



tulpan

Spring
Season
2010

Review by A. O. SCOTT, New York Times:

Tulpan, the first fictional feature by the Kazakh director Sergey Dvortsevov, might be described as an epic landscape film, a sweetly comic coming-of-age story or a lyrical work of social realism. But the setting — a windswept, sparsely populated steppe in southern Kazakhstan — gives the movie a mood that sometimes feels closer to that of science fiction.

The terrain looks singularly unsuited to human habitation, and the nomads who tend their sheep amid the ample dust and meager grass resemble residents of a half-forgotten outpost on a distant planet, waiting for a spaceship to fall from the sky.

At the same time, Asa (Askhat Kuchinchirekov), the young man whose struggles propel the film's modest, keenly observed narrative, arrives in this place with a bit of the allure — and a lot of the alienation — of an intergalactic voyager who has crashed to Earth. Asa has just completed a stint in the navy, and he looks especially odd, so far from the water, when he puts on his sailor's uniform. His command of nautical lore — for example, the predatory habits of the giant octopus — makes him all the more outlandish.

Asa is living with his sister Samal (Samal Yeslyamova) and her husband, Ondas (Ondasyn Besikbasov), a gruff and patriarchal herdsman who serves as Asa's role model and mentor, but also as a wet blanket on some of the younger man's dreams and ambitions.

Ondas has everything Asa wants: three children, a well-appointed yurt, scores of sheep scattered across the steppe. Not that everything is rosy: his ewes keep giving birth to dead lambs, and he is menaced by the specter of debt or dispossession. But his thorny temperament is profoundly at odds with Asa's sensitive, boyish eagerness. And Asa wants so badly to be a man that he keeps tripping himself up.

Tulpan is named for the young woman Asa wants to marry. He courts her with Ondas's assistance, bringing gifts to her elderly parents and working hard to beguile them with octopus stories. Tulpan's face is never glimpsed on screen, and she rejects Asa out of hand because his ears are too big, but he nonetheless decides that he is in love with her. His passion, quixotic though it may be, is also heartfelt and genuinely touching, since it is a measure of his sincerity and his desire to infuse the hard, austere life ahead of him with a touch of romance.

There is a sweet, sentimental side to *Tulpan* but Mr. Dvortsevov applies his own romanticism sparingly, allowing his slender, poignant narrative to thread its way, at times almost imperceptibly, through the film's rough and vivid documentary foreground. He is aware that for much of the audience, in urban Kazakhstan as well as abroad (where *Tulpan* has won several festival awards, including the Prix Un Certain Regard at Cannes), the milieu and the characters will seem almost impossibly exotic.

Ethnographic curiosity is not in itself an illegitimate reason to see, or to make, a film like this one, which belongs to a tradition that stretches back to Robert Flaherty's *Nanook of the North*. The risk is a kind of wide-eyed condescension, a patronizing appreciation of simpler, supposedly more authentic ways of life. But there is nothing especially simple about life on the steppe, or, more crucially, about the emotions of the people who dwell on it, and the viewer quickly loses the sense of their foreignness, which is replaced by a feeling of recognition.

And also of astonishment at what Mr. Dvortsevov and his collaborators (especially his co-writer, Gennady Ostrovskiy, and the cinematographer, Jola Dylewska) have achieved. One measure of this is suggested by an interview distributed with the film's press materials, which includes the question, "Please tell us about working with sheep and especially how you accomplished the lamb birth scene."

That scene, a milestone in cinematic ovine obstetrics, is both crucial to the story and a tour de force, the kind of thing a director like David Cronenberg or Takashi Miike would attempt only with prosthetics or other special effects. In *Tulpan* you see it for real, a perfectly ordinary event that is also something of a miracle.

