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## Film of the Week: The Tribe

By Jonathan Romney on May 23, 2014

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Critics on the Croisette are often expected by their outlets to file a round-up piece declaring that they've just seen "the best Cannes ever" or "the worst Cannes ever." But there's little newsworthiness in announcing that you've merely seen an okay Cannes. This year hasn't been that bad, with not too much to complain about—but it's been decidedly low on thrills. There was no champagne supernova like *The Great Beauty*, and no title that got everyone arguing, like *Blue Is the Warmest Color*. Despite a handful of very good films, there's been practically nothing to disturb people—or to make them think (as the occasional Cannes film does), "I never realized that film could do that."

It took till nearly the end of the fortnight for the festival to deliver what French critics call *un OVNI*—a UFO—in other words, one of those rare films that you can't quite believe really exist, that demonstrate that cinema still has a few tricks up its sleeve. I'm talking about the Ukrainian film *The Tribe*, by Myroslav Slaboshpytskiy, a winner of three prizes in Critics Week. As a member of that section's Nespresso Grand Prix jury, headed by Andrea Arnold, it was a thrill to discover something so bold, innovative, and downright wayward.

As the opening title announces, *The Tribe* is something you've never quite seen before—a film entirely in sign language, with no spoken dialogue. And no subtitles. There's a good reason for this risky endeavor, which Slaboshpytskiy follows through with intrepidity and absolute rigor. The film is set in a boarding school for deaf children and teenagers, and all its actors are deaf nonprofessionals ("children from the streets," the director says). The protagonist is Sergey (Grigory Fesenko), a young man seen in the first shot asking directions to the school. He arrives, is sent round the back way, and only reappears at the end of a very long take in which we see some sort of official school celebration involving teachers and children of all ages, all communicating in sign language and all apparently getting along famously. Looks like a nice place.



We shouldn't be fooled. The sympathetic adults all disappear from view very quickly as Sergey is inducted by other boarders into a brutal world that's like a nightmarish mix of *If...* and all the harshest high school movies you've seen, with echoes of Clarke (Alan) and Clark (Larry). After a cruel period of exclusion and hazing, Sergey become a foot soldier in one of the gangs that rule the school, taking part in terrorizing younger kids, mugging outsiders, and thieving sorties on trains. He's also enlisted as a pimp, accompanying two female boarders who go out at night to turn tricks with truck drivers; it's a job that Sergei is given after the last boy on pimp duty got crushed to death by a truck. And the adults in all this? The one we see the most of is the school woodwork teacher, who's running the prostitution operation for a local petty official, or gangster, who's planning to send the two girls to Italy. Sergey meanwhile falls for one of the girls, Anna (Yana Novikova), and starts an intensely sexual affair with her—after which things get complicated, all the way up to an ending that had me jumping out of my seat with its abrupt brutality, and its sheer brilliance of execution.

If I'm giving you the plot in such detail, it's partly because you might be surprised that I've been able to work it out. Despite patches of obscurity, and some details that still elude me, *The Tribe's* narrative is utterly clear despite not a word being spoken. In fact, plenty is spoken, but entirely in gestures, and one of the things that the film requires us, and trains us to do, is read those gestures. You won't emerge from *The Tribe* a competent reader of sign language, or precisely be able to translate a phrase like "I'll trade you a blowjob for a visa stamp," but you'll pretty much follow the kind of things that the characters are saying to each other. And you'll become very aware of the intense expressivity of sign language, and the way that these kids' gesturality becomes not just a communication of signs, a translation of words (apparently, what we're seeing is a specifically Ukrainian sign language), but also an expression of emotion—the way a character makes a certain gesture, in anger, contempt or amusement, becomes intensely readable and conveys their personality as much as their meaning. Slaboshpitskiy has compared sign language to ballet or Kabuki, and there's an intense, precise choreography to the way he uses groups. In one scene, a fight in a dormitory erupts before we quite know why, a group of boys piling onto a smaller one—and it's like watching a performance of physical theater, or a Pina Bausch show, individuals suddenly coalescing into a coordinated group before falling apart again.



*The Tribe* is a magnificent example of long take cinema, sometimes using static shots, sometimes using a Steadicam to follow characters through the labyrinthine school corridors, or into an extremely elaborate group set-up. A fight scene begins with a boy on a bike leading us into the tableau, and ends with him leading us out again; in between, a group of marching boys stride in a straight line to the scene of the rumble, a gladiatorial spectacle conducted in silence, although crowds of kids cheer the fighters on with signs alone. Because of the long takes, DP Valentin Vasyanovych's precise compositions (he also edited the film), and because of the absence of words, the film feels at moments like a comedy, although it isn't one. For a moment you think it is, because for most of us there's a residual association of silent cinema with the comic—and that something that has been exploited with brilliant ambiguity by Otar Iosseliani, of whom *The Tribe* also rather reminded me.

What we're watching here, though, isn't comedy so much as irony—in the disconnect between our expectation of spoken words and their actual absence, their replacement by a different kind of "speaking." I'm thinking for example, of the "virtual" crowd roars in the fight scenes, or the fact that characters insult each other, probably call each other very specific names, with a flick of the wrist rather than a word. This radical unfamiliarity means that we have to pay attention to the film in an entirely new way, not just interpreting the actions and gestures we see, but also listening to the sounds that fill the place of speech—the rustle of a character's clothes as he gestures, the involuntary vocal expressions of pain, ecstasy, or anger that emerge from their mouths. There's certainly comedy in the absence of expected sound—a light flashes instead of a bell ringing at the end of a class. But the film also makes brilliant, and sometimes disturbing, use of the fact that its characters can't hear what we hear—for example, the warning sound of the reversing truck that crushes the boy on pimp duty. And if you're profoundly deaf, you don't hear the footsteps or the slamming door when someone enters your dorm at night with violently malign intent...

*The Tribe*, in short, was the most surprising, most inventive, and in many ways most disturbing film I've seen in Cannes this year. And it's a bracingly counterintuitive exercise, in the way that it offers a cinematic voice to a community that's been barely represented on screen, yet does so in a way that's abrasively anti-sentimental, casting its characters not as the lovable, vulnerable innocents you'd conventionally expect them to be on screen, but as pimps, whores, thugs, bullies—just like everyone else you know. You could also see *The Tribe* as an angry film about the way that disabled children and teenagers aren't getting a fair deal from such schools, although that would be a somewhat literal interpretation of something that's a more ambitious social tableau. As for an allegory of the contemporary state of Ukraine—of a nation without authority figures they can trust not to abandon or exploit them, a people left without a voice that can be widely heard, forced to fend for themselves, violently if necessary—that interpretation convinces me more. Anyway, *The Tribe* is an astonishing film—hope that it comes your way soon. Silence never felt so savage.



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