters into a dark and depressing watery river forest which appears endless and carries a death-like stillness. The barely clothed young Ivan wades through the freezing water to gather information and safely reaches the Russian army headquarters which would soon be revealed as a difficult task since it leads to the death of two young Russian spies, Lakhov and Moroz whose dead bodies are displayed in the most horrific manner by the Germans. The scale of Ivan's conviction is revealed through his stubbornness and the array of disoriented dreams which works as a part of the narrative structure as well as reveals the cause of Ivan's traumatic experience. Even the happy and carefree companionship that he shares with his mother adds to his trauma as we soon realise that at the end of the sequence his mother is shot dead in front of him. These memories not only shatter the fragile young mind but their constant recurrence in the mind of the young boy reveals the entrapped condition of Ivan. The Germans are never shown, the only visible presence of the enemy is the shooting of the flares, this unseen enemy and no sign of war or the battle front creates a nightmarish world and soon we are drawn into the personal experiences of Ivan. Kerstin Stutterheim makes the following comment,

Ivan's individual fate is primal, as well as universal fear. The viewer as witness to Tarkovsky's film feels the intensity of Ivan's shock. Trauma as such is based on a real event, manifested in excessive pressure on the mind and soul of the individual. The person goes through an extreme situation for which he or she is unprepared, leading to the feeling of collapsing into a deep and dark hollow. The trauma is unforgettable. The memory of the situation that caused the trauma can be deeply buried in a dark corner of the mind, but it will be there forever. One can learn to deal with it, to encapsulate it, but it is engraved in the body's memory. In addition to having undergone an extreme trauma, Ivan is surrounded by a world war, a distracted landscape and visual translation of his emotional status.

In *Sculpting in Time* Tarkovsky makes it adequately clear that Bogomolov's Ivan attracted him firstly, since the suspense in the novel is based on its aesthetic revelation of the boy's emotions and not on any intended reaching of a goal. Secondly, on the manner of the tragedy wherein Ivan's inescapable fate is clear though there exists a lingering hope as we are drawn into the mire of the boy's adamant emotions and cherished dreams. What transpires as Ivan merges with the darkness as he wades into the dark cold waters is never mentioned but the revelation of Ivan's fate at the end of the movie brings out the morbid and complex picture of war rather than the traumatic fate of the boy, since we realise by then that suffering has become second nature to the boy. War significantly therefore, is not about creating heroes but creating humans, about the psychological impact that forever tarnishes the mind of Ivan. The final revelation of Ivan's death aims to satisfy the hope the glimmer of hope about the boy's safety as he enters into the dark river forest of the enemy territory but, the audience have already witnessed the psychological death that the boy suffers each moment as he lives and relives through his memory.

The nucleus of Ivan's existence is deeply entrenched on his strong association of fragmented and fractured dreams, the movie begins with a dream of a happy childhood and a happy Ivan which we will soon realise will never return or be revived. The attempts of the 'father figures' in the Russian army who also attempted to be his guardian and intended to assure a stable future for Ivan fail to convince the boy, though interestingly, the blame for Ivan's death is laid in the hands of the German aggressors and not the Soviet soldiers who had recruited him and let him serve in the army as a spy. Ivan, it becomes adequately clear is doomed from the moment we realise that his childhood was disfigured. However, one cannot but note that Ivan's story is framed as a tragedy and the film explores the underlying nationalistic jargon of giving up of one's life for the sake of the Fatherland. Yet these ideas do not underscore the scar that the war has left in the mind of the young boy. Ivan's first dream

presents a fairly idealistic picture of an easy and carefree life; nature becomes a vital component in expression of this primal condition in Ivan's childhood. The scenes are almost pre-lapsarian as compared to the barren and marshy landscape of the war-torn village. Ivan is chasing butterflies, looking through shiny cobwebs (signifying undisturbed nature), running around barefoot, drinking water from a bucket with the presence of the mother on a warm summer day. Unlike the other dreams the narrative of this dream is direct and does not possess much of a surrealistic quality and it is the harsh awakening to a devastated world and the cruelties of war that appears to be more significant in this context. The second dream is located within the barracks of the Russian army and occurs as Ivan has just returned from his reconnaissance, tired he eats silently and falls asleep. This dream conveys the key information about the death of Ivan's mother,

From a close-up of the sleeping boy, the camera moves to the left, traveling over the fire nearby and then down to the floor, looking at his shoes and scattered pieces of wood. The sound of water drops provides a soothing background on which the camera cuts to a close-up of Ivan's hand hanging out of the bed, with water flowing off his fingers. The camera then moves left again, but now looks up to show a square light spot at the top of a well, where Ivan and his mother are seen leaning over and looking down as a feather descends into the deep, dark pit. At the bottom one can see the reflection of a star, which Ivan reaches for. Suddenly, he finds himself down in the well, trying to catch the star. The rope of the pail quivers perilously as someone glances from the top; the pail is hurriedly pulled out, one hears remote, agitated voices, then the pail plummets down abruptly, followed leisurely by the mother's scarf. Ivan shouts, "Mama!" with terror in his voice, and the next image shows water being splashed over the mother's body, lying facedown on the ground next to the well (Lordanova).

The third dream is perhaps the most elaborate and symbolic to the central character of Ivan, it appears as Ivan is sitting with another young girl on a lorry overloaded with apples, with the white trees in the backdrop with the dark stormy sky and the horse that eat the spilled apples on the beach. The image of the little girl and Ivan racing to the water was meant to capture “the child’s foreboding of imminent tragedy” as Tarkovsky indicated later (Lordanova). This dream scene appears after the death of Ivan is revealed and brings the dream imagery of the film to a complete cycle by unifying with the initial image of a childhood that existed prior to the devastations of war. Moreover this dream is not part of Ivan’s mnemonic recollection but appears to be an overall acknowledgement of the celebration of Ivan’s childhood and the audience does not effectively require Ivan to for recollection but themselves participate in this fractured world of Ivan’s. “This last dream—showing children playing on the beach, among shiny splatters of water, and the mother, who smiles and walks away into the distance—is permeated with splendour and innocence. The final shot is of Ivan, running through shallow water and nearly colliding with a menacing dry tree, a forbidding encounter that puts a sudden end to a truly tranquil bliss. Like the abrupt shadow of the tree that cuts his run short, Ivan’s life is cut short by the war, which, as the official Russian narrative of World War II has it, befell them unawares” (Lordanova). Though not exactly a dream sequence Ivan encounters writings on the wall of the church where he is lodged before he sets out for his last reconnaissance. On the wall of the church where the Russian soldiers were billeted there is a message scrawled, “THERE ARE 8 OF US/ NONE OVER 19/ IN ONE HOUR WE’RE TO BE TAKEN OUT AND SHOT/ AVENGE US.” This writing on the church wall would presumably have been written by young Russian soldiers but what is important that the writing leads to voices, cries and chaotic sounds that fill with darkness Ivan’s third dream. This particular scene is significant as it combines Ivan’s internalised broken dreams with the external world in which the eight young soldiers were killed. This nightmare for Ivan is a reality

and mission once again becomes the focus of the camera as the party along with Ivan leave for their mission, a quiet reminder of the vengeful emotion that drives Ivan. This particular writing on the wall blends with Ivan's own anxieties and traumatic experience and we see Ivan unifying with the larger tragedies of war. Trakovsky's use of dream sequence and the links with nature once fruitful and now barren with Ivan's dreams and his conscious real life of that of a spy draws the real world within the scope of the dreams that haunt the mind of Ivan. What Ivan experiences is not isolated memories it is significant of what the war has done to him, his lived experiences become the narrative of war which is unlike earlier representation in war films. The dreams themselves therefore symbolically express more accurately the conditions of war, how it intimately touches and devastates human life. Anne Yi comments thus,

Under the siege of war, the order of logical causality explodes apart. A war in which books are burned in a square, millions are annihilated in death camps, when an entire family is dissolved, leaving a maniacal, possessed child behind, there can be no causal, sequential explanation. This war is a dream, because it takes the familiar, such as stoves and chimneys and ubiquitous birch wood, and bastardizes them in a way that renders them horrific. The stoves and chimneys, such everyday objects, are a haunting sight when they are found orphaned, standing alone, a reminder of the destruction that passed through (7).

With Ivan's Childhood Tarkovsky established that the military as secondary to the individual. His style attracted international attention and an award in 1963 at the Venice Film Festival. Youngblood makes the following comment, "Ivan's Childhood is more than a film about one boy's childhood; it is a film about the fate of all children during the World War II. Tarkovsky's use of the generic Russian name Ivan, the name given to protagonists in most folktales, is an important clue. But its universality at the end of the picture is evident, too, through Tarkovsky's use of newsreel footage of the Nazis and the documentary records of

their crimes. The company's young lieutenant inadvertently confirms Ivan's fate by finding his photograph among Nazi rubble at the end of the war. Ivan's face, defiant and childlike, stares out at us. Newsreel footage rolls. Since the text of the film has had no specific historical referents to this juncture, the point is made all the clearer that Tarkovsky intends as Ivan as a symbol of war dead and Nazi guilt" (Youngblood 91-92).

The film dwells on two separate existences, young Ivan's childhood and his life as a Russian spy. The title of the film *Ivan's Childhood* applies to those short couple of minutes when the boy dreams of his life in the midst of prewar Russia emblematic of a pristine natural landscape with his mother and later with the little girl. We experience Ivan's childhood only in his short fragmented dreams and in reality what we find in the barracks of the Russian army Ivan in a severe demeanour with a strict adherence to military codes of behaviour. Tarkovsky however, has not lost sight of the fact that Ivan is still a child. Tarkovsky questions the essential reality in Ivan's life, a boy's lost childhood or his trauma which is now expressed through vengeance and the nightmare of war. Ivan's encounter is only with older soldiers and there does not appear to be anybody like him in the vicinity. The short scene with the grizzled old widower with a cock in a war ravaged house is the only other encounter with the outside world, and this too is a chronically disturbed world. This too is a desolate world and we realise that Ivan lives and breathes war. After the death of his family his only aim is participation in war as an informer, perhaps he is driven to this extreme due to his desire for avenging the death of his family which erupts when Ivan encounters the writing on the church wall and with tears and sweat streaking down his face he yells at a jacket hanging on the wall, "I'll sit in judgement at your trial!" The end of the young boy finally comes in the gallows as is revealed to us in the final photograph of Ivan in the Nazi prisoner dossier. Despite the poetic quality and aesthetic appeal of this iconic film Tarkovsky imparts the deep and gruesome trauma that scar the minds of all those

who are left behind. Jean-Paul Sartre brings out this essential nature of Ivan's internalised suffering and pain,

Actions and hallucinations are in close correspondence... [Ivan's] nightmares, his hallucinations have nothing gratuitous about them. They are not about morsels of bravery nor are they about the surveys carried out in the 'subjectivity' of the child: they remain perfectly objective, we continue to see Ivan from outside, like in the 'realist' scenes; the truth is that for this boy the entire world is a hallucination and that in this universe this boy, monster and martyr is a hallucination for others...Madness? Reality? Both of them: in war, all soldiers are mad, this child monster is an objective testimony of their madness because it is he who has gone the farthest.

Dreams which effectively express an unreal world, yet in war and in Ivan's childhood dreams are the greatest reality and there is no escaping it. When Ivan wakes up it is to face a far more disturbing and horrifying world, a landscape that signifies loss and desolation like the ruined structure of the old man's house. This unending saga of loss and pain is the tragedy of war.

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