



Dawa and Geliban in *Mongolian Ping Pong*.

EVEN IN EDEN, BOYS WILL BE BOYS

Mongolian Ping Pong

review by Girish Shambu

In our DVD age, there are still movies that cry out to be seen on the big screen. This is especially true for epic-scale, large-budget films with lavish production values. *Mongolian Ping Pong* is a Chinese film that demands to be experienced in the theaters, but for none of those reasons. It's a small, intimate, quiet film made on a modest budget—the kind of film that audiences often choose to watch at home on DVD.

The reason why this is a big-screen movie has to do with its setting: the unspeakably picturesque, wind-swept grasslands of outer Mongolia. The movie tells the coming-of-age story of a boy who lives with his sheep-herding family in a tent home in the steppes. He finds a ping pong ball floating in a creek one day, and is fascinated by this unknown object. His grandmother theorizes it to be a “glowing pearl,” and the lamas at the monastery are stumped by it. The movie follows him and his friends as they try to unravel the mystery of the ball, learning a little bit about both the world and themselves in the process.

The unsentimental modesty of this tale packs a strange and wonderful punch because of the awe-inspiring Mongolian landscape. In this globalized age, when cultures and countries are transforming rapidly—and perhaps starting to lose what once made them unique and precious—this movie looks like a dispatch from another planet. We are surrounded by piercing blue sky, slow serpentine streams, and tall grasses swaying languidly in the breeze. When

night falls, the land is silent and chilled by the silver light of the moon and stars. The shooting style of the movie perfectly complements the majesty of this landscape. The wide shots panoramically take in the horizon. The camera is stationary and calm; it is there to observe, not to draw attention to itself.

But this movie is no bland picture postcard. Hiding in its crevices are signs of change encroaching upon a way of life that has stayed nearly intact since these were the stomping grounds of Genghis Khan several hundred years ago. A traveling salesman with a battered jalopy comes to visit the family every few days and brings news and goods from the outside world. At first, the puzzled family pores over an issue of *Elle* magazine; then they negotiate to buy a new kitchen appliance in exchange for two sheep. (The salesman's pitch: “It's used to make a famous American tea called coffee.”) And inevitably, the family thinks about acquiring a TV set.

In our modern, fast-paced Western society, the discovery of a ping pong ball by a 10-year-old boy would barely merit a blink, but the Mongolian kids in the movie are utterly entranced by its mystery. It's a marvelously revealing touch: The wonders of childhood are sometimes enhanced and sustained by scarcity. In our information-saturated lives, when anything we want or need is close at hand and instantly accessible, perhaps we make it a little harder for children to notice and be captivated by the small wonders of daily life.

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Evan Rachel Wood and Edward Norton in *Down in the Valley*.

JOHN WAYNE DIED FOR YOUR SINS

Down in the Valley

review by George Sax

According to Edward Norton, the star and one of the producers of *Down in the Valley*, he and director David Jacobson watched old movie westerns together in preparation for beginning work on the film. It figures.

Valley isn't really a western—either neo or quasi—but it alludes to, and appropriates ideas and images from, decades of horse operas. It's unabashedly reliant on these ancient Hollywood genre products even as it pointedly comments on the storied American West of the frontier era. Or, more accurately, on the West as it's been portrayed in innumerable, largely forgotten movies and in popular fiction, from James Fennimore Cooper on through Owen Wister, Zane Grey and Max Brand.

Harlan, the initially appealing and forlorn, eventually furtive and dangerous young man played by Norton, presents himself as an anachronistic exemplar of the precepts of strength, modesty and independence of the heroes of these stories. We're introduced to him when Tobe (Evan Rachel Wood), a bored, restless teenager, meets him at the San Fernando Valley filling station where he works. She's on her way to the beach and, intrigued by his odd, shy charm, impulsively invites him to come with her and her friends. An idyllic summer day ends with Tobe's seduction of Harlan and the beginning of an unlikely and increasingly dubious affair.

Tobe lives with her timidly anxious younger brother, Lonnie (Rory Culkin), and her strong-minded but increasingly frustrated father, Wade (David Morse), an officer at a juvenile detention facility. Their household is a picture of suburban alienation, beset by festering resentments and intimations of suppressed violence. There is also love, but it too is largely suppressed. Into this barely contained volatility comes Harlan, and his misunderstanding of its dynamics sets in motion a spiral of disaster.

Jacobson rather obviously wants Harlan's delusional persona to resonate with us as a distorting echo of the American frontier traditions—themselves tinny distortions. More importantly, he wants Harlan to personify the pervasive continuing influence of the trite conventions of popular culture's use of Western history. Harlan has fashioned his own self-mythologizing identity largely out of these clichés, and from the

intense American attraction to guns.

Wade is also a gun fancier and collector, but he denies Lonnie access to the weapons. When Harlan takes the kid shooting with his own ridiculously iconic Colt .45s, he's finding an earlier incarnation of himself in Lonnie.

Jacobson seems to have hit on some interesting material in his concept of Harlan. The attempt to imply a linkage between his pathology and the rootless, sometimes violence-inducing tensions in America's expansive post-urban societies holds some promise. There's an at-once amusing and disconcerting visual discordance in shots of Harlan riding horseback through stretches of expressway-dominated landscape. Jacobson and cinematographer Enrique Chediak's images of the *Valley* are richly and softly luminous; the area has probably never been represented so attractively and with such disquieting symbolism.

But the film never really comes to grips with Harlan and his environment. He never gels as a character. Jacobson's own involvement with the pulp-created West seems to get in the way, sometimes. There are recurring allusions to the history of assembly-line movie depictions of the Old West.

Jacobson may have wanted to do too much and not been able to work it all out. Harlan may have been too novelistic a conception for a movie. Whatever happened (including Norton's reported intervention in the script's preparation), the character becomes less convincing as he evolves into someone more weird and threatening. Harlan's biography is slipped in only perfunctorily and carelessly. And it may be a signal of the movie's eventual incoherence that Harlan is more reminiscent of Robert DeNiro's Travis Bickle than anyone from the repertoire of John Ford or John Wayne, or from one of the thousands of ground-out oaters from Hollywood's mills.

By the time Jacobson shows people filming a scene that's almost straight out of Ford's *My Darling Clementine*, he and his ideas seem overwhelmed. Is his movie really about Harlan's mystified obsessions, or about Jacobson's own cinematic preoccupations?

Valley doesn't realize its interesting ambitions.

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