

**Plemya/ 'The Tribe' (2014)**

Drama, 126 min.

Directed by MYROSLAV SLABOSHPYTSKIY.

Written by MYROSLAV SLABOSHPYTSKIY.

Cast: Hryhoriy Fesenko, Yana Novikova, Rosa Babiy.

Ukraine, Netherlands: Harmata Film Production.

Language: Ukrainian Sign Language.

Myroslav Slaboshpytskiy's debut film, *The Tribe (Plemya)*, has received a great deal of attention since it first swept Cannes in 2014, generally earning praise from critics, notwithstanding at least one audience member rendered unconscious following a real-time abortion scene. In the *Los Angeles Review of Books* Annie Julia Wyman went so far as to declare that the formal language of the film, specifically its masterful camerawork and gutsy auditory minimalism, is 'so powerful and complex as to re-emphasize the place of art — in this case, filmic art — alongside violence and politics as a third means of processing and shaping collective life'.<sup>1</sup> While others have criticized its bleakness, charging it with chic nihilism or cynical exploitation,<sup>2</sup> these readings too often elide a central dimension of the film's narratological and formal structure—namely, its national context.

*The Tribe*, as its name suggests, might be read as a dark statement concerning humanity's most brutish instincts, but above all it is a political allegory. One might go so far as to call the film Brechtian, both in its political situatedness as well as its highly stylized presentation. Insofar as it draws attention to itself as a realistic construction of a particular post-Soviet situation, a motif that surfaces early on as the students undergo a lesson with the EU flag and map of Europe on full display while pastel blues and golds (Ukraine's national colors) make repeated appearances throughout, it emphasizes the artificiality of the situations on screen and, by extension, in the world. What has been done can be undone; things could have been prevented, if only.... In this sense, *The Tribe*, counter-intuitively, might be called an optimistic film or, at least, given the Euromaidan protests that followed on its heels, an uncannily prescient one.

Set in a boarding school for the deaf, *The Tribe* follows the experiences of incoming student Sergey as he navigates the violent hierarchy of his new home, becomes an accomplice to the school's corrupt dealings, and runs into trouble after he lets his feelings for classmate (and sex worker) Anya interfere with the operations. Generally eschewing sound, diegetic or otherwise, the film features no spoken dialogue. Conversations, arguments, and contractual arrangements are all signed, and yet among the formal accomplishments of Slaboshpytskiy is the at times genuinely striking accessibility of the story's progression to audiences watching the alternately erotic and brutal art-film the world over. Scenes, like a typical long-shot sequence early on in which the students celebrate the usually boisterous back-to-school holiday Knowledge Day in eerie silence, are framed elegantly and symmetrically, reminding viewers of the performative nature of the interactions being depicted. The effect is jarring. The silence, the slow turns around corners, and the foreboding, lingering quality of the camera's gaze, all conspire to produce both profound immersion and the minimal psychological distance necessary to process the artistic, artificially crafted nature of the unsettling experience.

Ultimately, *The Tribe* suggests that humans can only endure so many crooked deals and humiliations before something gives way. In a prophetic turn of events, a corrupt woodshop teacher inadvertently instructs his students how to build the hammer that finally does him in, only now the instrument is less a symbol of a bygone global proletarian movement than of an atavistic, even reflexive revolt devoid of the bright promises of communist utopianism or liberal multiculturalism. While the dark allegory predicts the collapse of backwards, violent bureaucracies and reminds that, like art, they too are human inventions, it withholds projecting what might take their place. But if there is a hopeful gesture in *The Tribe*, it is its utter refusal to tell viewers what to think; absent of the usual tools of frequent close-ups and rapid cuts, it instead transforms audiences from passive consumers of images into active agents who, in the midst of visual uncertainty, must look, think, and

struggle to make sense of it all for themselves.

BRANDON KEMP

*Sewanee: The University of the South*

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#### NOTES

1. Wyman, Annie Julia, 'The Tribe' and the Language of Cinema', *Los Angeles Review of Books*, 10 December 2015, <<https://lareviewofbooks.org/essay/the-tribe-and-the-language-of-cinema>> [accessed March 19, 2016].
2. Tafoya, Scout, 'Review: *The Tribe*', *Roger Ebert*, June 10 2015, <<http://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/the-tribe-2015>> [accessed 19 March 2016].