

THE CTP GRADUATE FACULTY FILM FORUM

THE OTHER: A THEME EXPLORED IN TWO FILMS, COME AND SEE AND ONCE WERE WARRIORS

By Leah Lucas, March 2002

INTRODUCTION

My journey into this theme of 'the other' began with my choosing of two foreign films to explore. Both of these films, one from Russia and one from New Zealand are quite unlike the mainstream Hollywood thrillers. They are about war and family, both experiences depicted with a raw intensity that goes right into the body. They are not easy films to view, but I believe worthy, providing valuable thoughts and responses for lively discussion.

Elem Klimov, the Russian director of 'Come and See' wanted his film to appear so vividly real, to seem like a documentary. Klimov was a very young boy during World War Two when he had to flee the Volga River to reach the Urals with his mother and sisters. The Germans were on the attack and had just bombed the nearby petroleum plant. The flammable petroleum spread over the river boiling the water in a raging inferno. All the mothers heaped coats and blankets upon the children along with their own bodies to protect them from the flames. Elem, being a curious boy peaked out from under his mother's body to gaze upon a scene of hell. He describes how his very skin could sense the apocalyptic destruction. As a filmmaker he felt compelled to give genuine expression to the emotional complexities experienced from the agony of war.

The original title of his film was KILL HITLER, referring not just to Hitler the man but also to the darkness within each of us. But he was discouraged from using the name Hitler in the title. His brother was reading the New Testament when

he came to The Revelations of St. John of the Divine. This chapter depicts John's vision of God's throne and the book sealed with seven seals that only the innocent lamb was pure enough to open. He then went on to read "And I saw when the lamb opened one of the seals, and heard as if it were the noise of thunder, one of the four beasts saying, Come and See. And I saw, and behold a white horse, and he that sat on him had a bow; and a crown was given unto him: and he went forth conquering, and to conquer. And when he had opened the second seal, I heard the second beast say, Come and See, and the power was given to him to take peace from the earth, and that they should kill one another and there was given unto him a great sword."

St. John's apocalyptic vision is now playing out before our eyes. As CNN broadcasts hourly the latest episode of The Iraq Attack Show we are never allowed to truly see the real life effects upon the people of Baghdad. But one thing we know, The American President and the Iraqi Dictator are most definitely 'The Other' to one another.

Lee Tamahori's film from New Zealand uses the crucible of family in which to explore the genesis of violence and its results. This too is a difficult film to watch, as the violence is not the typical comic book type. Rather it has in immediacy and raw intensity so unlike most sentimental American movies. The power of the character's emotional intensity sears the screen. As in most true creative acts, we are touched, we are moved, but we are not entertained.

March 21, 2003 Leah Lucas

THE OTHER IN COME AND SEE Directed by Elem Klimov, USSR, 1985

Come and See takes place in the year 1943 in Belorussia during the Second World War. The film depicts the experience of Florian, a fourteen-year-old boy who joins the

partisans to fight the German Nazis invading their homeland. The film opens depicting a scene where Florian is with a friend searching for guns in the sand in order to have a weapon to fight the Germans with. He appears to be the typical expectant boy, aggressive and eager to fight the enemy. The scene shifts to Flor at home with his mother and younger twin sisters. She is distraught and doesn't want him to go and fight. Her husband has already left and gone to war. But the partisans come for him and he is taken to the forest to join the fighters. Already he has shifted from the world of the feminine, the mother, the nurturer into an other world of masculinity, defense of the nation, conflict. The journey out of his childhood has begun. Throughout the film we see the boy enter into an encounter with a world at war, under siege and internal journey totally other than his world at home with mother.

As he enters the forest and joins the Russian freedom fighters his face is happy when they pose for a photograph. This sense of expectation is quickly crushed when he is commanded to give his boots to another soldier. Florian is left behind as they go out to fight. He is crying as he stumbles through the forest. He does not see the delicate bird eggs that he steps on and crushes. He comes upon a beautiful young woman named Glasha who is also crying because the man she loves has left to fight. Suddenly the enemy planes appear and drop bombs all around. Here begins the path of destruction as the trees burn and smoke fills the sky. Glasha and Flor emerge from the attack shocked and disoriented. Flor can barely hear, the noise of the bombs leave his ears ringing. Through the muffled soundtrack we share in his isolation of deafness. We witness the change in his face as his consciousness registers such a crashing encounter with the enemy, the other. The evolving expressions of Flor's face become the medium through which we are drawn into a profoundly direct experience of war. He finds a hiding place and curls up with Glasha. He tells her he will take her home to his mother and sisters. He

now longs to return to the place he was once so desperate to leave. The next morning it is raining. Glasha opens herself to the falling rain as the sun reflects through the water. The music has a liturgical sound. The entire forest appears transformed with a cathedral like quality. Flor gazes upon this feminine form with an expression of awe. A mysterious bird walks in the underbrush. There is something holy in this scene with a sudden glimpse of life and beauty.

The journey back home leads them further into the abyss. All the villagers have been murdered his family amongst them. Glasha sees their naked bodies piled up behind the barn. Flor does not look. He leads her to the swamp that he believes they have to pass through to reach the island where his family must have escaped. Flor and Glasha struggle through the quagmire that threatens to swallow them. It feels like a nightmarish dream to watch them agonizingly wade through the muck. The very earth has turned into a danger. The world is no longer solid as they sink ever deeper into the horrors encompassing their world. A figure appears out of the mist carrying his staff like an ancient pilgrim. Flor tries to shoot him. Glasha cries out "his family has been killed, he is deaf, he is crazy." Flor can't bare to face this reality; he throws Glasha back into the swamp trying to drown her. He buries his own head in the watery earth but Glasha does not let him die. As they join the refugees Flor looks down in horror at a burn victim. The man reminds him that he told him not to dig for the gun. Flor thinks that it is his fault; he was the one to bring death to his family. He sits and stares into space, catatonic in the grief of an unbearable existence. A soldier cuts his hair, which is both buried in the ground and placed upon a naked skull. The partisans mould the muddy earth around the skull to create an effigy of Hitler, which they mock and spit upon. Flor is transforming as he stares at the likeness of The Fuhrer. His own hair on Hitler's head draws him into the Other. Now he is filled with hate, he wants revenge. He refuses to let the soldiers take his gun. He has become the other, a boy no longer, he must

fight not just to survive but because they have murdered his mother, his sisters. He becomes the aggressor; he terrorizes a farmer and steals his cow. He'll do what he has to do.

The threat of death is ever present. Throughout the film the enemy planes drone in the sky, frequently in the formation of a cross yet always a reminder of imminent destruction.

The devastating climax of 'Come And See' brings us to a scene of genocide where the Nazis burn six hundred and twenty-eight Byelorussians in a barn. Flor is about to be killed with them but is allowed to escape because he has no children. Another photograph is taken. This time by a Nazi photographer as he shoots a picture of the terrified boy held up by German soldiers laughing at the game. He collapses in a heap as they drive off singing while the village is decimated, the church is burning. It is a scene of hell wrought upon earth.

Back in the forest we see the results of the partisan ambush. Now they can exact their revenge. The captured Germans attempt to proclaim their innocence. One Nazi does not hide the truth. He speaks openly of his hatred and contempt for the Jews and how they should be killed, knowing he will die for what he has done. Flor brings the tank of gasoline; here is the moment of choice. Do they become totally like the other, torturing them as they did to the Byelorussians? Another choice is made, the shooting more merciful.

The final scene brings Flor to a direct encounter with the other symbolized by a portrait of Hitler. He stares down into a dirty mud puddle where lies a picture of The Fuhrer. As Flor stares at the picture his face takes on the appearance of a haunted gargoyle sculpted by the horror and pain both witnessed and experienced. He begins to shoot at Hitler's face, at first as an act of self-hatred for what he himself has become. As Nietzsche said "remember when you stare into the abyss the abyss stares back at you." As he continues to

shoot, in a spectacular cinematic device we the viewers are transported back through the density of time and deeds done. We witness an unraveling of history; Hitler's rise to power and all his acts of destruction are shown in reverse as the screen goes to rewind. Maybe it didn't have to go that way. Flor becomes a stand in for everyman, inevitably each one of us must meet our own other dark side, the darkness we all carry within. When we cannot claim what is other to our conscious self we too are in danger of enacting the unredeemed, wreaking havoc on whatever life's stage we happen to occupy. Gripped in his encounter with the great dictator Flor pulls into awareness all the layers of his own experience. There is the burying of the innocent self, his rebirth into the other, and the return once again to his own origin. Tears melt his frozen visage as he looks at Hitler the baby in his mother's arms. Here lies the uncorrupted child. "It all begins with the children." The captured German had said.

Our struggle with the other is apparent in our struggle with our fellow man and ourselves. There is the enemy; there is the ally; the one who us and the one who is the other. On a more fundamental level civilization depends upon that which is other transforming from the hidden to the known places in the self. We are all capable of great rage, hatred and revenge. Florian had to find a way back from his maddened existence in order to bare witnessing so much atrocity yet still remain human. To cross the borderline into insanity and remain lost in the other world would have meant an irretrievable loss of humanity. When the heart remains frozen, hardened out of unexpressed terror and pain there is no compassionate human to meet the world.

Adolf Hitler is the representative of this 'inhuman other'. Yet as a little baby he was born to a disturbed mother who had already lost three children. Klara, his mother loved her son and spoiled him. But it was not an attuned love providing for her son's genuine emotional need. Their relationship was

deeply disturbed; she was a downtrodden wife married to a self-centred tyrannical husband. She herself had no outlet for her deep-seated fears and anxieties and had to remain subservient to Adolf's father. This was a man who cruelly abused and degraded his son. He whipped him daily, nearly beating him to death when Hitler was eleven.

*The humiliated child knew of no other choice than to identify with his aggressor. So totally did he give up his vulnerable, weak self to merge with the powerful, brutal father that he writes in *Mein Kampf*, his ideological manifesto "the psyche of the masses is not receptive to anything that is half-hearted and weak. They would rather bow to a strong man than dominate a weakling. The masses love a commander and feel inwardly more satisfied by a doctrine tolerating 'no other' beside itself. They are unaware of their shameless spiritual terrorization and the hideous abuse of their human freedom, for they absolutely fail to suspect the inner insanity of the whole doctrine. All they see is the ruthless force and brutality of its calculated manifestations, to which they always submit in the end." Alice Miller in "Thou Shalt Not Be Aware" writes in her analysis of Hitler "brutality always wins out in the end. Yet one cannot destroy one's unconscious through destroying the world. Hitler at the apex of his power was tortured nightly by unremitting nightmares that woke him with convulsive shrieks."*

Redemption from a descent into humanity can only be reached through individual struggle. As the tears of emotion, of sorrow and pain flow down Flor's face a personal commitment to compassion is depicted. Florian returns to the forest rejoining his fellow partisans to continue their fight for survival. The sky is now clear. No enemy planes can be seen. The camera pans up from the earth through trees and sky, soaring into spirit, to connect with what is Holy, the ultimate Other where both God and Devil battle on earth and in heaven.

ONCE WERE WARRIORS Directed by Lee Tamahori, New Zealand 1995

Once Were Warriors is a powerful disturbing film from New Zealand directed by Lee Tamahori. This film is about a family displaced from their roots, cut off and lost from land and tradition. The film portrays the tragic result from loss of connection with nature and self, where masculine rage unbound destroys the feminine force of creativity and intuition. But it too holds a message of redemption in the return to the lost world of 'the other', the lost tribe of the Maori.

In the opening scene we see Grace, the fifteen-year-old daughter as she walks through a barren industrialized world of highway, cars and cement sidewalks. The background music has a tribal sound with a modern day rap tempo. Grace's best friend is a homeless boy who lives in an abandoned car beneath the highway underpass. She brings to him the book of stories that she has written.

The scene shifts to home where the father Jake proudly shows his family the parcel of seafood he has brought home for them to eat. He begins to make love to his wife who is thrilled with the gift. But then he tells her he has lost his job, but it is all right because he can go on the dole. The loving mood is immediately ruined. Filled with fear about how they will pay for the house his wife Beth is angry at Jake's irresponsibility. His pride is ruined. He doesn't want to admit to his own sense of inadequacy as the family provider. He storms off to the local bar. Drinking with his buddies he justifies his actions. He portrays himself as the innocent victim who just wanted to please his wife. He puffs himself up with rage and drink, moving further and further away from the other self that is shamed, weak and vulnerable. Jake has dark skin, his ancestors were black slaves, but he is big and strong, nobody can tell him what to do, especially a woman – his wife.

The drinking continues into the night as Jake brings his friends back to the house. Beth joins in the fun, using the party to forget her fear of their precarious existence. Another glimpse of connection is revealed as they take pleasure in singing to one another; the chemistry between them palpable. The children are listening upstairs. Grace says "aren't they beautiful when they are like that". Her brother replies in disgust "they're just drunk."

The eldest son, Nig appears and Beth asks him to have a drink with her. She so desperately wants closeness with him. But disgusted by her intoxication he rejects her. She is deeply crushed. But Beth does not allow herself how far in cuts her pain at losing her eldest son. Instead she turns to anger, taunting the drunken Jake. He beats her viciously. The raw violence that breaks out quickly puts an end to the party, terrifying the children as they huddle in their room.

Beth came from a Maori family. She left them in rebellion to marry the handsome Jake. She wanted her freedom and saw no value in their disapproval of her choice of husband. Finding herself a mother of five children trapped in a violent marriage she colludes with her husband in drinking and fighting to evade a deeper despair. It is left to the children to face the wreckage. They come downstairs the next morning confronted by the mess. Grace cleans up the chaos and tries to prepare food for her hungry siblings. Nig finds it all futile; to save himself he has to leave.

The middle son Mark, nicknamed Boogie, has been busted for stealing a car. His court date is that day but his mother is too badly beat up to go with him. She is ashamed and can't appear in court showing such a damaged face. It is too obvious an illustration of the damaged family. As a result she loses her son. The judge remands Mark to social welfare custody, he is sent to reform school. This devastates Beth,

Jake's callous response is "the boy is soft, it will toughen him up."

The school turns out to be a savior for a Mark. The teacher is a man who brings them back to the Maori wisdom. He tells them how the Maori used to be proud and fierce warriors. He teaches these delinquent boys how to reach up to the ancestral lands and pull them down into their bodies. He tells Mark he will teach him how to hold his Bayla inside him. Having been so badly failed by his family, Mark's redemption lies in his encounter with the Maori traditions, internalizing the strength and pride of his ancestors. He tells his older brother "I wear my tattoos inside me." His identification with this tribal other allows him to grow into a new strong self, rooted in the body.

The eldest son Nig finds his own tribe as he joins a gang of youths who initiate him through violence into their family. The members of this gang are tattooed warriors. Nig is filled with pride as his face and body are imprinted with beautiful intricate markings. When he meets his father at the bar baring his brand new countenance he is rejected. Jake refuses to acknowledge that he has lost his son to a world of 'the other' symbolized in the gang, his new family. Jake was unable to be the father his son needed. He is compelled to sink more deeply into an existence of drinking and fighting, growing ever more lost to his own pained sorrowful self.

The family continues to fragment. Beth makes an attempt at bringing them together in her determination to visit Mark at his reform school. She rents a car and they joyfully sing songs as Jake drives down the highway. They appear like a normal happy family as they picnic by the lake enjoying conversation and beautiful scenery. But the pleasant interlude is quickly ruined as Jake insists on stopping off at the bar for "just one drink." The family waits in the car until nightfall. Beth never did get to see her son. The shadows grow darker over this tormented family.

The final devastation comes when Grace is raped by her uncle Bully while another drunken party takes place downstairs. Grace sees there is no protection for her in her own home. There is no one to save her, no one to communicate with, no one to understand what is happening inside her. In utter despair she hangs herself in the tree in the front yard. Beth reads her daughter's diary and finds out about the rape, Her world cracks open as she realizes she has sacrificed her own child. Gracie symbolizes her own sensitive, feminine self abandoned so long ago. She kept herself blind to facing how the violence in their home was ruining the children. She had been unable to save herself or them. This was the final awakening. Gracie's death catapulted her into action. She showed Jake the diary. He turned on his friend – the rapist and beat him almost to death. Jake has irretrievably embraced the other path of destruction. He smashes up the bar while his family chants in Maori at Gracie's funeral. He attempts to chop down the tree that his daughter died upon. Alice Miller's words ring true once again; Jake cannot destroy his own unconscious by destroying the world. His wife tells him "you're a slave Jake. Our people once were warriors. They were people with pride and spirit. If my spirit can survive living with you for eighteen years then I can survive anything." He can only reply "fuck this warrior shit, you'll be back." He is drowning in rage as his wife drives off with her remaining children and Gracie's friend, the homeless boy who loved her.

In the end, Beth frees her spirit through a return to her homeland and Maori clan. She reclaims her children and the lost parts of herself. Police sirens wail in the distance as they come for Jake. Tragically, he remains the slave; to the drink, to his fists and to himself.

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