

Overlord, Part II

Stuart Cooper, Dir. (1975)

Rested and in high spirits, Tom and Arthur hurry to rejoin their company.

When they catch sight of the group, way ahead of them, Arthur groans. “Oh, for Christ's sake. They got at least 10 minutes on us.”

“You think so?”

“I'm going down.”

“What, down there?”

“Yeah.”

“Hey! Don't do it. You'll kill yourself.”

We see Tom silhouetted at the top of the hill. A fighter plane soars overhead.

Abruptly, mild-mannered Tom rolls down into the ravine. We observe him in slow motion, just as we watched the falling soldier earlier. His face contorted with pain, he comes to a stop, sprawled, at the bottom, his backpack still strapped onto his back.

In the next shot, we see Tom confined in a narrow rectangle, between tight vertical lines. A prisoner, he is escorted to a cell.

He sits on a bench, shoulders squared, leaning against the wall, with a blank stare. There's a big scrape on his cheek. Finally, he closes his eyes.

Lying down, asleep, his face fills almost the entire screen. He opens his eyes, and turns, looking at the ceiling. Then he shifts his gaze to us, the viewers, challenging us.

If Tom meant to assert his individuality one last time – or maybe even for the first time – the army has let him know that it does not approve. The camera looks down on him, motionless on his cot in a tiny cell. Finally, he sits up and puts on his boots.

But the military needs everybody it has to send to the front, even Tom. When a soldier enters the cell, Tom jumps up to attention. Seen from above, every element of the shot seems out of kilter. Punishment over, he marches out of confinement.

With the scrape on his cheek, Tom is back in formation, Arthur directly behind him. The corporal tells the men they will have 12 hours leave, starting at nine o'clock in the morning. It's their last leave before they're sent to war. “You'll be back here by 21.00 hours or your mother won't recognize you by the time I'm finished with you. Forget what I've told you, and you won't be around to write me a thank-you letter after the war's over.” During this speech, the camera zooms in on Tom's face, his hollow eyes in shadow, the lips tightly pressed together.

Arthur asks if his cell was comfy and Tom raises two fingers, to say “Fuck you!” to Arthur.

“Making a signal, Beddows?” demands the corporal.

But, facing the other way, the gesture has a different meaning. “Only for ‘victory’, Corporal,” replies Tom.

Tom is in a picture house, watching a newsreel, “Heil to the Lambeth Walk,”* in which images of German soldiers goose-stepping past Hitler are edited to the rhythm of a jaunty working-class tune, “The Lambeth Walk,” making them look ridiculous. In closeup, we see a hand with bright nail polish resting on Tom’s thigh.

*Hoch der Lambeth Valk (Charles A. Ridley, 1942) was a well-known propaganda short, shown often as part of the screenings in British theaters during the Second World War.

The woman, wearing lipstick and a faux-pearl necklace, cigarette between her fingers, looks at Tom, eyebrows raised. Under her gaze, he seems uncomfortable. Onscreen, the German soldiers look foolish and harmless, which, as Tom will soon learn at first hand, is not the case.

Finally, the woman goes too far, inching her hand up to his crotch, just as Hitler salutes the audience, staring straight out from the screen, his pomaded hair, his tiny mustache. Tom jumps up and leaves.

Tom rides his bike along a quiet lane, headed towards the camera. A quick cut takes us to a bomber as it takes off, also approaching the audience until it fills the frame, overwhelming us.

Tom rides on, the sunlight outlining his figure, drawing a halo around him. Then, from inside the bomber, we see an English village below. In the ruins of Corfe Castle, Tom gets off his bike and walks. The castle is near England’s southern coast; France lies just across the water.

An aerial view shows us the bomber, the sun reflecting off its wings, looming over the landscape. The plane crosses the coast and heads out into the English Channel toward Europe, tracked by the camera in a shot that lasts over a minute. The gentle roar of the plane’s engine is the only sound.

Then we are plunged into darkness and startled by the sound of explosions, vivid patterns of light. It sounds and looks like fireworks. But it is a bombing raid.

CAPTION: *A burning building, bursts of explosion and falling bombs.*

CAPTION: *On the ground: cascades of debris, buildings ablaze, smoke and ruination.*

The plane flies on. Below it, houses are lit up by exploding bombs. We see the plane as a tiny silhouette, against a background of cloud, smoke and sprays of flame from the explosions.

CAPTION: *The remains of a crashed bomber and bombed out buildings in Essen, Germany.*

A dissolve brings us to Tom, in uniform, sleeping on a passenger train, the English countryside rushing past him outside the window.

The camera zooms in on his sleeping face, serene against the leaf-patterned upholstery of the seat. He dreams that he’s on a battlefield. In his vision, he is turning over the body of a German soldier. Young, about Tom’s age, the soldier looks angelic in death. Seen in closeup, his peaceful face, resting on a bed of fallen leaves, resembles that of Tom asleep in the railroad car.