

“To show the beauty of this reality”

Film director Sergey Dvortsevov speaks with WSWS

Richard Phillips
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Sergey Dvortsevov, director and co-writer of Tulpan, spoke with the World Socialist Web Site during his recent visit to Australia. Dvortsevov was born in Chimkent, Kazakhstan in 1962 and worked as an aviation engineer for Aeroflot for nine years before studying at the Moscow Film School in the early 1990s. His first four films—Paradise (1996), Bread Day (1998), Highway (1999) and In the Dark (2004)—were documentaries and won numerous international film awards. Paradise, which depicts the life of a nomadic shepherd, and Highway were both set in Kazakhstan. (See “Tulpan: Poverty and unrequited dreams on the Kazakh steppes”)

Richard Phillips: After directing a number of successful documentaries why did you decide to make a fiction film?

Sergey Dvortsevov: I decided to stop making documentaries because they’d become a sort of a moral barrier for me. Documentaries deal with private life and real personal conflicts but only show one part of your subject’s life. You can make ten different films about one person. With editing and other techniques you can prove almost anything and show them as kind, evil or clever. So this became a moral contradiction for me.

RP: What are the specific artistic challenges with fiction that you’re mainly concerned with?

SD: Making documentaries somehow feels like stealing reality but in fiction you have to create every second of reality and although it’s difficult to do this successfully it’s very exciting.

Tulpan was a real creative challenge, especially because in a place like the steppes there are no trees, mountains or hills. The challenge was to create energy almost out of nothing and show that if you look more carefully at this landscape you begin to understand that it’s full of life, relationships and great beauty. My

task was to show this beauty; to sort of rehabilitate this reality.

RP: The dialogue in *Tulpan* is very simple and yet the film creates characters of depth and complexity. How was this achieved?

DS: The language and the story were important but a script is literature. It was very important for me to find the right film language and tell this story through images. I spent a lot of time working on this, using video before we actually began shooting, which was on 35 mm film, and had many discussions about how to achieve this.

RP: How typical were the hopes and dreams of your characters? In Asa’s case he desperately wants to become a shepherd.

DS: Most young people in Kazakhstan, like young people everywhere, dream of a different life and want to move to the city. For them the city means better possibilities, jobs, comfort and an interesting social existence. But there are also people like Asa who want to settle in the steppes. He had already experienced city life, and knew how difficult it was.

RP: He’d also experienced life in the navy.

DS: Yes, he’d been a member of the Russian fleet and had returned to join his married sister who was living on the steppes. And, by the way, the drawings on the inside of his sailor’s collar, which show his dreams of having a farm and family, are a real thing. There is a long tradition in the Russian navy of sailors drawing their dreams on the inside of their collars.

RP: Could explain something about Asa’s friend, Boni?

DS: There are many thousands like him who want to live in the city but they don’t really know what it is like. Boni thinks it’s some kind of paradise. City life, if you don’t have a decent education or particular occupational skills, is very hard. He has no special skills and in the city his future would be as a labourer carrying sacks at the markets or he would become a thief or something like that.

RP: When did you decide that *Tulpan* would not be shown in the film?

DS: I made that decision while writing the script. During filming, though, many people, including my producer, tried to persuade me to show her. I was convinced that this was not necessary because it was a film and not television where everything is shown. In film it's necessary to understand that it's often more important what you don't show or only partially show. This means that the audience has to imagine her. This way they feel more drawn into the story.

RP: Your film has a number of striking visuals, and many involving long takes with the children and animals. How did you achieve this?

DS: We set up the camera and rehearsed certain things but much of it was unpredictable. We knew that the donkeys, for example, tended to fool around but we couldn't predict how they would behave and it was the same with the little boy. He was capable of doing all sorts of things and so it was a matter of improvisation, good luck and being very patient.

I wanted to catch the special atmosphere of this unique and very isolated place and to present this reality without any film tricks or special editing cuts. Of course, this takes a lot of time and work but there are important rewards.

RP: It appears that little has changed on the steppes for centuries. Is that the case and what changed after the collapse of the Soviet Union?

DS: Since the collapse of the Soviet Union it has become very difficult for these people. There were subsidies but these have gone and life has become much harder. It's a very tough life and they depend entirely on the weather. It is also true, as the film shows, that a shepherd cannot live there alone. He has to have a wife and without a wife he cannot get a flock.

RP: What are living standards for ordinary people in Kazakhstan and what are the levels of social inequality?

DS: Most people live in the cities. The country's main income is from the oil industry so there are many wealthy oil tycoons. But there are also many poor people in Kazakhstan, maybe not as poor as those in Uzbekistan or Tajikistan, but the poverty is increasing because of the global financial crisis and there is a big gap between the rich and the poor.

RP: There are moments in *Tulpan* that remind me of Abbas Kiarostami's work. Have his films been an influence?

DS: I saw *Through the Olive Trees* and *A Taste of Cherry* and I respect his work very much. He is a real poet and one who tries to tell his stories through images and relationships, and not by film

tricks.

I'm not interested in trying to create or copy the style of any particular director and I don't like watching anything that makes me feel the mathematics of the film. As soon I feel that a filmmaker is pressing me to believe his story or his philosophy of life then I lose interest.

My aim is to create something that I feel in my soul and to present life as I feel it. The advantage and nature of film is that it allows you to present physical reality and for people to feel this. I don't want to destroy this physical reality or to replace or change it with stupid ideas or film tricks and that's how we made *Tulpan*.

I'm not trying to prove something but to show this world—its relationships and physical reality—to people. It is also necessary to capture something of the mystery or unpredictability of life. That's why the scene of the ewe giving birth was very important and magical because it's something you cannot accurately explain in words. I divide films into those with magic and those without it.

RP: What has happened to the film industry since the collapse of the Soviet Union?

DS: The Soviet Union was not the right system but there were some good things that should have been saved. It's not a question of destroying everything. Now there are a lot of bad movies being made and the television stations only show rubbish and hours of serials, which make audiences silly.

RP: But isn't this a global phenomenon?

DS: Yes, but in Russia, like many other things, they embrace this situation even faster than anywhere else. Now we have wild capitalism and there are many people who have not just become very rich but want to be the world's biggest capitalists. This is the attitude of a lot of those involved in television who are only interested in making money and don't care about people at all. It's a very corrupt system. Film audiences have also changed and the cultural level is low. If you make a film that's a little bit complicated then audiences are not used to it and sometimes don't understand.

Last year there were about 200 films made in Russia but few of these were any good. Our film was the most widely released Russian film internationally last year and has been screened in over 40 countries, yet the Ministry of Culture didn't give us any money to make *Tulpan*—they just weren't interested.



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