

Institute of Contemporary Arts

writing in snow
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From the Latin *oriri*, the etymology of the verb ‘to orientate’ is to rise – as does the sun, from the east.

Snow *disorientates*, however. It does not rise: it falls. Curious, then, that a film so embedded in snow – a film in which we see the moon in daylight, rather than the sun – is called *The Ascent*.

Susan Sontag once stated that Larisa Shepitko’s *The Ascent* (1977) was ‘the most affecting film about the horror of war’ that she knew¹. Adapted from a novella by Vasil Bykaŭ, *The Ascent* tells the tale of Sotnikov and Rybak, two soldiers of the Belarusian resistance who are sent out into a snowy expanse to find food, only to be captured by the Nazi occupation – an event which erects for the film a dramatic arc, making a figurative Jesus and Judas of Sotnikov and Rybak, respectively. But before such biblical allusions, before amateur actors in swastika’d costumes appear, the film creates a philosophy, a poetry of existence from an embodied encounter with snow. ‘It’s not all about war,’ as Rybak says. (It’s not all about ascension, either.)

It’s about the emptiness of a snowy expanse: a vacancy that is also a vagrancy, a form of wandering. To write about anything – but about a snowy expanse, especially – is to wander across a blank page, forming fragments in the process. In snow, momentum comes undone: what could have been brisk is slowed down, what could have been purposeful is shattered.

In *The Ascent*, someone falls back with each move forwards. Or else snow falls, effacing imprints of footsteps, the trace of the path taken. Is it about the struggle to go on, after falling? Is it about starting again, and again, without knowing the direction, or the meaning?

The Ascent is bookended with an image of all-enveloping snow, which folds the end of the film into the beginning, as though nothing in between ever occurred, or mattered if it did. Snow erases. Snow does not care for difference. Observe it chromatically: earthly hues and ethereal blues, film’s blacks and whites – all are blurred by snow into snow.

Snow does not care for elsewhere or elsewhere. Search for the horizon, with its promises of otherwise, or the new: it is invisible, buried beneath sameness – snow-covered ground confused with snow-filled skies.

Rybak collaborates, Sotnikov refuses. Rybak survives, Sotnikov dies. As Rybak cries remorse at the end of the film, it falls deaf on the ears of snow.

Snow transforms the black leader into the white screen. It is through the white screen that snow obtains, in spite of its indifference, an ethical thickness. In the cinema, the white screen forces the spectator out from their shelter of shadows, into an unforgiving, glaring light. Throughout *The Ascent*, a chorus of men, women, and children break the fourth wall, to face the spectator. Yet, in a snowy expanse, we are always already watchable.

It is tens of degrees below zero. It is beyond freezing. Without view of the horizon, with icicles on eyelashes, it is difficult to envision anything – what victory looks like, what is virtuous and what is evil – but the here and the now of being cold. It's not all about war. It's about the cold. Wheezing replaces the rattle of gunfire: our hero, Sotnikov, coughs through the first third of the film.

Snow transforms film into something poetic. To write is to wander across a white space, across a snowy expanse, forming fragments in the process. In snow, causal connection comes undone. Instead: repetition, disruption.

Rybak half-carries an ill and injured Sotnikov: with one of Sotnikov's arms around his back, one of Sotnikov's legs out of action, the two together inscribe a six-legged thing into the white screen. Snow tends towards formlessness, but moving bodies, in defiance, write themselves into snow – whether it cares, or it doesn't. However ephemeral, or insignificant, the insect makes a mark.

Another image lingers: the removal of gloves and a hat in a cold snowscape, so that bare skin can touch bare skin. Few moments in cinema feel as intimate as that of a hypothermic Sotnikov being embraced by Rybak. Rybak summons something like the heat of a lover's breathing – which 'swept all over' his body, once upon a time. He exhales little clouds of condensation, of comfort onto Sotnikov's cheeks and neck. He whispers sweet words of assurance into Sotnikov's ear: 'I'll come back for you,' he vows.

Snow disorientates, erases. Snow transforms, translates. Snow brings together. As Rybak asks, 'Where are we?', it is the 'we' which carries weight, in the absence of an answer to 'where'. It is the 'we' which carries warmth.

Gilles Deleuze describes the white screen as ‘the milky image, or the snowy image, whose dancing seeds are about to take shape’ⁱⁱ. The appearance of the snowy image is something magical, sometimes. In the white screen of *The Ascent*, the omnipresence of snow is both brutal and mundane: something magical lies, instead, in ‘dancing seeds’ that inhabit the white screen – seeds still unplanted, seeds still unsown.

In the beginning, bodies in the distance, gathering strength to rise, to stand against a desolate snowscape, look like nothing but lines or blots. *The Ascent* is about dancing seeds, about to take shape.

ⁱ Susan Sontag, ‘Looking at War’, *The New Yorker*, 9 December 2002, <https://newyorker.com/magazine/2002/12/09/looking-at-war>

ⁱⁱ Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta, London, The Athlone Press, 1989, p. 200.