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The cinema of Béla Tarr – The circle closes

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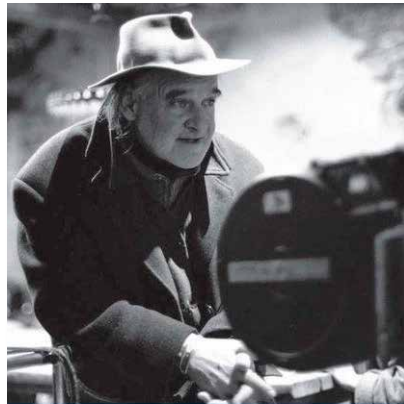
The cinema of Béla Tarr

The circle closes

Miklós Kiss

'Much of the available commentary on the films of Béla Tarr is often confused and confusing.' I could not agree more with John Cunningham. His words, written on the jacket of András Bálint Kovács' book (New York: Wallflower Press/Columbia University Press, 2013), remind the reader of those essayistic writings on Tarr's cinema which often try, without success, to imitate the movies' elusive poetry through their own vague and impressionistic language. By carrying out an accurate and elaborate analysis before arriving to its sober interpretations Kovács' highly-anticipated book¹ blazes a trail through the jungle of such questionable contributions.²

Throughout my reading I was particularly interested in three aspects of the book's focus and range. First of all I was expecting a thorough and clear elucidation on Tarr's



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cinema, paying particular attention to the director's consequent *auteurism* and the films' salient style and peculiar narrative features. Furthermore, I was concerned with the imagined reader as envisioned by Kovács. Having read a lot about Tarr in Hungarian (obviously targeted at a Hungarian audience) I was wondering who would be the addressee of a book written for a broader public as part of a global market, and how Kovács would present those national and regional idiosyncrasies which are often part of the discourse of these films. Finally, as a kind of bonus, I was hoping to get some insights – or at least some speculations arrived at from a systematic analysis – about the pressing question of Tarr's voluntary retirement as a filmmaker.

Quantifying a sublime experience

'Why are your films so pessimistic?' Tarr's answer was a question: 'Tell me if after the film you felt stronger or weaker?' 'I felt stronger', was the answer. 'Thank you. You answered your own question.' (p. 165)

This brief conversation as quoted in the book was part of a Q&A following a screening of Tarr's latest film *The Turin Horse* (2011). As a spectator at this event I remember Tarr's swift reply, which I thought was not only the best possible argument against the usual critique that the Hungarian filmmaker persistently faces but also one of the great ripostes against any uncritical or simplistic definition of art in general. Tarr's answer not only points to the specific function of his movies but also reminds the viewer of the empowering potential of the art experience that lingers beyond its sometimes feature-length gloomy visions.

Nonetheless, one may easily indulge in Tarr's artistic view as I did during the Q&A and as most of his critics do by hailing him as 'the last modernist', a 'visionary filmmaker', or a member of 'the dying super-species of cinéastes'. However, it is immediately noticeable that Kovács strikes a different note. Instead of drifting towards the temptation of writing an essayistic, value-laden interpretation or trying to crack open the director's heavy-shelled authorial intentions, he chooses a method that gathers quantifiable facts from which he then presents a solid and crystal clear functional analysis. His rigorous quantitative take on a Bordwellian historical poetics does not controvert but only scrutinises the sublime experience within a rational discourse. An empirical, longitudinal comparative approach owing much to the practice of Barry Salt's statistical style analysis (1974)³ confirms many (and disproves some) of our intuitive hunches concerning the experience of viewing Tarr's films. It assigns analytical precision to impressions of slowness, darkness, unconventional use of dialogue, stationary or circular movement, etc. – somewhat subjective qualities that most reviewers attribute to Tarr's cinema. Pointing out connections and patterns, Kovács sheds a revealing light on trends in

Tarr's work, leading to a justified argument for a specific stylistic genealogy that traces out different working periods through an 'internal evolution' (p. 1) within the oeuvre. Obviously, a 'quantitative analysis can tell us neither *why* something changes nor what this change *means*' (p. 5). This important remark qualifies a distinction between Salt's slightly naïve stylometry theory and Kovács' method. In the 1970s Salt assumed a causative link between his detected data and an aesthetic experience, while Kovács knowingly denies such causality and admits that '[c]auses of changes and the meaning of changes will always remain the domain of the intuitive critic' (ibid). Undeniably, information gathered by means of a meticulous close reading, for example by counting close-ups or by measuring shot lengths, does not lead directly to absolute explanations but may offer tools for attaining a clear and meaningful grasp of Tarr's artistry.

If he is writing on the films of Béla Tarr then Kovács, the author of numerous books on art cinema (most recently *Screening Modernism: The European Art Cinema 1950–1980* [Chicago-London: The University of Chicago Press, 2007]) and the Hungarian translator of Deleuze's *Cinéma I-II*, is surely an 'intuitive critic'. Moreover, he identifies his own position as that of 'a privileged viewer' (p. 166). Kovács' close friendship and professional relationship with Tarr as well as with the director's regular collaborators (among others his life partner, co-director, and editor Ágnes Hranitzky; the writer László Krasznahorkai; the composer-actor Mihály Víg) guarantees an advantageous writing position.⁴ Nevertheless, the book starts in a biographical mode with a chapter on Tarr as a person; it is paved with personal anecdotes about his 'non-compromising perfectionist' (p. 14) and 'eccentric personality' (p. 6), only then does Kovács assume the role of a film academic with scholarly expertise in dissecting 'the Tarr-style' (three out of six chapters). Defending his position as a viewer and the outcomes of his empirically-scaffolded analytical method, Kovács does not shy away from entering into confrontations with the director, including a cardinal issue they could not get past (Kovács' and Tarr's disagreement is about their different views on characters, which is discussed in the book's last chapter). By having trust in and being consistent to his methodology – that is, by acknowledging and scrutinising 'the difference between intention and the realisation of the intention' (p. 167) – Kovács reaches an analytical accuracy with which he can unfold insights and trends in the oeuvre that 'may remain hidden even to the author of the films' (p. 5). One of the most exciting findings resulting from this method is related to Tarr's signature long takes which, as Kovács' quantitative analysis proved, 'shows a remarkable pattern [of] a constant and almost monotonous increase in shot lengths' (p. 91) throughout the whole oeuvre – a striking revelation which not only surprised Kovács but Tarr himself (p. 92). These exposures on style visualised in charts and diagrams are undeniably the book's most valuable contributions.

Béla Tarr or Tarr Béla, but who is the reader?⁵

Beyond its undisputed analytical merits in mapping the Tarr-style (or probably thanks to the emerging insights of the meticulous method) the book takes a clear stand on these films' cultural, geographical, and political specificity, a topic that defines a considerable part of the discourse surrounding Tarr's cinema. Comparing Tarr's universal vision to that of Tarkovsky, Kovács downplays cultural explanations against his exhaustive formal and stylistic assessment. Following a reasonable view according to which the Russian Orthodox tradition would not suffice to *fully* explain Tarkovsky's transcendentalism, Kovács claims that 'there is nothing "Hungarian" in Béla Tarr, and no Hungarian cultural or cinematic tradition would help in appreciating or understanding his particular stylistic universe' (p. 97). The claim's general point is that a cultural-historical contextualisation loses its analytical pertinence if the given film has the same effect on a native viewer as on a foreigner who is unfamiliar with the given tradition. In Tarr's case, while the films' universal references are style-related and clearly detectable (e.g. reliance on the modernist tradition of long takes) their specific, national allusions remain too subtle for both foreign and Hungarian audiences (e.g. Péter Breznyik's step dance in *Damnation* [1988] is a direct but delicate citation of the actor's similar performance in *The Message of the Emperor* [László Najmányi, 1975]).

Taking his point a step further, Kovács extends this doubt in looking at the oeuvre from a cultural or cinematic tradition with his main reluctance towards historical and political explanations. Although admitting that in Tarr's world 'every aspect of the environment carries signs of history, politics and social situation' (p. 63) Kovács concludes that these films are purposely moving away from being defined in relation to historical time or concrete space. Without vindicating any exclusive interpretative position he sees Tarr's cinema as 'a vision that shows neither national characteristics nor particular signs of a period of time any more specific than the end of the twentieth century' (*ibid.*). Emphasising the primacy of style, Kovács argues that already in Tarr's early documentary-fiction period the films detach themselves from their concrete social and economic environment and concentrate 'on human rather than social relationships' (p. 39). According to Kovács' central conclusion the subjective authorial gaze outweighs the objective social gaze. Even in his early movies, by somewhat faking the style of *cinéma vérité* (p. 30), Tarr only exploits 'social reality' and, by keeping society in the background, concentrates on 'simple human stories' (p. 31). Such an authorial concept (which is one of the key ingredients of Tarr's *auteurial* appreciation) becomes more apparent in the second period of internationally-acclaimed films starting with *Damnation*. An increasingly chiselled style obscures any particular reality of concrete historical or geographical coordinates; instead, its 'global affect'⁶ as Rancière called it creates a general atmosphere and communicates a psychological state ('feeling of disappointment' [p. 4], 'irrevocable disintegration' [p. 68], 'general

desperation', 'human helplessness' [p. 72], 'entrapment' [p. 99]) with universally identifiable relevance. In Kovács' apt summary:

[T]he most important thematic element of Tarr's stories...is not even a topic or a theme, but rather an attitude or an approach to human conditions ..., a fundamentally compassionate attitude toward human helplessness and suffering in whatever situation. (p. 151)

The historical and political decontextualisation of Tarr's films may be reasonable for foreign audiences while it perhaps sounds simplistic for a Hungarian or for that matter any Eastern European reader. As strange as it sounds this mismatch is one of the main reasons for the discrepancy between Tarr's international and Hungarian reputation. In Kovács' convincing explanation Tarr's international acclaim is due to his unique application of the tradition of the European modernist style and to the momentum of the contemporary globalised festival cinema (one may also see similar reasons behind the festival successes of contemporary Romanian films). However, the international applause stands in sharp contrast with Tarr's domestic neglect, even depreciation, which feeds upon Eastern-European historical emotions and contemporary national and political sentiment. Sadly, most of Hungary's last 20-25 years have targeted Tarr (and Krasznahorkai) as a dartboard for shallow cultural-political attacks, of which these manipulations naively (or perhaps very knowingly) took the films' universal despair as a covert insult against national self-esteem. This egotistic and paranoid reaction is nothing new in relation to the region's film history, as its frustration and poisonous mistrust is deeply rooted in the authorial culture-politics of Hungary's past era (trained in dealing with, among others, Miklós Jancsó's or Károly Makk's Aesopic film language). Ultimately such misinterpretation took a heavy toll on Tarr's domestic reputation, further widening the gap between his international and national status to grotesque levels.

Even though Kovács evokes some of the stunning examples of parallel compliments and abandonment he assigns only five pages in the book's conclusion to discuss this unusual disparity. I see two simple reasons behind keeping such distance. One of the key arguments of the book is about reasoning for universal values and aesthetic dominance in Tarr's films against any determining relevance of historical or cultural context. Also, the incongruity between Tarr's international and domestic reputation is visible and important only from the Hungarian point of view. Downplaying the relevance of the question is understandable and equally telling regarding Kovács' aim in targeting international readership, hence the primacy of the English language edition over its Hungarian counterpart (also published in 2013; unfortunately, concerning this question, I did not have the opportunity to compare the English edition with the Hungarian version).

Kovács eventually cuts through the paradox: he claims that ‘the difference in the appreciation of these films is to be found in the personal attitude of the appreciator’ (p. 173). Then, he admits in a tongue-in-cheek manner that ‘the discrepancy between national and international appreciation definitely cannot be explained by...psychological factor, unless we claim that international critics like more depressive films than most of their Hungarian colleagues’ (ibid). This brings him to the logical deduction that even though these films are apolitical and non-historical the discrepancy in appreciation is fixed in the cultural and geographical locus of the given viewer, from which position socio-political determination trumps style – that is, ‘national sentiment overrules aesthetic quality’ (ibid). Kovács’ laconic conclusion abruptly halts his own train of thought although the implication he arrives at hints at an argument, speaking volumes of that national sentiment, according to which the domestic negligence of Tarr’s cinema is basically a result of an ideological protest against the director’s worldview and personality. After all, it takes less effort to grasp Tarr’s character than his movies.⁷

The oeuvre closes

‘I want to make one more film about the end of the world, and then I will stop making films.’⁸

Instead of further reconstructing such a pointless discussion it is better to turn to another peculiar question and address the book’s treatment of the curious issue of Tarr’s voluntary retirement from filmmaking. Having read about his private and professional struggles and learning about his non-compromising perfectionism it is important to understand that his retirement is not a retreat. Even though Tarr has, self-declaratively, stopped making *his personal movies* he continues to work as a producer and teacher, supporting the endeavors of others in creating *their own cinema*. Kovács’ explication reinforces this view, claiming that Tarr decided to quit out of artistic reasons and not by beholding to the sombre personal and ideological circumstances. *The circle closes*, where that *circle* does not refer to a career but an aesthetic necessity and is more precisely a *cycle* of films characterised with an internally and – as Kovács demonstrated – gradually evolving stylistic and thematic permutation. The *closure* is not an end but a realisation of the *exhaustion* of those stylistic and narrative qualities which distinguish Tarr’s cinema.

There is no doubt that Kovács’ analysis of *The Turin Horse* (pp. 145-153) is strongly influenced by the awareness that the object of his study is not only Tarr’s latest but also his final film. However, taking such a biased approach is not problematic – after all, Tarr was similarly biased by his own declaration, spoken well before he started to make this last movie. As the above quote stresses, *The Turin Horse* was

always meant to be his final film. In fact, this position of knowledge allows Kovács to shed light on those specific characteristics of the film which may rationalise such a directorial decision. In keeping with the entire book's objective method his informed point of view provides strong analytical evidence to its assertions. For example, claims according to which this film is 'the most radical of all of his [that of Tarr's] works' (p. 145) or that the Tarr-style was 'brought to its extreme point here' (ibid) are not empty words but justified statements through clear explanations that convey evidence from the entire oeuvre. Following a meticulous analysis of the entire corpus of Tarr films and compared to the insights of these analyses, arguments that describe *The Turin Horse* as a film of extreme repetition (p. 147), disappearing and dysfunctional dialogues (p. 148), radicalised narrative slowness (p. 149), or of deterioration of represented events (p. 150) make objective sense. In Kovács' interpretation the all-out representation of stylistic and narrative deterioration, decline, and disappearance is a six-day *story* of 'counter creation' (p. 148) which necessarily leads to an ultimate blackout not only in the film's diegesis but in Tarr's filmmaking activity too.

As the director declares, since he 'arrived at a degree of expressivity, one which seems impossible to increase' (p. 1), 'he has nothing more to say' (p. 140). Let us hope – and Kovács shares this wish (p. 2) – that such a categorical announcement is only about the end of one specific way of filmmaking. In the meantime I recommend reading András Bálint Kovács' book, which makes the reader/viewer want to re-enter the circle and re-experience, this time from a more knowledgeable position, Béla Tarr's empowering artistry.

Notes

1. In 2007 the book was first commissioned by an English editor and it was finished in 2010 under contract with Columbia University Press (Bálint 2013).
2. Contrasting with Kovács' method and tone, I would include Jacques Rancière's (2013) book on Tarr's films among these problematic writings. At any rate, I sympathise with Rose McLaren's evaluation: 'the distance between the abstractions of philosophy and the immediately physical nature of the art discussed can be problematic where either that distance is not successfully bridged or, worse, it accommodates a distortive reading that attempts to fit individual works of art into the broader intellectual arguments that philosophy might privilege. Both problems apply here... Rancière's ambition seems to be more grandiose than particular, and in this way it can feel as though Tarr is just a means for the philosopher to reach his bold conclusions' (McLaren 2013).
3. With a primary aim of testing and correcting auteur critics' vague hypotheses, former physicist Barry Salt's statistical approach isolated and quantified stylistic constants across films. His comparative method, inspired by musicology's *stylometry*, was powered by empirically-collected data (shot lengths, shot length distribution, camera movements, etc. – parameters that are under the control of the filmmaker).
4. In 1988 Kovács worked on Tarr's *Kárhozat* (*Damnation*) as an artistic consultant. During the writing of his book he was in continuous correspondence with Tarr and Hranitzky (p. vii).

5. 'For about sixteen years Béla Tarr was not the same as Tarr Béla' (p. 171). In playing with language (in Hungarian the surname is placed before a person's given name) Kovács refers to the fact that Tarr's international recognition only came around the second half of the 1980s.
6. Rancière 2013, p. 34.
7. It would not be fair to conceal the fact that sometimes Tarr himself fuels such emotions. See for example the ill-fated interview in *Der Tagesspiegel* (Schulz-Ojala 2011) and a follow-up article about the controversy it unleashed in Hungary (Schulz-Ojala 2011b).
8. The quote, translated and cited by Kovács (p. 2 and, in a slightly different version, p. 145), is part of Tarr's announcement after the release of his film *The Man from London* (2007); Malusia 2008, p. 25.

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Impossible dreams: 'Europe and Love in Cinema'

Fiona Handyside

As its title makes clear, *Europe and Love in Cinema*, edited by Luisa Passerini, Jo Labanyi, and Karen Diehl (Bristol: Intellect, 2012), offers an intriguing and