BÉLA TARR, THE TIME AFTER

JACQUES RANCIÈRE

Translated by Erik Beranek

UNIVOCAL

Béla Tarr, le temps d'après
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I. THE TIME AFTER

An evening with the family. On television, a speaker recapitulates the official version of the history[1] of humanity. There has been primitive man, feudalism, and capitalism. Tomorrow there will be communism. For the time being, socialism is paving the way for it and must fight hard against its rival, capitalism, to do so.

Such is the official time in Hungary at the end of the 1970s: a linear time with well-defined stages and tasks. The father of the family of *The Prefab People* translates the lesson for his son. He does not say what he thinks of it. But one thing is certain for the spectator: neither the father's conduct, nor that of the narrative, takes this temporal model as its standard. Indeed, within the first minutes of the film we saw him leave his wife and children, despite the former's tears, and without responding to her questions concerning the sense of his departure. Apparently he has already returned, or not yet left. And the unfolding of his actions is far removed from the official order of times and tasks. In the preceding sequence, he and his coworkers, charged with overseeing a power station, improvised a soccer match on rolling office chairs. In the following, we will see him dump his wife and

1 It is important to note that the French word "histoire" can be translated either as "history," or as "story," depending on context. Because the tension between "situations" and "stories" is one of the threads that runs from the beginning to the end of this work, "story" has been chosen in almost every case. It should not be overlooked, however, that in many instances both meanings ought to be heard equally: the story told in an "official history" is a story nonetheless [TN].

children at the entrance to a swimming pool, situated in the shadow of a factory chimney, to go talk with a friend who thinks it is time to leave when one can no longer distinguish the clouds in the sky from the smoke of the factories.

"Our time has passed," his wife notes melancholically, evoking the hours of boisterous dance that marked the happy days of her youth from beneath the dome of the hairdresser's hooded hair dryer. The following sequence illustrates this in the dance-café where her husband leaves her alone with her glass, inviting another woman to dance or repeating nostalgic refrains with a chorus of males: withered Roses of Pentecost or autumn leaves carried away by the wind. After which, the film will take us back before its own beginning, announcing the husband's departure and his reasons for leaving: the possibility of making big money by going to work abroad. Within a year of which to buy a car, perhaps; within two years, a house. In vain, the wife opposes his consumerist dreams with the happiness of being together: he will leave, as we know, since we have already seen him leave. In vain, on our part, would we believe the separation irrevocable. A close-up of the tears of the abandoned wife is succeeded, without transition, by a long shot of a store where the couple, together again, acquire a washing machine equipped with eighteen programs. And the final shot will show them slumped on the platform of a truck beside this first symbol of their new prosperity.

Released in 1981, *The Prefab People* is Béla Tarr's third film, produced and directed in socialist Hungary. The unfolding of the narrative already points to the great distance between official planning – of production and of conducts – and the reality of lived time, the expectations, aspirations, and disenchantments of the men and women of the young generation. The tension between these two temporalities does not only indicate the break [*l'écart*][2] with the official vision of the present and the future that the young Béla Tarr would allow himself. It also allows for a rethinking of the temporal development of the filmmaker's works. It is common to divide this *oeuvre* into two major periods: there are the films of the angry, young filmmaker, grappling with the social problems of socialist Hungary, wanting to shake-up the bureaucratic routine, and to call behaviors issued from the past into question: conservatism, egoism, male domination, the rejection of those who are different. And there are the films of maturity, accompanying the collapse of the Soviet system and its disenchanting capitalist consequences, when the censure of the market has taken over for that of the State: darker and darker films, in which politics is reduced to manipulation, the social promise to a swindle, and the collective to the brutal horde. From one period to the other, from one universe to the

2 The French word "écart" – which is so central in Rancière's writings on film, and which punctuates his discussion of the progression of Tarr's *oeuvre* – has been translated as "gap" in almost every instance. Cf. Rancière's *Les écarts du cinéma*. Paris: La Fabrique, 2011 [TN].

other, the style of the *mise en scène* seems to change entirely, as well. The anger of the young filmmaker was translated into the brusque movements of a hand-held camera, which leapt from one body to another in a tightened space and drew as close as possible to faces in order to scrutinize their every expression. The pessimism of the mature filmmaker is expressed in long sequence shots that delve into the empty depth of field surrounding individuals enclosed in their solitude.

And yet, Béla Tarr tells us time and again: there is not, in his *oeuvre*, a period of social films and a period of metaphysical and formalist works. It is always the same film that he makes, the same reality of which he speaks; he simply delves a little deeper into it each time. From the first film to the last, it is always the story of a broken promise, of a voyage that returns to its point of departure. *Family Nest* shows us the young couple, Laci and Irén, vainly besieging the housing service in hopes of obtaining the apartment that would allow them to escape the stifling atmosphere of the paternal home. *The Turin Horse* shows us the father and daughter packing their meager belongings one morning to leave an infertile land. But it is over the same horizon-line, behind which we saw them disappear, that they enter into view again, walking in the opposite direction and returning to the house to unload the things packed that morning. The difference between the two is precisely that no explanation is worth anything anymore: there is no longer any obtuse bureaucracy, any tyrannical

stepfather blocking the path to promised happiness. It is only the same wind-swept horizon that urges individuals to leave and then sees them home again. Passage from the social to the cosmic, the filmmaker willingly says. But this cosmic is not the world of pure contemplation. It is an absolutely realistic world, absolutely material, stripped of all that dulls pure sensation, as only cinema can offer it.

For Béla Tarr's problem is not that of sending a message about the end of illusions and, eventually, about the end of the world. No more than that of making "beautiful images." The beauty of images is never an end. It is only the reward for a fidelity to the reality that one wants to express and to the means that one employs in doing so. Béla Tarr never stops hammering out two very simple ideas. He is a man concerned with giving the most precise expression possible to the reality that people live. And he is a filmmaker entirely occupied by his art. Cinema is an art of the sensible. Not simply of the visible. Because all his films, since 1989, are in black and white, and because silence plays an ever-greater role in them, it has been said that he wanted to bring cinema back to its silent origins. But silent cinema was not an art of silence. Its model was the language of signs. Silence only has tangible power in the sound film, thanks to the possibility it offers of dismissing the language of signs, of making faces speak not through expressions signifying sentiments, but through the time taken to turn around their secret. From the beginning, Béla Tarr's image is intimately tied to sound: the hubbub,

in the first films, at the heart of which the characters' complaints are raised, the words to silly songs set bodies in motion, and emotions are disposed upon faces; later on, the cold indifference of miserable bistros, where an accordionist drives bodies mad, before the muted sounds of the accordion quietly accompany their ravaged dreams; the noise of the rain and the wind, which carry words and dreams away, chuck them in the puddles where the dogs shake themselves off, or send them wheeling through the streets with the leaves and detritus. Cinema is the art of the time of images and sounds, an art developing the movements that set bodies in relation to one another in a space. It is not an art without words. But it is not the art of the word that recounts and describes. It is an art that shows bodies, bodies expressing themselves among other bodies through the act of speaking, and through the way in which the word has an effect upon them.

There are two great arts of the word. There is literature, which describes that which we cannot see: the appearance of the things it imagines and the feelings felt by fictional characters. And there is rhetoric, which urges action either by arousing motivation for it, or by sketching its outcome in advance. Each makes use of the other in its own way. Rhetoric borrows the necessary colors from literature to make promises more sensible and actions more convincing. Literature, for its part, gladly crafts stories from the gap [*l'écart*] separating the promise of words and the reality against which

actions collide. It is in this gap that militant fiction finds its dominant model. The denunciation of fallacious promises is presented in such fiction as encouragement to work for a different future. This critique can become complicit by confirming, in its own manner, the official scenario of the future to be constructed. But, conversely, when it renders this reality – denied by rhetorical fiction – autonomous, before our very eyes, it opens a distance with respect to all the scenarios of ends to be attained, and all the means of implementing such scenarios. This, then, is how angry, young filmmakers mature: not by losing their illusions, but by untethering the reality to which they wish to remain faithful from the expectations and sequences that bind the logic of fiction to the temporal schemes of the rhetorics of power. The essence of realism – contrary to the program of edification known by the name of socialist realism – is the distance taken with regard to stories, to their temporal schemes and their sequences of causes and effects. Realism opposes situations that endure to stories that link together and pass from one to the next.

This can begin with the slight gap that opposes the reality lived by individuals to the time of planners and bureaucrats. Thus, the narrow margin in which an angry, young artist could work at the end of the 1970s in the country of five-year plans was defined: showing that which did not circulate sufficiently between the perspective of the planners and the lived experience of individuals; that which did not move

quickly enough in the realization of promises; that which testified, in the attitude of bureaucrats, to an insufficient attention to the sufferings and expectations of those who depended upon them. Such is the space that authoritarian regimes concede to artists in the time of "the thaw." But, in order to exploit the breach offered, it is already necessary to loosen the constraint that binds the arguments of stories to the exposition of "problems," the existence and domain of which are defined by the power of the planners. It is necessary to take more time than is required for the illustration of the "problem of housing the young" in the common room, where "problems" are translated into insinuations, accusations, complaints, or provocations – in the carnivals, bars, or dance-halls, where the promises of songs are belied by vacant eyes or by the idle hands that nervously finger a glass. It is necessary to call upon actors who are not actors, but people to whom this story might have happened, even if this was not in fact the case – men and women who are called upon, not to perform these situations, but to live them, and therefore to incarnate expectations, lassitudes, disenchantments in which it is their own experience, the experience of any socialist individuals whatever, that is expressed, and who do so, not in the conventional expressive codes, but in the connection between words times, spaces, refrains, gestures, objects.

It is this interweaving that constitutes the reality of a situation, the reality of the lived time of individuals. At first, it is made into the section of a

diptych (reality against promise), but soon it will be considered for itself; these connections will always continue to mobilize cinema, and their exploration will require the ever more driven exploitation of its resources, of its capacity to give each word the space of its resonance, to give each sensation the time of its development. Stories demand that we retain, from each situation, the elements capable of being inserted into a schema of causes and effects. But realism, for its part, requires us to go ever deeper into the interior of the situation itself, to expand, ever farther back, the chain of sensations, perceptions, and emotions which make human animals into beings to whom stories happen, beings who make promises, believe in promises, or cease to believe in them. As such, it is no longer with the official deployment of time that situations are confronted, but with their own immanent limit: there, where lived time is connected with pure repetition, there, where human speech and gestures tend toward those of animals.

These two immanent limits effectively mark the period that begins, in 1987, with *Damnation* and culminates, in 2011, with *The Turin Horse*, which Béla Tarr openly presents as his final film. But it is not necessary to understand by this that he is a filmmaker of the end of time that follows the catastrophe of Sovietism. The time after is not the morose, uniform time of those who no longer believe in anything. It is the time of pure, material events, against which belief will be measured for as long as life will sustain it.

II. FAMILY STORIES[3]

It all begins with a daily routine, that of work and family. In the street, a woman's steps striking the pavement disturb some hens pecking among leaves and papers. The woman is returning to work. We follow her onto the bus, then to the meatpacking factory where she takes down sausages. It soon becomes apparent, however, that socialist production and the worker's collective are not the primary concern – neither for the characters of *Family Nest*, nor for the filmmaker. He, too, passes quickly to the exit: to what we suppose to be payday, and to the weariness of the faces, as thin as the forms are long; to the ritual of the security-search, that silently supported routine of humiliation, which, in the close-up framing a bag opened at the level of a guard's armband, makes us feel a relation of simple tolerance between the order of the system and the life of the individuals.

We will find Irén, again, at home – sadly, though, not at her own. Before we hear the sound of her voice, the camera has shown us the round face of the father-in-law, master of these parts, in extreme close-up, and has revealed the object of the quarrel: he is deprived of the soup he desires because his daughter-in-law wanted to make crêpes for a friend – what's more, for a gypsy – who she was allowed to invite: one incident among the many

3 The French title of this chapter, "Histoires de familles," involves several meanings, each of which would be understood by the French reader: family stories, family histories, and family business or affairs [TN].

that punctuate the lives of Irén and her daughter in the apartment of her husband's family, where she lives while he is away in the army. As it turns out, his return will solve nothing. It will only heighten the drama, adding another individual to the already crowded home, but also a masculine ear, sensitive to the father's accusations: why didn't Irén amass any savings while housed for free by her in-laws? What, then, was she doing during those evenings she claims to have devoted to overtime?

The family nest is, on the one hand, the home of one's own, dreamt of in vain, and, on the other, the nest of vipers where this dream is extinguished. Whatever is usually said about it, cinema is not well-suited for dreams. And the nest dreamt of by Irén finds its only reality in a merry-go-round gondola, to the sound of a silly song speaking of the sunshine for which one waits. The filmmaker places his lens quite naturally at the heart of the viper's nest. A space that is too full of people is also a space that is framed, saturated, appropriate for a certain type of effectiveness: that of bodies brought close to one another or situated in the sonorous continuum of off-camera voices; that of words transformed into arrows, whose trajectories are readily followed by the lateral movements of the camera; that of faces shot in close-up, upon which the mounting tensions are registered. It is this frame that transforms the "housing problem" into a situation without exit – which is also to say, into a cinematographic situation. Even if the angry, young filmmaker lashes out against the shortcomings of the

socialist State, it is not the individual's connection to the political collective and its statist incarnation that furnishes his material. Without a doubt, *The Outsider* takes us to a disciplinary commission and to a talk on production standards, but the connection of the individual to the bureaucratic norm is of little interest to the filmmaker. This is because it is hardly cinematographic: a simple matter of shot and reverse shot within a neutralized space. The film's center of interest is not Irén's confrontation with the housing employee, who explains to her that it is useless for her to come to him each week asking for an apartment when she will not in any case have the necessary amount of points to live for another two or three years. The employee expresses the cold logic of the system. Which is also to say, he is without affect, without the power to wound. Consequently, it falls upon him to receive her yet again the following week for the same ritual.

What wounds, what destroys, is the circulation of affects in the family nest. It takes place among individuals, in clashes between the generations and the sexes. The tyrannical father-in-law of *Family Nest* never speaks of communism. He does speak endlessly of his generation, though – a generation in which one worked hard, saved up so as to have a better life, looked after one's reputation, and raised one's children well, having known to limit their number. But, even if he lectures them, the father shares the male power with his sons. This, in the first place, is what is brought to bear upon Irén and the

other women. It shows itself in all its violence when the young husband, hardly returned to the family home, leaves his wife and child to take the Gypsy woman home with his brother and rape her on the street corner. And the moralist father treats himself to several extra-conjugal indiscretions, as well. More often, it is exercised in the division between the house, where the wife is supposed to serve her husband and children, and the bistro, which is essentially the place where male sociality is enjoyed over a glass of beer. "All that interests you is your beer and having a good time with your friends," Kata will say to her husband in *The Outsider*, a complaint shared by the wife of *The Prefab People*. The café is the other site in the battle of the sexes. The wife is brought there on holidays and the lens is kept at a distance. But if the camera's movements are prolonged between the singers on the platform and the family tables, it is only to give a different color to male domination. Only the men move freely through this space, only they take up the idiotic refrains – "*Fallen angel with the pallid face / There is no more love in the land of the thieves*" or else "*The peonies have wilted / My smiling love / Never more shall I call you / In the cold and frozen winter*" – as if these words, speaking of beloved women, were the secret formulas for their own unions, while the wives wait, arranging their perms or fiddling with empty glasses.

Thus, male power organizes the two affective spaces of the familial drama: the tight frame of the apartment, where the camera follows the violence

of wounding words in rapid movements; the looser frame of the café, where the longer trajectories follow the affects of a sentimentality whose enjoyment the men have reserved for themselves. It asserts itself in the *huis clos*[4] of the home, as in the free spaces of the outdoors. It is this connection of the inside to the outside that the films of the angry, young man arrange differently. The space promised even in the title of *The Outsider* – a film in which the gypsy reference is mixed with the "new wave" spirit – seems to answer the closing, whether dreamt or truly experienced, of *Family Nest*. It is not in the home, the couple, and its eternal victim that the film finds its dramatic motivation, but in the non-conformist, András, whose face – bent over his violin, with his long, curly hair, his ecstatic air, and his Christ-like beard – grips us from the first shots. Following the irresolution that drives him from the hospital toward the factory, that pushes him from the woman with whom he has had a child toward the woman who gives up other lovers in order to marry him, and that makes him forget all about her as soon as he can take out his violin, the film adopts an erratic structure. The characters – Balász, the friend who will die of an overdose and perhaps of grief on the wedding day; Kata, the wife; Csotesz, the brother – all appear in the same manner: around a bistro table as if out of thin air, between two tunes

4 The term "huis clos," which might have been translated as "situation without exit," has been left in French throughout, in order to retain Rancière's allusion to Jean-Paul Sartre's play, *Huis Clos* – translated into English under the title *No Exit* [TN].

on the violin, or two encounters with a nostalgic alcoholic from the theaters of Budapest, with a man who, on the contrary, has fled the inhumane capital, or with a painter less occupied with his art than with speeches concerning the privileges of the artist. The camera lingers, with András and his violin, on a gypsy market; it revolves, with András and his brother on roller skates, around an old man crossing the street with a glass of beer; it follows, with no apparent reason, an old woman returning from the market with her empty stroller; or it frames some woman's face, mindful of we know not what, or two young men who smile with complicity as they look at a photo we never see. It shows us András in formal dress, imagining himself conducting Beethoven's *Seventh Symphony*, which plays prosaically from a record player placed at his feet, before concluding its journey with a parody of a welcome speech, addressed to a delegation of "party brothers," celebrating the radiant future, and with the strains of an arrangement of Liszt's *Hungarian Rhapsody*.

The resources of color came together with the nonchalant rambling of the editing, with the atmosphere of the liberation from mores, and with the musical continuum, which passes quickly from the gypsy tunes of the bar to the pop orchestra assembled by András' friends, to create a general ambiance of disrespectful drifting. But this triumph of youth, impassioned by new customs and music on the margin of official society, quickly proves to be nothing but a *trompe-l'œil*. This is not only because

the couple, András and Kata, breaks apart as quickly as it comes together, and because the carefree, young bohemian will end his roving in military service. It is above all because, along the way, the war of the sexes has reassumed its traditional aspect: the young bar-waitress with liberated morals has again taken on the role of the frustrated wife, dreaming of a true family nest and the means of living there comfortably, even if that means saving up by going to live at her mother's for the time being; and the drift of the non-conformist is transformed, by the same blow, into the classical figure of male power, embodied in the society of cheerful amateurs, consuming beer and music among themselves. At this point, the war is reconstituted in a different *mise en scène*: in the musicians' club, at the foot of the platform on which András moves to the sound of a hit song telling of legendary voyages (*"The sea rolls me there / To the coast of India / But we do not care / If we discover America"*) by the band Neoton Familia, Kata's face is framed between the white circles of two spotlights and speaks with that of András, in shot / reverse shot to the rhythm of the flashes of light that isolate their faces in an orange semi-darkness. The *mise en scène* has become more complex, but the conflict has been intensified, as well: the grievance of the victim of male egoism has become the collision of two egoisms. Beyond the return, in *The Prefab People*, to black and white and to the classical figure of female suffering, this collision of two egoisms in the

artificial light of the projectors announces the change of direction undertaken in *Almanac of Fall.*

There is no longer any housing problem in *Almanac of Fall.* Hédi's vast apartment could apparently house several large families and her kitchen seems more spacious than the entire apartment of *Family Nest.* No longer any conflict between the inside and the outside. The existence of an exterior world is only suggested in the first scene by a curtain stirred by the wind. No work to be sought far away, in order to secure a life at home. The money is right there in the apartment, and it belongs to Hédi; the sole objective of everyone living there – János, her son; Anna, the nurse who gives her shots; Miklósz, Anna's lover; and Tibor, the professor introduced by János – is to get his or her share. No longer a female victim of the male order: even if they all want to fleece Hédi, she knows how to assert that it is upon her that they all depend; and if Anna must suffer the lechery of all of the men surrounding her, she knows how to use each for her own ends. They are five individuals who confront one another in a *huis clos.* Socialism and its problems have entirely ceased to exist as the backdrop of the conflict. But even if the structure of the story is that of a chamber-drama, and if the mother and the son tear each other to pieces, we are not exactly in the universe of Strindberg: the conflict between generations is no more the subject of the film than is the war of the sexes or any other dichotomy. It is not for nothing that the film borrowed its epigraph from Dostoyevsky, which the author of

Demons himself borrowed from Pushkin. Guiding and misleading the five protagonists is the devil, who sends them turning in circles. Indeed, the problem that each of them faces is not simply that of imposing his or her own interests and desires upon the others. It is that of making them suffer. Without a doubt, the characters come to blows more than once in order to settle their scores, and even the frail Hédi has the unsuspected strength to strike Anna. And sex lacks all sweetness there. János rapes Anna in the kitchen with the same asperity as the two brothers in the street with the Gypsy, and Anna makes it known that the professor himself has had her with the violence of an animal. But those guided by the devil are not merely animals, they are perverse animals. Anna takes immense pleasure in asking if her nocturnal frolics with the ferocious professor woke Hédi, just as the latter will enjoy, in turn, moralizing the professor, or recounting the event to Miklósz as an affair to which he should attach no importance.

This hell, identified with the presence of others, certainly recalls that of Sartre. But perhaps it is with the devil as it is with the socialist bureaucracy. If the devil interests the filmmaker, it is because of the space he opens for the circulation of affects; it is also because of the problems that he poses to the cinematographic art, and the opportunities he presents for it to be fit with its proper movements. The *huis clos* in which the characters turn in circles is also the occasion for a farewell to a certain idea of documentary cinema, to the will to stick close to life, to listen to its indistinct

hubbub, to capture its wanderings by following the characters and their moods, and by sharing in their chance encounters, in the street, at the markets, in bistros, dance-halls, and carnivals. By closing these five wild animals in an apartment, by bringing them into confrontation with one another in a series of scenes, *Almanac of Fall* employs a theatrical device that breaks with the naturalist style of the films that wanted to grasp life in order to oppose it to the official dogma. The experimental device, fit for isolating affects and exacerbating them, is the occasion for a singular formal experiment, which breaks with naturalism by employing what people sometimes see as its weapons *par excellence*: depth of field and color.

Hédi's *Modern Style* apartment, with its enfilade of vast rooms connected by *portes vitrées*, certainly gives the camera a completely different scope than do the socialist lodgings of the first films. Yet Béla Tarr uses this opportunity not to enlarge the space, but, on the contrary, to compartmentalize it and render it abstract. *Almanac of Fall* offers the first examples of what will be one of the hallmarks of Béla Tarr's visual style: the division of the shot into several zones of darkness and light. This division marks a significant counter-movement, with regard to the style that the European cinema of new waves and angry youths had imposed. In the West as in the East these latter had gladly abandoned the dramatic *chiaroscuro*, which Hollywood operators had inherited from the Expressionism of the 1920s, in favor of a naturalist light. In *Almanac of Fall*, the play of darkness and

light returns in the first shot. But their connection is made more complex. Darkness and light are, from this point on, distributed into several zones, and to do this the filmmaker readily makes the most of the obstacles that stand in the way of the camera's movements. A bar, a wall, a back create a black zone that at times blocks the whole screen before the camera rediscovers a worried or menacing face at the edge of the frame, as if emerging from the night. Often, the scene is isolated between two zones of darkness, or the semi-lit faces of interlocutors are found separated by a vertical bar. From the enfilades, the director has above all retained the possibility of framing a scene between two doors; from the *portes vitrées* he has retained the distance in which the pane of glass sets the scene, and the grille of the decorative, *Modern Style* latticework that separates the characters in the first shot. The depth of field is, then, that of the little windows of light extracted from the darkness of the hell from which scenes and characters suddenly appear. His naturalist effects are thus turned back into artificial effects. The artifice mounts when the frame is opened from above or below in order to show us someone shaving through a transparent ceiling, or a struggle through a glass floor: the fighters are then suspended in the void like the furniture in the kitchen, their bodies contorted like those of Bacon's figures. The space has clearly become pictorial, clearly symbolic, as well.

But to this extreme artifice, the filmmaker usually prefers an artifice that pits one element of realism

against another. This is the function of color, which he employs here for the last time. In *The Outsider* color expanded the setting, it contributed to the documentary-like naturalism of the erratic trajectories between hospital, factory, café, street, market, and nightclub. In *Almanac of Fall* color contributes, rather, to the abstract *huis clos* by overwhelming the depth of field. The director chose two dominant, violently artificial tones for this purpose: the blue in which the apartment and Hédi first appear to us, and the orange in which the profile of Miklósz first emerges. These are the colors that cling to objects and envelop faces for the entirety of the film, even if they are, at times, degraded – the one toward a more "natural" white and green, the other toward pink or yellow. This range of unrealistic colors, together with the compartmentalization of space, recalls the "Synthetist" commitments Gauguin and his imitators once opposed to the Impressionist continuum and its naturalistic flashes of light. Its function is quite different here, to be sure: it is no longer a matter of transcribing an ideal vision, nor of imagining an earthly paradise. The compartmentalization of space and the artificial colors are there, on the contrary, to describe the hell of human relations. But the radicalism of the means chosen has the same effect of a radical rupture with naturalism. Without a doubt, Béla Tarr will go on to renounce the baroque practices intensified here: he will invent a range of gray sufficiently rich to render useless the anti-naturalist uses of color. And for the impossible angles, for the

artistic framings behind Art Deco arabesques, or for the atmosphere stuffed with halos of light, heavy draperies, and Tiffany lamps he will substitute the temporal resources of the sequence shot and of the slow and inexorable movement of the camera around bodies – of which the full rotation executed here around the meditative face of Miklósz offers the first example.

The deliberate artificialism of *Almanac of Fall* does not mark the path to which the filmmaker will be committed. But it puts an end to the artistic and political sequence of films seeking to express the new sensibilities contesting the socialist order through family problems. The "problem of society" became a dark melodrama, even if the last film of this sequence culminates in dark comedy: Anna knew how to make good use of the rape she suffered, beginning an affair that would allow her to marry János – and his promises of inheritance – but, in the last shot, it is with Miklósz that the young wife dances, tenderly entwined, to the sound of an ironic *Que sera sera*, which doubtlessly echoes the sad lessons of popular wisdom more than Doris Day and *The Man Who Knew Too Much*. This sordid and burlesque wedding closes the family stories in which the revolt of the young filmmaker was expressed. From this point on, there will no longer be anything but errant individuals in Béla Tarr's universe. They will occasionally be able to have spouses or children, but the family will no longer be the home of the tension between two orders. It is not, for all that, the war of all against all that will

replace the problems or the illusions of socialism. Traffickers, thieves, swindlers, and false prophets will be at the center of all these films. But, more than figures of evil, they will be the incarnation of a pure possibility of change. A daily routine of rain and wind, of material dilapidation and mental inactivity; a promise of escape from its repetition, whatever that promise may be (sordid traffic, unforeseen attraction, or ideal community): this simple framework will be enough for the deployment of the radical materialism of Béla Tarr's mature films. The devil is the movement that turns in circles. It is not his lesson of despair that counts, but all the riches of light and movement that turn with him.

III. EMPIRE OF RAIN

A long line of pylons beneath a gray sky. Neither its beginning, nor its end can be seen. Cable-cars are running. Their contents cannot be seen either. Ore of some sort, no doubt. But we will see no more of the mine than we will of the miners. It is merely a long rosary stretching to infinity, never stopping: the pure image of uniform space and uniform time.

Yet something happens: whereas the cable-cars advance without end, the camera has begun to draw back. A vertical black band appears: a window frame. Then a black mass obstructs the screen. Little by little its form takes shape: a man is there, motionless, behind the window. We see only his head and shoulders, from behind. But we reframe the situation immediately: the long, uniform rosary beneath the gray sky is what he sees from his window.

This sequence shot, with which *Damnation* opens, is like the signature of Béla Tarr's style: a movement in one direction and the camera moving in the opposite direction; a spectacle and the slow displacement that leads us to the one who watches it; a vague, black mass, which is revealed to be a person seen from behind. The man behind the window will return several times in his films, in a variety of forms. There is the doctor who we see at the beginning and end of *Satantango*, busily spying on his neighbors. There is Maloin, the worker who, at the beginning of *The Man from London*, sees the suitcase thrown from the boat's upper deck and the murder of one of the

accomplices through the glass panels of his signal box. There is the pane of glass at the end of *The Turin Horse*, at first completely obscure, but which, with the backward movement of the camera, gradually allows us to make out both the lone tree, stripped bare, looming on the horizon of wind-swept hills, and the man, prostrate upon his stool, who no longer expects anything from this desolate landscape, nor from the worn-out horse, shut away by the stable doors as if by a tombstone.

A style, as we know after Flaubert, is not the embellishment of a discourse, but a manner of seeing things: an "absolute" manner, says the novelist, a manner of absolutizing the act of seeing and the transcription of perception, against the narrative tradition that rushes on to the effect that follows from a cause. For the writer, however, "to see" is an ambiguous word. It is necessary "to make the scene visible," says the novelist. But what he writes is not what he sees, and it is this very gap that brings literature into being. The situation is different with the filmmaker: what he sees, what is in front of the camera, is also what the spectator will see. For the filmmaker, though, there is also a choice between two ways of seeing: the relative, which instrumentalizes the visible in the service of the succession of actions, and the absolute, which gives the visible the time to produce its specific effect. The counter-movement carried out in the first shot of *Damnation* takes on its full meaning when compared to the movement with which Hollywood films often begin. Let us think of

the panoramic shot of an urban setting with which *Psycho* begins, and of the way in which the field is contracted in order to lead us up to a window: that of the hotel room where Marion Crane and her lover come to make love between two and three. The surroundings thus brushed aside, we are quickly focused upon the theater of the drama, in order to put the characters and their relationships into place.

The establishing shot no longer works this way in Béla Tarr's films: it is not a matter of setting the scene of the small, industrial town where the characters' actions take place. It is a matter of seeing what they see, for the action is ultimately only the effect of what they perceive and feel. "I cling to nothing," says Karrer, the man in the window, "but everything clings to me." This intimate secret of one character is just as much a declaration of cinematographic method. Béla Tarr films the manner in which things cling to individuals. Things, whether the tireless cable-cars in front of the window, the decrepit walls of buildings, the piles of glasses on the bistro's bar, the noise of billiard balls, or the seductive neon of the Titanik Bar's italic letters. This is the meaning of the first shot: it is not the individuals who live in places and make use of things. It is the things that first come to them, that surround, penetrate, or reject them. This is why the camera adopts these extraordinary rotational movements, which give the impression that it is the places that move, welcoming the characters, casting them into the out-of-field, or closing in on them, like a black band occupying the entire screen.

This is also why the setting is usually there before the characters enter, and remains when they have gone. It is no longer relations (family, generations, the sexes, or others) that determine situations; it is the external world that penetrates individuals, invades their gaze and their very being. It is what the woman at the coat-check of the Titanik Bar (played by the actress who played Hédi in *Almanac of Fall*) explains to Karrer (played by the actor who, in the same film, played her favored auditor, the taciturn Miklósz): the fog seeps into every corner, it penetrates the lungs, and installs itself, at last, in the soul itself. In the bar of *Satantango*, Béla Tarr entrusts the miserable Halics with the task of transforming this same idea into a prolonged complaint: the incessant rain destroys all. It has not only stiffened the coat he no longer dares to unbutton. It has been transformed into an interior rain, which springs forth from the heart and floods all the organs.

With *Damnation*, the rain installs itself in Béla Tarr's universe. It is the very stuff of which the film seems to be woven, the environment from which the characters emerge, the material cause of all that happens to them. The hallucinatory scenes of the ball testify to this. The ball, or at least the dance scene, is a quasi-obligatory scene in Béla Tarr's films. This, too, allows us to follow the evolutions and the ruptures. The lens of *The Outsider*, or of *The Prefab People*, placed us unceremoniously among the dancers, and showed them moving to the rhythms of refrains whose silliness guaranteed the

documentary-like authenticity. Nothing of the sort here. The very rhythmic, utterly simple melody (*la-ti-do-ti-do-la / mi-fa-mi-re-do-ti*) that sets the tone first accompanies the lone stream of water on a wall. The tune of the dance gives rhythm to the rain, rather than the collective celebrations. The slow, lateral movement of the camera will then reveal, alternating with the faces of decrepit walls, three groups of people frozen in the doorways of the dance-hall, their dumbfounded gazes fixed upon the out-of-doors. Perhaps they are simply looking at the torrential rain. Perhaps it is the strange scene that we will see in the following shot. Outside, beneath the downpour, a solitary man dances frenetically, but without music, upon a flooded dance-floor. It is from above that we will later see – first from one direction, then from the opposite – the agitated farandoles of those who had first appeared to us as statues of salt, sculpted by the fog and the rain. And at dawn, the water will have invaded the dance-hall where the steps of a man (the same?) continue to smack furiously in the puddles.

Without a doubt, we will have seen the relationships among the four characters at the heart of the film woven and unwoven over the course of the ball. In brief episodes, we will have seen each of these four conspirators trick the others, before the affair is brought to a close at dawn with a report to the police. The devil will have sent them turning in circles like the dancers of the farandole. But the devil is ultimately nothing but the fog, the wind, the rain, and the mud that penetrate walls and clothes,

in order to install themselves in hearts. It is the law of repetition. There is ordinary humanity, which submits to it – and even risks mimicking it – in the joyous farandoles of the holidays. And there are the characters of the story [*les personnages de l'histoire*],[5] who seek to escape from it. Indeed, a story is quite necessary. But, as Karrer says, all stories are stories of disintegration: stories in which one seeks to pierce the wall of repetition, at the price of sinking deeper still into the "interior rain," into the mud of corruption.

In order for there to be a story, it is necessary and sufficient that there be a promise of escaping from the law of the rain and of repetition. In *Damnation*, this amounts to the 20% commission, promised by the bistro's owner, on the value of unspecified wares that must be fetched and brought back in a three-day journey. The innkeeper makes this proposition to Karrer, for whom he can do such a favor since the latter has no occupation other than that of haunting the town's bistros. But such an adventure is too much for Karrer. This is not only a character trait. Béla Tarr's typical character, from this point on, is the man at the window, the man who watches as things come toward him. And to watch them is to allow oneself to be invaded by them, to subtract oneself from the normal trajectory, which converts

5 The aforementioned difficulty concerning the word "histoire" is accentuated here in the phrase "les personnages de l'histoire." While the word "personnage" has been translated as "character" in most cases, it can also be read as meaning "figure" (in the sense of an important or influential individual) in certain contexts. Accordingly, this phrase might also be translated as "the historical figures" [TN].

solicitations from the outside into the impetus to act. In order to act, however, impetus does not suffice. There must be ends. Before, the end was a better life in the snug family nest. But with the end of socialism, this modest dream, the individual aspect of collective prosperity, disappears. The new slogan is not "be happy," but "win." To be on the side of those who win, that is what is proposed to Karrer. This will be the great dream of Madame Eszter in *The Werckmeister Harmonies*, and the lesson that the wicked child Sanyi teaches to his idiot of a sister in *Satantango*. But there is nothing human over which little Estike would be able to prevail. Her sole victory will be over her cat, whom she tortures and poisons in the loft while the rain rages outside.

This, then, is the problem that casts back into insignificance all the talk and the cunning of the "winners": one does not win against rain or repetition. Karrer is Schopenhauerian like his inventor, the novelist László Krasznahorkai, who enters into Béla Tarr's universe with *Damnation*. He knows the nothingness of the will that is at the heart of things. He does not want to look at the rain, he says, like the dogs who await the puddles in order to drink from them. He does, however, know a dog of this sort, who he can recommend to the smuggler. It is the husband, buried in debts, of the woman he loves: a cabaret singer he goes to hear in the darkness of the Titanik as she whispers a crepuscular song – eyes closed, accompanied by obstinate arpeggios – with the words that return with equal

obstinacy: "Everything is over. It is all over. Nothing anymore. Never again."

Yet Karrer is not entirely without practical aims. To send the husband to retrieve the compromising wares is his chance to take his place in the singer's bed, with the hope that some incident along the way – which one might even help to bring about – will prevent him from returning. But physical possession is not an end in itself. A sex scene devoid of any frenzy, as if in time with the uniform movement of the cable-cars, testifies to this. He will say it to the wife: for him, she is the guardian at the entrance of a tunnel leading to something unknown, to something he cannot name. This unknown, in the depths of which something new is to be found, is the single thing to which those who do not act, to which those who are nothing but perception and sensation can aspire. But the woman at the coat-check has already warned Karrer: the guardian of the tunnel is a witch. She is a bottomless swamp, which will only devour him. And while he awaits the husband's departure, standing lookout in the rain, she comes, surrounded by a horde of dogs, to remind him that the only future to expect is the perdition announced by the prophets of the Lord. From this point on in Béla Tarr's work, this figure, the prophet of disaster, will be opposed to those who traffic in promises. But perhaps it is too much to speak of a bottomless swamp. The humanity represented in *Damnation* is not responsible enough for itself to deserve the promises of destruction by war, of plague, and of famine proclaimed, in the

manner of the prophets of Israel, by the woman at the coat-check. The shallow puddle where the dogs drink is the most likely destiny promised by the rain, and by the vain attempts to escape its influence. It is over the course of the ball, surrounded by the downpour, that the destiny of the four hostile accomplices is sealed. All stories are stories of disintegration, no doubt, but this disintegration is itself only an ordinary episode in the empire of rain. Thus, in a corner of the ball, the camera will briefly follow the husband, whose return spells defeat for Karrer, and whose wife seems to make this known by dancing amorously, hanging from the neck of the "victor;" then, in the restroom, the owner of the bistro complaining to Karrer that there are things missing from the delivery, before taking the singer for a good time in his car. It will then return to the nocturnal farandole and to the tireless dancer in the puddles of the early morning, before moving from the columns of the Titanik toward those of the police station, and passing through the window into the room where Karrer, seen from behind, murmurs his denunciation to a silent police officer.

In this way, everyone will have betrayed everyone else. But the betrayals are not what interest Béla Tarr, no more than successes. For him, the true events are not articulated in enterprises, obstacles, successes, or failures. The events that comprise a film are sensible moments, slices of duration: moments of solitude in which the fog of the exterior slowly penetrates bodies from the other side of the window, moments in which these bodies are brought together in a closed

place, and in which the affections of the external world are converted into repetitive accordion tunes, feelings expressed by songs, footsteps on the ground, collisions of billiard balls, insignificant conversations at tables, secret negotiations behind a glass, fights behind the scenes or in the restroom, or coat-check metaphysics. Béla Tarr's art is that of constructing the global affect in which all these forms of dissemination are condensed. This global affect does not allow itself to be translated into feelings experienced by the characters. It is a matter of circulation between several partial points of condensation. The matter proper to this circulation is time. The slow camera movements, which depart from a stack of glasses, from a table, or from a person, rise toward a glass partition, reveal a group of drinkers behind the partition, glide to the right toward some billiard players, return to the seated drinkers, and then leave them aside in order to alight upon the accordionist – these make up the events of the film: a minute of the world, as Proust would have said, a singular moment of coexistence between the assembled bodies, in which the affects – born of "cosmological" pressure, the pressure of rain, of fog, and of mud, and converted into conversations, tunes, shards of voice, or gazes lost in the void – circulate.

From this point on, a Béla Tarr film will be an assemblage of these crystals of time, in which the "cosmic" pressure is concentrated. More than all others, his images deserve to be called time-images, images from which duration is made manifest – the

very stuff of which those individualities, which we call situations or characters, are woven – manifest. This has nothing to do, then, with the "pieces of nature" that Bresson wanted to take from his models, and to assemble into a painter's canvass through montage. There are no pieces, no demiurge of montage. Each moment is a microcosm. Each sequence shot has a duty to the time of the world, to the time in which the world is reflected in intensities felt by bodies. During a burlesque episode in *Damnation* we hear a character explaining the necessity of lifting the true veil to two topless strippers: the veil of Maya, the veil of representation that covers the unnamable reality of the true world. For Schopenhauer, the art that lifts this veil is music. A Béla Tarr film accomplishes this function of music. The successful sequence shot, in this sense, is truly the unnamable, vainly sought by Karrer in the tunnel guarded by the singer. But Karrer is at a crossroads. The camera turns around him, passes over his face, and carries away the secret. As a character, he can only see the unnamable through the veil. As such, he can only betray it – like he betrays his accomplices – and receive the only unnamable that he will have deserved: the puddle beneath the rain from which the dogs drink, the dogs with whom he barks at the end of the film.

IV. CROOKS, IDIOTS, AND MADMEN

Damnation left Karrer barking in the face of a dog, like a final image of the human condition. Before the face of the same actor is made to appear behind a window, *Satantango* opens with a long sequence shot, showing us a herd of cattle leaving their stable. Cows are animals endowed with a weak symbolic power. It is, therefore, as an actual herd, and not as an image of herd mentality, that they must appear to us. Their inaugural presence is certainly given without explanation, but we can justify it *a posteriori*: with the departure of these cows, the last stock of a collective farm is being liquidated. And it is the money from this sale that will be at the center of the intrigue. Thus, the film enacts a counter-movement in relation to the two films preceding it. The calculations of the parasites gravitating around Hédi in *Almanac of Fall*, or the trafficking organized by the innkeeper of *Damnation*, abandon the social preoccupations of the first films in order to plunge us into the universe of intimate dramas and private intrigues. Even if *Satantango* is developed around the story of a nest egg, coveted by a dozen characters abandoned in a forgotten countryside, the film returns the stories of familial viper nests, and of petty trafficking between false friends, to the time of the great collective story.

This is the story of a promise and a swindle. It is, at first sight, the most banal of scenarios for a film addressing communism. And the cyclical form adopted by the film – following László Krasznahorkai's

novel, which it brings to the screen – seems, equally, to be the most banal means of adapting the form of the return to a repetitive history, to a fiction of disappointed social hope. And if one adds that it takes the film seven hours and thirty minutes to show us the twelve episodes – which, in the novel, bring us back to the point of departure – and that this duration is tied to the very slow, rotational movements that the filmmaker is particularly fond of, and readily accompanies with indefinitely repeated musical themes, one easily concludes that there is an exact alignment between the circular form and a story of disillusion. But this conclusion forgets that there is a circle and a circle, just as there is a promise and a promise, a lie and a lie. Yet, it is in this rupture of the apparently identical that the film finds its proper dynamic.

Perhaps this dynamic is given in the title of the fourth episode, taken directly from the novel: "Unraveling." What unravels is indicated to us by the title that the two episodes surrounding it share in common: "The Work of the Spider." The work of the spider is first explained by the innkeeper's imprecations against the Swabian swindler who sold him the bistro without telling him of its secret defect: the devastating spiders that spin their webs everywhere. But the work of the spider is also the mediocre web that the bistro's regulars spin with their petty intrigues, and with the impoverished desires aroused in them by drink and by the sight of abundant breasts. These regulars are the last

survivors of the collective farm, who must meet there in order to divide the money from the sale. The first lie, the first swindle, is that of two members who want to split the sum and sneak off on the sly. And the story of the end of the community could simply be the conflict of human spiders, each wanting to obtain the greatest individual advantage from the collective bankruptcy. It is this mediocre web that will be unraveled by the intervention of a superior liar, the charismatic Irimias, who promises not the advantageous division of the collective dream's remains, but the abandonment of it all in favor of a new and more attractive dream. Indeed, the latter knows the source in which the success of the superior swindle lies: not the greed and cowardice of the little people who are only good for petty trafficking, but their incapacity to live without pride or honor. Only, in order for the swindler's lie to succeed, there must be a secret complicity with him; the web of the little people must already be unraveled. To unravel the webs is not the work of the spiders who only know how to weave them; nor is it the work of the manipulators, especially adept at taking advantage of the rips. There must be a madman or an idiot.

In this case the idiot is named Estike, the youngest child of a marginalized family for which prostitution is the primary means. Idiocy does not designate some measure of intellectual quotient, but two structural traits, two opposed and complimentary traits that are equally necessary for playing the major role in Béla Tarr's films: the capacity to completely absorb

the environment, and the capacity to bet against it. Estike first enters the scene in the guise favored by the filmmaker, that of the dark smudge that a head and shoulders seen from behind create in the camera's view of a great gray space: here, the uniform space of a wind-swept plain, where the desolate earth and the low sky merge in a drab spectrum of grays. When her brother exits the house with leprous walls, we will see her full height, with her overly-long cardigan and her bulky boots, which, along with the short dress draped over her pants, seem to condense the surrounding universe of wind, rain, fog, and mud, rather than providing the means of protecting her from it. Soon thereafter, she and her brother will be no more than two small points absorbed by the gray desert. But in the following shot we will be on the training ground of her second idiotic virtue: her capacity for belief. In the grove to which her brother has led her, they dig a hole where she buries her money, so that it will grow into a tree of gold coins. Estike's idiocy consists, first, in this: not simply in the fact that she believes the most unlikely stories, but in her determination to take all thought *à la lettre*. This is illustrated in the following episode, in which she methodically applies the theory of the "victors," taught by her brother, to her cat, who she tortures and then kills with rat poison, before discovering that she herself is the victim – not so much of her own naivety, but of this very theory – when she sees the empty hole, and then learns from Sanyi that he took the money because he needed it. And this is

confirmed by the rest of this episode, as well, which sees Estike leave through the rain, carrying the lace curtain – which she has fashioned into a shawl – over her shoulders, the dead cat under her left arm, and, under her dress, the rat poison, the remains of which she will swallow at dawn in the overgrown ruins of a chateau, before lying down, cat in arms, having smoothed out her dress and fixed her hair so as to be presentable when the angels come to get her.

It is necessary to dwell upon the two lengthy shots that accompany Estike's nocturnal walk, fleeing the café, through the window of which she saw the adults turning in circles to the rhythm of the accordion, or slumped in their chairs, sleeping off the alcohol paid for with shares of the communal pot. Two walking shots, in which not a single foot sinks into the muddy terrain. We hear only the regular sound of steps, indifferent to the hissing wind. In the first we see only the face of the little girl, her hair plastered down by the rain, and the glow of a gaze in the night, accentuated by the visual rhyme that the first button of her dress produces with it; in the second, her upper-body at dawn, as if wiped out by the downpour and slumped by the fatigue that also dampens her gaze, but continuing her straight route through the muddy plain. This march toward death certainly might evoke that of Bresson's Mouchette, and the lace "shawl" over the little girl's shoulders seems to be an homage to the dress in which the adolescent wraps herself to roll toward the water of the pond. Mouchette eluded the world of guards

and poachers, of drunks and rapists, whose victim she was, by means of a suicide transformed into a children's game. But if Estike imitates Mouchette's rolls, it is only to exert her power by martyring her cat. There are no games in Béla Tarr's universe: only the inertia of things, and the breaches that can create the obstinacy to follow an idea, a dream, a shadow. One dares or does not dare to set oneself in motion. There is the *huis clos* where one turns in circles, bumping up against furniture and other people, and there is the straight march for the realization of a thought. In this sense, the murder of the cat and Estike's suicide are closer to little Edmund's parricide and leap into the void in *Germany Year Zero*. Idiocy is the capacity to transform into gestures the spectacle that one sees through windows, and the shadows stirred up by the words one hears.

That is what this face summarizes in the night and at dawn, at once entirely sculpted by the hissing wind and the lashing rain, and entirely guided by its own resolution to pursue a shadow. This conjunction of two idiocies is the very essence of the cinematographic being, the being at once entirely given and entirely removed in a gaze, in gestures, in a gait. The most singular perfection of the cinematographic art has, perhaps, consisted in the invention of these idiot-figures, with Estike following Edmund, but also following characters who at first seem quite remote, like Ginnie from *Some Came Running* with her stuffed animal / purse and her embroidered pillow. But what makes Béla Tarr's stories of idiots singular is

his manner of rendering duration – the medium in which fog seeps into minds and shadows mobilize bodies – sensible, of having given it an autonomous existence, extracting the shortcuts specific to the time of actions, among which count, first of all, the beginning and the end, the place from which one departs and that at which one arrives.

Still, no one takes the time to walk if he is not guided by the concern to go somewhere, by the desire that his steps not be cast at random, that events have a reason, and acts a destination. Such is the illusion of the Schopenhauerian will-to-live. The young girl invented by Krasznahorkai conforms to this illusion, as do all of his characters. The words from the novel spoken in voice-over at the end of the episode summarize this: Estike is happy that everything makes sense. But it is silently, with neither deliberation, nor explanation, that the young girl on the screen goes toward death. Therein lies the tension between the logic of Béla Tarr's film and that of the novel he scrupulously adapts; or rather, the tension between cinema and literature, since there is no reason to suppose a divergence between the filmmaker and the novelist, who was closely associated with the conception of the film. The filmmaker is interested in bodies, in the way they hold still or move in a space. He is interested in situations and movements, rather than stories and the ends they use to explain the movements, at risk of distorting their force. A situation only releases its power through the gap it opens with the simple logic of a story: the time taken

to follow the uniform march of characters through a plain deprived of all accidents, to turn around a silent face, or to frame the endless gesticulation of bodies in a fixed shot. But this connection can be read in the opposite direction: the gaps suppose the norm of the story. This constraint is also a resource. The films that Béla Tarr directs on the basis of Krasznahorkai's novels are fashioned from the tension between the circular stories of illusory ends the latter offers him, and the possibility he finds in them of constructing a visual scenario which extracts the power of situations that endure from the narrative that binds them together, but which also breaks the circularity of the narrative by giving all the force of these situations to straight lines, to positive lines of flight, forward in the pursuit of a shadow – to the straight lines around which the circular narrative closes its nihilistic logic.

This, then, is the dynamic of the film. The straight line traced by Estike while the men-spiders turn in circles in the bistro, lulled by the alcohol or stirred by the sound of the accordion, is taken up by another tracer of straight lines, Irimias. After a silent static shot has shown us the farmers assembled behind the billiard table where the body of the young girl is laid out, the camera hones in on the solitary face of Irimias and on the speech in which he performs the work of the superior liar: to explain, to give the reason for the young girl's death, the reason why children kill themselves – the incapacity of the community to protect its weakest – and the reason for this incapacity: the moral spinelessness

of men and women, aware of the bankruptcy of all their projects, incapable of imagining the means of escaping it. And as all diagnoses of illnesses must propose a remedy, Irimias reveals the only remedy he knows: to say goodbye to all this material and moral misery, this climate of helplessness and cowardice, to leave in order to establish a model farm and veritable community on a nearby manor. Sadly, this spiritual medicine lacks its thoroughly mundane condition: the money to put the plan into action. At the end of the speech, the sound of footsteps is heard, preceding the movement of a hand that deposits a bundle of bills at the feet of the corpse, soon followed by more hands and more bundles, the money from the sale for which everyone conspired against everyone else, and which Irimias will quietly put in his pocket.

A swindle, to be sure. The farmers who have given all of their money, and who will break all of their furniture before leaving, will only find an abandoned structure, where Irimias will come to explain to them that, because of the hostility of the authorities, they will have to wait for the realization of the great communitarian project, and make themselves invisible for the moment by dispersing themselves throughout the region. But this is not just any old swindle. Concentrated in Irimias' speech are all of the arguments, images, and emotional triggers that have made of communism the explanation of all the miseries of the world, as well as the reality to be constructed in order to bid farewell to all misery. The novelist was content to give a sarcastic summary

of the speech, and he constructed his chapter like a series of shots and reverse shots marking the *mise en scène* of the speech and its effect on an increasingly enthusiastic listener. But the filmmaker took the opposite approach, excluding all reverse shots in order to focus exclusively on the face of Irimias, turning his speech into a fever pitched reverie, and entrusting this reverie to the seductive voice of his musician, Mihály Vig. The liar is also a dreamer. The swindler *cum* spiritual doctor is also a doctor who cures bodies and minds of their submission to the law of fog, of mud, of petty betrayals among comrades over issues of money and women, and of individual or collective binges. He permits them to recover their "honor and dignity."

These two words do not merely designate the delusion that is put to work in a swindle. They express a belief that animates Béla Tarr's entire *oeuvre*: the capacity of the most mediocre beings to affirm their dignity. Béla Tarr is not a "formalist" filmmaker, fashioning well-polished sequence shots for pessimistic stories. Form, in Tarr's films, is never anything but the deployment of the space-time in which the very tension between the law of rain and misery, and the weak but indestructible capacity to affirm "honor and dignity" against this law, operates – ethical virtues to which a cinematographic virtue corresponds: that of putting bodies in motion, of changing the effect the environment has upon them, of launching them into trajectories that disrupt the circular movements. In this, the filmmaker

is an accomplice to Irimias, emphasizing his enlightened-prophet character – by visually giving him the allure of a Don Quixote flanked by a prosaic Sancho Panza, by imparting the maximum intensity to the moments in which he denounces the spinelessness of the little group, or by adding meditations on eternity to the damning report he writes about them. The great swindle of the new life is also the drive that imparts bodies with a new direction in a straight line. It takes them toward a space that is no longer molded around their own fatigue. It confronts them, no longer with the drab spectrum of grays but with the night, no longer with rain and mud but with the void, no longer with repetition but with the unknown.

The stunning shots of the farmers' arrival at the abandoned manor attest to this: at first, it is the slow exploration of the building by a small light behind which a body appears – that of the ungainly Mrs. Kraner, whose gaze silently explores the dilapidation of the walls. Then, accompanied by a strange, distended musical phrase, whose crazed tone evokes, at once, the old village harmonium and the modern synthesizer, it is the slow panoramic shot, passing the faces of each of the members of the community one by one: faces without bodies, emerging alone from the night, each fixed upon an invisible point, and expressing not their feelings, but the pure effect of the confrontation with the unexpected: surprise, exaltation, perplexity, or simple inability to take the full measure of the

place and the situation. After which, the camera grasps an exchange of looks before turning, very slowly, around the face of Mrs. Schmidt, after whose buxom breasts – shaken by the rhythm of the accordion – the males of the community lusted, but also whose enigmatic gaze, whose rings and curly locks seem to concentrate every unspoken dream. Later, in the empty room, the bodies stretched out on the floor seem to be carried by the tracking shot, which slowly advances toward the owl perched upon the ruined balustrade, and the darkness of the outside, where the cries of animals resound in the distance.

This movement of the camera is also a movement of the narrative, which leads the farmers, who have abandoned everything, all the way to the deserted station where Irimias disperses them, and where they thank him for his good deeds. In a sense, it is this dispersion, this prolongation of the movement from the inside toward the outside, that ends the story recounted by the filmmaker, rather than the final return to the room of the alcoholic doctor and the discovery that the enigmatic bells, with which the tale opened, were merely pulled by an escapee of the asylum. Perhaps human life is nothing but a story of sound and fury told by an idiot. But this truth is worth nothing to cinema. The latter only lives by opening the gap between sound and sound, fury and fury, idiocy and idiocy. There is the idiocy of the drunkard in the café who ceaselessly recounts a story that no one hears and who concludes by tirelessly

repeating the same phrase, and there is the idiocy of the young girl marching toward death, or that of the farmers exploring their empty paradise and its dilapidated walls with dumbstruck eyes. There is the sound of the accordion that makes bodies gripped by drink turn stupidly, and the notes whose invisible instrument accompanies the leap into the unknown. There is the sound of the rain that penetrates and demoralizes, and the sound of the rain that is braved. There is the fury that is exhausted in intrigues and scraps in closed places, and the fury that draws one outside and breaks the furniture of these closed places to pieces.

Cinema's proper task is that of constructing the movement according to which these affects are produced and circulated, the movement by which they are modulated according to the two fundamental sensible regimes, repetition and the leap into the unknown. The leap into the unknown can lead nowhere at all, it can lead to pure destruction or to madness. But it is in this gap that cinema constructs its intensities and makes them into a testimony or a tale about the state of the world that escapes from the dismal record of the equivalence of all things and the vanity of all action. The loss of illusions no longer says much about our world. The proximity between the normal disorder of the "disillusioned" order of things and the extreme of destruction or madness tells us much more about it. And it is this proximity that lies at the heart of *Werckmeister Harmonies*.

When he speaks of *Werckmeister Harmonies*, Béla Tarr often presents it as a nice, romantic fairy tale. The expression is meant to surprise the spectator, who will have seen the two protagonists of the story, the "idiot" János and the learned musician Eszter, crushed between the conjugal and political intrigues of the latter's wife, and the naked violence of a mob, unleashed by the words of a circus "prince," rushing to attack a hospital in order to break its equipment and beat up the sick. Anyone who recalls the final image of János, transformed into a human rag, inert on the bed of a psychiatric asylum, will think that if there are any fairies in the film, they are all of the evil sort, and even if the action revolves around the attraction of a giant whale, we are far from Pinocchio. What, then, must we hear beneath the expression "fairy tale?"

Perhaps, in the first place, a displacement of Béla Tarr's realism. Tarr never stops repeating that he does not make allegories and that everything is mercilessly material in this film as in all the others. Nevertheless, the status of the characters and of the action clearly tends to shift from the social apologue to the fantastic tale. The film is drawn from Krasznahorkai's *The Melancholy of Resistance*. But it only retains certain episodes, and with this act of selection the tone of the narrative also changes. The novel began on a downright comical note with the grotesque character of János' mother, and then turned to the rivalry that brought her into conflict with the scheming Mrs. Eszter. It is upon the ground of these misogynous

"stories of good women" that the narrative's elements appeared: the conflict between Mrs. Eszter and her husband, the town's disorder, and the disquieting arrival of the long truck enclosing the attraction of the whale and the prince. For its part, the film begins on a household item that plays a major role in Béla Tarr's visual universe – the firebox of a stove – before expanding the frame to show the sinister café that the stove heats. It is the only sequence the film will devote to the café, equally emblematic of Tarr's films. But this time the place does not lend itself to a dance of drunken fools. It is a representation of the movement of the planets, organized, along with the bistro's regulars, by the character who will play the role of the idiot here – János, the mailman, with his thick hair that covers his entire forehead, his big visionary's eyes sunken beneath the arcs of his bushy eyebrows, and his jutting chin. It is before his eyes that the truck and its long trailer containing the fabulous monster will later appear to us, dividing the space of the street in accordance with the quadripartition of the frame that so pleases the filmmaker: the gray shadow of the truck preceding the brightness of the facades its headlights illuminate, the black mass of the trailer, and the pale shadow of the space at back. It is with him that we will enter the abode of the melancholic Eszter, dedicated to finding the pure sounds and natural harmonies destroyed by the artifice of the Western harmonic system developed by Andreas Werckmeister. It is in his room that the vindictive Mrs. Eszter will appear to us with her

suitcase symbolizing the desire to return victoriously to the conjugal home, as well as her great crusade to unite the honest citizens and to re-establish order in the town. And it is with him that we will penetrate and slowly explore the lair of the monster – whereas the János of the novel did this pushed forward by a dense and curious crowd.

Krasznahorkai's novel adopted a polyphonic composition, in which the situation was seen successively from the perspectives of diverse characters. In dropping the petty intrigues of mediocre beings, the film also abandons these multiple points of view. This conforms to Béla Tarr's principle: in cinema the situation is given in its entirety, without subjective filter. Here, however, he draws a consequence from this principle which seems to contradict the opposition of situations and stories. In a "romantic" mode, the film is clearly developed around a single character: the "idiot" János, who roams the streets of the little town with his wild look, his reefer jacket, and his handbag. Béla Tarr even tells of having only been able to make the film the day he found the actor who would be able to be János: an actor who is, in fact, a rock musician, and who, like the two other protagonists of the film, has the distinctive feature of not being Hungarian, of being thrown into the midst of Béla Tarr's usual actors, confined here to secondary roles.

Thus, the "fairy tale" structure seems to revoke the privilege of situations in order to focus upon the adventures of a character. But it gives these adventures

a very specific characteristic, a characteristic that gives cinema its privilege: János' adventures are, in the first place, visions. János is essentially a sensible surface. But this sensible surface is of another kind than that offered by the quasi-apathetic characters of *Damnation* or *Satantango*. The wind, the rain, the cold, and the mud that penetrated their bodies and souls seem to have no hold on him. What affect him are pure visions – a black mass in the street, a mob gathered around braziers in a square, the body of the monster – and later, sounds: the watchwords of the riot, which we only hear as the words that resound in his head and heighten the intensity of his gaze. The privileged character is a seer. He sees with maximum intensity what the others heedlessly absorb. And he is immediately driven by what paralyzes the others, though without thereby obeying the classical schema that transforms perceptions into motives for action. The idiot only transforms what he sees into one thing: a different sensible world. Halted with him before the glassy eye of the whale, the spectator may have in mind references to Melville, and to an entire symbolism of evil. But János himself sees nothing in it but the marvel attesting to the power of the divinity capable of creating such incredible creatures. He integrates the monster into the order of the cosmos that is the grid organizing his gaze, the order that he sees in the map of the sky hung on the wall of his abode, and that he reproduces every evening as a ballet. Estike could only await the angels, who were merely words spoken in

voice-over after she disappeared from our view. János immediately constructs a different sensible world, a world of harmony, with the very individuals who move grotesquely about the café.[6]

The structure of the "romantic fairy tale" is also this: in an ordinary place – a small, provincial town with its routines and its rumors – something extraordinary appears: a strange event, a creature come from elsewhere. This something extraordinary divides the community into two unequal parts: there are those who are afraid because they see the devil in every novelty, and there are those – often simply the one – who take the measure of the strange or the monstrous. Perhaps the whale is not an allegory. But it is, in any case, the agent of a division between two orders. From the world of climatic inertias and social intrigues it separates a radically different dimension. Béla Tarr likes to call it ontological or cosmological. We could call it, perhaps more simply, mythological. In each case it deals the cards anew, replacing the situation and story cards with those of idiocy and intrigue. We have passed from the tension between the inertia of situations and the swindles of stories to the pure opposition of two sensible orders. Less than ever, then, is it a matter of opposing the real to the illusion. It is a matter of inserting a fantastic element into the heart of the real, which cuts it in two. There

6 It is significant that the role of the sun in János' representation is taken by the actor who, in *Satantango*, took the role of the grotesque Schmidt, who played the fool in the café, while his wife was abandoned to the arms of dancers driven by an accordionist – whose interpreter is seen here to be entrusted by János with the role of the earth.

is the real of conjugal and social intrigues, and there is the real of all that exceeds this, of all that does not submit to its logic. In *Satantango* it was the real of the shadow that must be followed if one is to live "with honor and dignity." Such a real would still permit the double game that made a visionary and a police informant of the same character. Eszter and János, the two dreamers – or the two idiots – of *Werckmeister Harmonies*, lack the possibility of compromise: in seeking to take the measure of the excessive, they leave the social order to the manipulators. Eszter is not interested in the whale but seeks to recover the pure sounds – like so many distinct stars – and to (de)tune his piano according to the ancient doctrine of Aristoxenus. For his part, János sees the order of the cosmos that includes the monsters in its harmony, and carries the light of this order in his hallucinatory gaze. And the tenderness of the gestures that join the naive and the learned is like the expression of that "fellowship of the stars," dear to the ancient philosophers. Their pairing composes an order that is sensible for them alone.

Opposed to this is the order of social intrigues, of the manipulators for whom the whale, the mob that mills about, and the cosmos itself are only perceived and judged on the ground of two connected questions: is this not disturbing? But also: how can one profit from this disturbance? The dialectic is known and Mrs. Eszter applies it faithfully: disorder is useful to order insofar as it creates the fear that drives the demand for more order. For the mob is

gathered in the square, around the whale, a mob that is said to consist of the followers of the enigmatic prince – the other attraction of the circus, which we will never see. Rumor attributes a variety of disorders to this mob, but it is dangerous, in the first place, because it is there without a reason for being there, without having anything to do there but wait. But what novelty is to be expected from an order that is henceforth without promise – not even a fallacious promise – an order that justifies itself simply by the brut fact of being there? The order of repetition no longer even allows for the gap between the swindle and the new life. All one can do against it, from now on, is destroy it without reason and without end. It is for destruction, pure and simple, that the invisible "prince" calls upon a mob – a mob for whom such destruction is the only power that remains for escaping from repetition.

Thus, the game is played by three: the mob, the tandem of "idiots," and the circle of schemers. It is played like a game in which the losers win. Those who are witness to the extraordinary and the monstrous gain power on the screen, but only at the price of being crushed as characters. Those who profitably calculate the advantages and inconveniences of allowing the mob to be unleashed lose their ability to impose their presence on the screen. The novel developed the strategic hesitations of Mrs. Eszter's circle. The film, for its part, rids itself of Mrs. Eszter the moment things become serious, sending her into the room where she sketches a dance step to the

Radetzky March in the arms of the drunken captain, her lover. The *March* itself only attains its true scope in the following sequence, where its crescendo is accompanied by the frenetic cymbals, the howls, and the menacing batons of two characters, who the filmmaker had apparently been able to leave behind in the novel: the two bad boys, the captain's children, who János is charged with putting to bed. The unfolding of the intrigue – narrative and political – is in the hands of Mrs. Eszter. But the visual and sonorous intrigue escapes her. Johann Strauss' waltz is nothing but a salon dance for her. "Interpreted" by the two rascals, the waltz once again becomes a military march, and their gesticulations transform the saccharine finale of New Year's Eve concerts into the fanfare of the apocalypse. It is by means of their rage that the filmic action takes place – the filmic action which now sends János toward the square, toward the truck where he gets one final look at the whale and hears the watchwords of destruction delivered by the invisible prince, and ultimately toward the street through which he runs while the words calling for the riot resonate.

The director simultaneously amplified this riot (which occupies little space in the novel) and rendered it unreal. This begins when the camera following János halts upon a quintessentially "romantic" nocturnal scene: two picturesque, white buildings emerging from the darkness, brightly illuminated, with their sloped roofs and closed shutters cutting symmetrically through the masses of two trees;

behind them, the noise and flames of explosions, which could have been those of a carnival, had we not already known the true cause of the pyrotechnics: the riot, the participants of which we will soon see marching. But when we do, it is a mob of rioters the likes of which has never been seen: no slogan, no cry of rage, no expression of hatred on the faces of these men, who we might believe to be leaving the metro at rush hour were it not for the uniformity of their rhythmic steps and the flashes of light revealing clubs in their hands. They seem, like Estike, to be carrying out a pure resolution to go straight ahead into the night. But the terminus of the march appears straightaway: piercing the black, the rectangle of one of those doors through which Béla Tarr's camera loves to pass at the same time as his characters. Like usual, the camera is going to move backward, in the opposite direction of the figures that appear. But at this moment, the rhythm changes with the light: the blinding white of a hospital corridor seems to inhale the men who now rush forth, clubs extended, to break the equipment, to throw the sick from their beds, and to beat them. But here, too, it is a matter of pure gestures: no expression of hatred, no feeling of anger toward those they assail, or of pleasure taken in their task, appears on the faces that remain in the shadows while the arms do their work.

The moment when two of the rioters' faces will finally appear to us, will be the moment when the movement comes to a halt, which here, again, is tied to a contrast of light: a shower curtain pulled

away to reveal a ceramic wall, before which stands, in a blinding white light, an emaciated, naked old man whose protruding ribs resemble the bandages of a mummy. This old man is a victim at once too vulnerable and too inaccessible: a figure from the beyond, evoking the pictorial figures of the inhabitants of Limbo or of Lazarus in his tomb, a being to whom it is no longer possible to do evil, or not possible to do further evil. It is at this moment that the two rioters turn their faces toward us and – while the strings begin a long lament, soon accompanied by a piano, whose harmonies recall János' dance of the planets – make their way toward the exit, followed by the others, who we will then see behind grated windows in a procession of shadows – a procession that, for us, evokes the processions accompanying great figures, viewed through veils or partitions, in the films of Mizoguchi. The riot will have been this: a forward movement, a crescendo, and a slow movement of withdrawal, in which the mob is silently dispersed into individuals, without a cry heard or a passion expressed. Pure material destruction – purely cinematographic destruction, in a sense – without any politico-fictional result other than that of giving the party of law and order the occasion to take things into its own hands. But pure cinematography does not boil down to the choreography of a set of movements without reason. A sequence of gestures is also the constitution of a certain sensible world. Condensing the promised destruction, the rioters have brought its horror and

insignificance back before our eyes. Yet the devastation of the hospital will have destroyed János' sensible world, the world in which monsters had their place in a cosmic order, which even the most backward of the bistro's regulars could represent. While the rioters were silently departing, a movement in the opposite direction revealed János' face to us. It had been lost from sight, but we know that he saw. The novel develops, at length, the feeling of lost innocence that then invades him. Cinema cannot permit itself such reflections. It can, however, permit itself to make the fictional/detective dénouement of the story coincide with the ruin of a sensible universe. János, convicted of participation in the riot, will only escape the military presence in being sent to the asylum. Most important, though, is the fact that there is no longer a place for János' sensible world, the cosmos that includes the excessive.

The riot cannot bring its task of destroying everything to completion. In any case, it does destroy one thing: the possibility of having the vision, in one's mind and in one's eyes, of a harmonious order other than the simple order of the police. Idiocy, then, can only become madness. The end of *Werckmeister Harmonies* brings us back to the hospital, where János – motionless and silent in his white shirt, his gaze extinguished – is seated facing us, his naked legs hanging off the edge of a hospital bed. János is now enclosed in the universe that András, the nurse, had dismissed at the beginning of *The Outsider*. Next to him, however, is Eszter – draped in his black

coat, kicked out of his house and, simultaneously, returned to his classic temperament – who came to give him his daily meal and reassurance. The roles are reversed, but even without the cosmos, the fellowship of the stars remains. This is perhaps what Béla Tarr wants to say when he assures us that his films are messages of hope. They do not speak of hope. They are this hope.

V. THE CLOSED CIRCLE, OPENED

From *Damnation* to *Werckmeister Harmonies*, Béla Tarr will have constructed a coherent system, putting formal procedures to work which truly constitute a style in the Flaubertian sense of the word: an "absolute manner of seeing," a vision of the world become creation of an autonomous sensible world. There are no subjects, said the novelist. There are no stories, says the filmmaker. They were all told in the Old Testament. Stories of expectations that are shown to be lies. We await he who will never come, but in whose place all sorts of false messiahs will come. And he who will arrive among his own will not be recognized by them. Irimias and János suffice to summarize the alternative. Stories are stories of liars and of dupes, because the stories are themselves lies. They lead us to believe that something of what we have waited for has come to pass. The communist promise was only a variation of this much older lie. This is why it is pointless to believe that the world will become reasonable if we keep harping on the crimes of the last liars, but also grotesque to insist that from now on we are living in a world without illusion. The time after is neither that of reason recovered, nor that of the expected disaster. It is the time after all stories, the time when one takes direct interest in the sensible stuff in which these stories cleaved their shortcuts between projected and accomplished ends. It is not the time in which we craft beautiful phrases or shots to make up for the emptiness of all waiting.

It is the time in which we take an interest in the wait itself.

Through the pane of a window, in a small town in Normandy or on the Hungarian plain, the world slowly comes to be fixed in a gaze, to be etched on a face, to weigh down upon a body's posture, to fashion its gestures, and to produce that part of the body called soul: an intimate divergence between two expectations: the expectation of the same, habituation to repetition, and the expectation of the unknown, of the way that leads toward another life. On the other side of the window there are the closed places where bodies and souls coexist, where these little monads, fashioned from acquired behaviors and stubborn dreams, meet, ignore one another, gather, or oppose one another around glasses that simultaneously stave off the boredom and confirm it, around songs that delight in saying that everything is finished, around accordion tunes that bring sorrow by driving one mad, around words that promise El Dorado and that make their lie known in the promise itself. This truly has neither beginning nor end, only windows through which the world penetrates, doors through which the characters enter and leave, tables where they gather, partitions that separate them, glass panes through which they watch one another, neon lights that illuminate them, mirrors that reflect them, stoves where the light dances.... A continuum at the heart of which the events of the material world become affects, are enclosed in silent faces, or circulate in words.

It is literature that first invented places of this sort in inventing itself, in discovering that, with the time of sentences and chapters, there was more to do than to chant the steps by which individuals achieve their ends: to find wealth, to conquer a woman, to kill a rival, to seize power. It was possible to render, in its density, a little of that which made up the very stuff of their lives: how the space in them became time, how things became felt emotions, how thoughts became either inertia or action. In this task literature had a double advantage. On the one hand, it did not have to submit that which it teased out to the test of the gaze, and on the other hand, it could overcome the barrier of the gaze, to tell us how the character behind the window received what came in through it, and how it affected his life. It could write phrases like "all the bitterness of life seemed to be served up on her plate,"[7] in which the reader tasted the bitterness all the more for not having been obliged to see the plate. But in cinema there is a plate and no bitterness. And when the world passes through the window, the moment arrives in which it is necessary to choose: stop the world's movement with a reverse shot of the face which saw it, and which must now make an expression that translates what it feels, or continue the movement at the cost of making the person who saw into a mere black mass, obstructing the world instead of reflecting it. There is no consciousness in which the universe is visibly condensed. And the

7 My translation. The passage quoted can be found in Gustave Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*, Part I, Ch. 9 [TN].

filmmaker is not there to make himself the center that arranges the visible and its sense. For Béla Tarr, there is no other option than that of passing by the black mass that obstructs the shot, of leaving it after exploring the walls and objects of its abode, of waiting to surprise it the moment the character is going to get up, leave his house, make himself a lookout in the street, beneath the rain or in the wind, a solicitor behind a door, a listener behind a bar or at a bistro table, the moment his words reverberate in space with the tick-tock of a clock, the sound of billiard balls, and an accordion tune.

There is no story, which is also to say: there is no perceptive center, only a great continuum made of the conjunction of the two modes of expectation, a continuum of modifications that are miniscule in comparison to normal, repetitive movement. The task of the filmmaker is to construct a certain number of scenes that allow for the texture of this continuum to be felt and that bring the play of the two kinds of expectation to a maximum of intensity. The sequence shot is the basic unity of this construction because it is that which respects the nature of the continuum, the nature of the lived duration in which expectations come together or fall apart, and in which they bring together and oppose beings. If there is no center, there is no other means of approaching the truth of situations, and of those who live them, than this movement that ceaselessly goes from a place to the one who awaits something there. There is no other means than finding the right rhythm for making the

rounds of all the elements composing the scenery of a place, and for giving them their suffocating power or their dream-like virtuality: the bareness of a room or the columns and partitions that punctuate it, the leprosy of the walls or the brilliance of the glasses, the brutality of the neon lights or the dancing flames of the stove, the rain that blinds the windows or the light of a mirror. Béla Tarr insists: if montage, as a distinct activity, has so little importance in his films, this is because it takes place in the heart of the sequence, which never ceases to vary in its own interior: in a single shot, the camera passes from a close-up of a stove or a fan to the complexity of the interactions for which a bistro serves as theater; it climbs from a hand toward a face before leaving the latter to enlarge the frame, or to explore other faces; it passes through zones of darkness before illuminating other bodies, now caught on a different level. In this manner it establishes an infinity of miniscule variations between movement and immobility: tracking shots that advance very slowly toward a face, or initially unperceived halts in the movement.

The sequence can absorb the out-of-field as well as the reverse shot in its continuity. No question of passing from one shot to another in order to go from a word's source to its recipient. This latter must be present in the time in which the word is delivered. But this presence can be that of his back, even simply that of the glass he is holding in his hand. As for the speaker, he may look us in the face, but more often it is his profile or his back that we see, and it is often

even the case that his words are present without us seeing him at all. But it is hardly exact, then, to speak of voice off or the presence of the out-of-field. The voice is there, dissociated from the body to which it belongs, but present in the movement of the sequence and in the density of the atmosphere.[8] If it belongs to the speaker and to the listener, this is only insofar as they are elements of a global landscape that embraces all the visual or sonorous elements of the continuum. The voices are not attached to a mask but to a situation. In the continuum of the sequence every element is simultaneously interdependent and autonomous, each granted an equal power to interiorize the situation, which is to say, to interiorize the conjunction of expectations. This is the sense of equality proper to Béla Tarr's cinema.

This sense is formed from an equal attention to each element and to the way in which each element enters the composition of a microcosm of the continuum, itself equal to all the others in intensity. It is this equality that allows cinema to take up the challenge that literature issued to it. It cannot cross the boundary of the visible to show us what the monads, in which the world is reflected, think. We do not know which interior images motivate the gazes and closed lips of the characters around which the camera turns. We cannot identify ourselves with their feelings. But we enter into something more essential, into the very

8 This is also why Béla Tarr is one of the few filmmakers able to make use of dubbing (in *Werckmeister Harmonies* and *The Man From London*) without destroying the sensible texture of his films.

duration at the heart of which things penetrate and affect them, the suffering of repetition, the sense of another life, the dignity assumed in order to pursue the dream of this other life, and to bear the deception of this dream. In this resides the exact adequation between the ethical intention of the filmmaker and the captivating splendor of the sequence shot, which follows the rain's journey into souls, and the forces with which they oppose it.

This adequation is also that of radical realism and superior artifice. We recall the words inscribed as the epigraph to *Family Nest*: "This is a true story. It didn't happen to the people in the film, but it could have." The phrase told us that this story would resemble dramas that people completely similar to those represented lived every day. The roles were played by non-professionals, who had not lived this situation, but who knew of other situations comparable to it, and the improvised dialogues were as faithful as possible to everyday conversation. It is highly unlikely, however, that the individuals acting in *Satantango* had ever given all their savings to a charlatan founder of imaginary communities, or that the German actors of *Werckmeister Harmonies* had much experience of the daily life in the small towns of rural Hungary. They are there, in the first place, as protagonists of an apologue on the way in which beliefs affect lives. But beliefs only affect lives through situations. And situations, themselves, are always real. They are cut from the fabric of material existence, from the duration of inertias, expectations,

and beliefs. They pit real bodies against the power of certain places. The construction of a Béla Tarr film always begins with the search for the place that can lend itself to the play of expectations. This place is the primary character of the film. It was in order to give the film its face that, for *Damnation*, the filmmaker visited so many escheated industrial regions from socialist Hungary before deciding to take the elements assembled in his urban setting from several different locations. It is for this reason that, in preparing *The Man from London*, he visited so many European ports before choosing the least probable of all, Bastia, and emptying it of all its recreational boats, in order to appropriate it for the landing of a ferry connecting England and France. And the character around which *The Turin Horse* was first constructed is the lost tree on the summit of the hill, across from which Béla Tarr had the house, fit for welcoming the other characters, specially made.

Neither studio set, nor mere occupation of a favorable location. The place is at once entirely real and entirely constructed: the monotonous plain of a Hungarian countryside, or the high facades and the straight streets of a Mediterranean port bring all the weight of atmospheric and human reality needed to nourish a situation and, at the same time, the virtualities of a set of movements connecting the bodies engaged in this situation. The performance of the actors falls within the province of this same "realism." They are neither traditional actors, nor individuals living their own story on the screen.

It hardly matters, however, if they are career actors like János Derszi, the young man of *Almanac of Fall* who became the old man of *The Turin Horse*, or amateurs like Erika Bok, little Estike of *Satantango* who became the daughter of the old coach driver. They are, in the first place, "personalities," says Béla Tarr. They have to be the characters, not play them. We must not allow ourselves to be tricked by the apparent banality of the prescription. Their task is not that of identifying themselves with fictional characters. No realism in their words, which punctuate a situation without intending to translate the particularity of the characters. But no need to adopt a "neutral" tone, à la Bresson, either, in order to make the hidden truth of their being appear. Their words are already detached from their bodies, they are an emanation of the fog, of repetition, and of expectation. They circulate throughout the place, are dispersed in its air, or they affect the other bodies in it and arouse new movements. The realism is in the manner of inhabiting situations. Amateurs or professionals, what counts for actors is their capacity to perceive situations and to invent responses, a capacity formed not by classes on the dramatic arts, but by their experience of life, or by an artistic practice forged elsewhere. It is this capacity that is put to work by Lars Rudolph, the German rock musician who made *Werckmeister Harmonies* possible because he *was* János; Miroslav Krobot, the theater director from Prague who plays Maloin in *The Man from London*; or Gyula Pauer, the sculptor who

installed a Holocaust memorial in Budapest, and the head set designer for many of Béla Tarr's films, who plays the Machiavellian innkeeper of *Damnation*, the surly innkeeper of *Werckmeister Harmonies*, and the melancholic innkeeper of *The Man from London*.

To be sure, the privileged example is that of Mihály Vig, the musician credited as co-author of Béla Tarr's films for the haunting melodies that anticipate the sensible texture and the rhythm of the sequences.[9] He plays Irimias like a person come from elsewhere, like the execution of an interior music, which confers the same dream-like tonality to the lying words of the swindler, as to the verse of Petõfi that he recites in *Journey on the Plain*: because to dream and to lie, like to drink and to love, arise from the same music; they belong to a single, fundamental modality of expectation. This same affective constancy is brought by the actors who carry their character from film to film, sometimes in the foreground, and sometimes in occasional secondary roles: it is the same role of melancholy object of masculine desire that the same actress, Eva Almassy Albert, plays throughout *Satantango* and furtively in the restaurant of *The Man from London*, where her fox captures the look of the actress who once played little Estike, glued to the window pane behind which the adults dance about to the sound of the accordion. In the same restaurant run by the innkeeper of *Damnation* and *Werckmeister Harmonies*, Alfred Jaraï takes up the same ordinary post, and surrenders to the same occasional clowneries,

9 Thank you to Camille Rancière for the aid she brought listening to this music.

as in the bar of *Satantango*. The same actor, Mihály Kormos, plays the role of harbinger of the disaster in the double figure of the interpreter and accomplice of the "prince" in *Werckmeister Harmonies*, and of the prophet of the apocalypse in *The Turin Horse*. And Erika Bok retains the incorporated memory of the little idiot in the constancy of the gestures of old Ohlsdorfer's daughter, or in the indulgent desires of Maloin's daughter.

A paradigmatically ordinary place where expectation of the identical and hope for change can be set in rhythm with one another, where the proffered temptation and the announced disaster give form to the situation in which individuals act out their dignity – such is the formula, from which Béla Tarr's films must invent meaningful variants. *The Man from London* exemplifies one of the possibilities of the formula: its being grafted onto an intrigue arrived from elsewhere. *The Turin Horse* exemplifies the inverse case: the formula reduced to its minimal element, the film after which there is no reason to make any others. What Simenon's novel offers Béla Tarr is an exemplary case of temptation: from the heights of his nocturnal post in the signal box, Maloin, the worker, is witness to the smuggling of a suitcase thrown from the boat, then to the fight between the two accomplices, and to the suitcase's plunge into the waters of the port. In fishing it out, he gets caught in the gears of a mechanism that, despite himself, will make him the murderer of the thief. From this story, Béla Tarr has essentially retained one situation:

that of the solitary man in his tower of glass, the man whose work, every night for twenty-five years, has consisted in watching the passengers disembark from the ferry, and in pulling the levers that release the train's rails: a man fashioned by routine, isolated by his work, humiliated by his condition, and for whom the spectacle entering through the window offers the pure temptation of change.

He also carefully isolated the character from the picturesque little world of fishermen, traders, and bar regulars surrounding Simenon's hero. He condensed the cafés and hotels where the action unfolds into a single café-hotel-restaurant, in which he has installed his accordion, his pool table, and some members of his usual troupe of drinkers and jokesters. He reduced the story to some essential relationships and figures: there is the familial foyer, where the wife and daughter sum up a condition of humiliation for Maloin. There is the thief, Brown, transformed into a shadow seen in a circle traced by the light of a street lamp beneath Maloin's windows, into a mythological figure upon the dinghy borrowed to search for the lost suitcase, into the silent audience of the English inspector, who offers him impunity in exchange for the return of the suitcase, and into the invisible inhabitant of Maloin's shack, where his murder will be elided not only in the image, but also in the sound. Finally, there is the man of persuasive speech, Inspector Morrison, the single figure in whom all the police work and the initiatives of the family of the theft's victims in the novel are condensed: the figure of order who

knows how to turn all disorder to his advantage, utilizing the rhetoric of an Irimias who would have grown old in the service of the captain in *Satantango*, and of Mrs. Eszter's intrigues. In the universe thus delimited, the filmmaker reduced Maloin to several fundamental attitudes: the gaze fixed upon the object of temptation, or upon a variety of threats; the meticulous work of the hands that dry the bills upon the stove; the routine of drinks and chess matches with the owner of the bistro; the paroxysmal fury of the voice that howls his humiliation in the domestic scenes, or in the butcher's shop where he goes to remove his daughter, Henriette, who he cannot stand to see washing the floor down on her knees; the challenge leveled at poverty in the boutique where he shows Henriette that he can buy her a fox and make her into someone who can look at herself with pride in the mirror: laughable participation in that world of the "victors," which the previous incarnation of Henriette, Estike, would strive to reach with nothing but a dead cat under her arm.

The cycle of unrest caused by the suitcase culminates with Maloin, downcast and breathless, leaving the cabin where the undesired murder has taken place without us having seen anything but the door's slats, without us having heard anything beyond the sound of the waves. After which the suitcase will reappear, seeming to drag Maloin in its wake, in the room of the restaurant where Morrison is orchestrating his ridiculous plan for finding the man who is already dead. In leaving the cabin, Maloin will

have abandoned the fight against his destiny, just as the rioters had in turning away from the overly prone victim. Simenon's character then went toward the redemptive prison. Béla Tarr's character is given no such opportunity. The perverse order incarnated in Morrison is satisfied with having recovered the money, the only thing that matters to him, and offers Maloin the bag of Judas, the envelope containing several bills imprinted with the queen's effigy. The story borrowed from Simenon ends like one of Krasznahorkai's novels: with a return to the point of departure. But Béla Tarr's film ends differently: with a miniscule tracking shot slowly rising mere centimeters up the unshakeable face of Brown's widow. This latter had not once loosened her lips during the deal proposed earlier by Morrison, as obstinate in her silence as the four notes (*ti-do-re-mi*) the accordion sent spinning around her, and now sees neither his black shadow, ministering words of comfort to her, nor the white envelope that he places in her bag. The film fades to white with the final figure of she who will have only said two words throughout the entire film, and those to refuse a coffee: "No, thanks." Pure symbol of dignity maintained, at the price of remaining foreign to all deals, foreign to the logic of stories, which is always a logic of deals and of lies.

Thus, *The Man from London* shows how the Tarr-system can graft itself onto this or that of the innumerable fictions recounting stories of temporarily interrupted repetition and of promises made in the service of deception. *The Turin Horse*

takes the opposite approach: no longer to graft situations onto any story; to identify situation and story according to the most elementary schema: the succession of several days in the lives of a number of people, reduced to the smallest multiple – two individuals – who themselves represent the greatest multiplicity that this number affords – two sexes and two generations – but also two exemplary graphic lines: the straight line of the man with the emaciated profile, the pointy, gray beard, and the long body, whose stiffness is accentuated by an immobile right arm, glued to his side; the curve of the daughter, whose face is almost continuously hidden by the long, lank hair that covers it in the house, and by the cape whipping in the wind outside. A mundane time, which no promise interrupts, confronted by a lone possibility: the risk of no longer being able even to repeat. No longer any cafés, in which expectations intersect and deals are proposed. Only a lost house in a wind-swept countryside. No longer any illusions, deals, or lies: a simple question of survival, the only possibility of carrying on the next day being that of eating a meal consisting of a single boiled potato with one's hands. This state of affairs depends upon a third character: the horse.

Ever since *Damnation* the animal inhabits Béla Tarr's universe as the figure in which the human experiences its limit: dogs drinking from puddles, which Karrer barked with in the end; cows liquidated by the community, horses escaped from abattoirs, and a cat martyred by Estike in *Satantango*; the monstrous

whale of *Werckmeister Harmonies*; all the way up to the fox wrapped around Henriette's neck. No puddle, here, where a dog might drink, no cat to give milk to as a treat to oneself, no circus passing through, only a visionary who announces the disappearance of everything noble, and a group of gypsies attracted by the well water. Besides these, all that remains is the horse, in whom several roles are condensed: it is the tool for work, the means of survival for old Ohlsdorfer and his daughter. It is also the beaten horse, the animal martyred by humans that Nietzsche embraced in the streets of Turin before entering the night of madness. But it is also the symbol of the existence of the disabled coachman and his daughter, kin to the Nietzschean camel, the being made to be loaded with all possible burdens. Three times are articulated, then, around the relations linking the three actors of the drama. There is the time of decline that drives the horse toward a death, which, like that of Brown, will remain hidden behind planks, though we will have followed its slow approach – in the horse's weary head and the daughter's gestures – up to the magnificent final trio, in which the father removes the horse's halter before the daughter closes the stable door to a haunting pedal in C minor. We also see this end time progress inexorably for the two inhabitants of the house with the dry well and the lamp that no longer wants to be lit.

The second time is that of change, attempted the morning when the father and daughter load all of

their belongings onto a handcart, which the daughter will pull since the father is disabled and the horse worn-out, in an image that might remind the artist born in socialist Hungary of the emblematic images of Helen Weigel pulling the cart of *Mother Courage*. This sequence, in which we see – as if positioned behind the same window beside which the father and daughter so often sit on a footstool – the team, from afar, like a spectral shade, disappear slowly behind the tree that cuts through the horizon, before emerging once again from an indistinct point, and returning back down the path leading from the hill's crest to the house, gives us a visual summary of *Satantango*. The third time is that of repetition, that of the long watch behind the window from which the tree with bare branches can be seen in the distance through the dance of dead leaves in the wind. It is the slow movement of the camera, which, after the return, approaches the window through the wind, the mist, and the window's bars, behind which we discern the enduring impenetrability of the daughter's oval face, framed by her long hair. The next morning, after the silent farewell to the horse, it will be the initially opaque window pane and the backward movement of the camera that will reveal to us the wind, the leaves, and the tree on the horizon, and then the back of the old man, no more penetrable than his thoughts.

This is because repetition itself is divided in two, like the anti-Bible of the Gypsies that the daughter slowly reads aloud, her fingers on the lines: "Morning will turn to night. Night will end...." Morning

truly seems to plunge into night in the brevity of the sixth day, in which the light slowly reveals the table, with the father and the daughter seated before their potatoes. "We have to eat," says the father, but his fingers rest beside the plate while the daughter remains immobile and mute, her hair pulled back revealing a waxen face. And soon the faces, hardly emerged from the black, will dissolve back into it once again. But the end anticipated in their immobile bodies and vacant faces is not the final disaster. Rather, it is the time of judgment that these beings confront, motionless now, but whose relentless and patient gestures have ceaselessly sketched the image of a refusal to be abandoned to the sole fatality of wind and misery for the entire length of the film. The resigned bodies that are effaced in the night are also marked by the memory of the gestures with which they steadfastly applied themselves, each morning, to prepare for the morning to come. In the night that descends upon the final silence of the characters, the filmmaker's rage remains intact against those who debase the lives of men and horses, those "victors" who, like the Nietzschean prophet of the second day says, have degraded all they have touched by making it into an object of possession, those who have made all change impossible because it has always already happened, and because they have appropriated everything including dreams and immortality.

A last film, says Béla Tarr. Let us not understand by this a film of the end of time, the description of a present beyond which there is no more future to

hope for. Rather, the film back before which it is no longer possible to regress: the film that leads the schema from the interrupted repetition to its primary elements, and from every being's fight against its own destiny to its ultimate end; and that, at the same time, makes of every other film just another film, another grafting of the same schema onto another story. To have made his last film is not necessarily to inaugurate the time in which it is no longer possible to film. The time after is rather the time in which one knows that with each new film the same question will be posed: why make another film about a story that is, in principle, always the same? We might suggest that it is because the exploration of the situations that this self-same story can determine is as boundless as the constancy with which individuals apply themselves to supporting it. The last morning is still a morning before, and the last film is still just another film. The closed circle is always open.

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- J.R.

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