



Ivan's Childhood

Director: Andrei Tarkovsky
Country: USSR
Date: 1962

A review by Peter Bradshaw for *The Guardian*.

Andrei Tarkovsky's great film from 1962 is now on re-release, and its pure audacity and visual beauty are electrifying: with Fellini's *8½*, it boasts one of the great opening dream sequences in movie history. Here, compassion coexists with a cold, lucid brilliance. We are on the Soviet eastern front in the dying months of the second world war: Ivan (Nikolai Burlyayev) is a tousle-haired young boy used as a scout behind enemy lines; his mother and sister having been killed by the Germans, he is consumed with a need for revenge and capable of staggering courage and resourcefulness.



Dream sequences and flashbacks return us to his heartbreakingly happy childhood before the war, and part of the title's potency lies in showing how long his childhood has lasted, long enough to encompass peace and war. "Scouts are the soul of the front" is the romantic way his job is described: Ivan's soul, everyone's soul, is scarred. He is taken under the wing of two officers, Kholin (Valentin Zubkov) and Galtsev (Evgeny Zharikov) who themselves quarrel childishly over their attraction to a beautiful nurse, Masha (Valentina Malyavina) while telling Ivan that this is no place for children.



Finally, the three go on a mission in a night-time swamp, eerily lit by flares, to recover the bodies of two Soviet scouts hanged by the Nazis and left out with the jeering placard "Welcome": it is a matter of both honour and morale to bring these corpses back.

Tarkovsky's classic camera trope is on show here: a mysterious close travelling shot, like a reconnaissance aircraft moving across the surface of an alien planet. He famously said that editing was a matter of sculpting in time:

this film's final hard cut from the desolate battleground to conquered 1945 Berlin is an edit achieved not with a sculptor's chisel but with a sword or a sledgehammer – and all the more powerful for that. It is one of the great coups de cinéma. Unmissable.

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