



Cinema as Art and Philosophy in Béla Tarr's Creative Exploration of Reality

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Abstract. Rather than in terms of fiction or reality, Béla Tarr's cinema can be perceived as a creative exploration that is neither realistic nor non-realistic, but the “sum-total of our dealings with the world around.” The absence of a storyline, non-professional actors, found locations and long shots “uninterrupted” by editing, carefully thought through and choreographed at the same time, are the effect of this exploration. The director refuses to tell a story, but his aesthetics move beyond that of social realism. In this sense the sombre image of Hungary that defines the mood and style of the films can be thought of not as realistic representation of the world, nor as the metaphysical beyond, but as an event, a situation “locked” in a wandering movement in which anything or nothing can happen, both real and virtual (Gilles Deleuze). Here the world, the film, the viewer and the outside are intertwined in the process of becoming (Deleuze). Drawing on Deleuze's proposition of time/thinking image, the article explores the imagery of Béla Tarr's later films – *Damnation* (*Kárhozat*, 1989), *Satan's Tango* (*Sátántangó*, 1994) and *Werckmeister Harmonies* (*Werckmeister harmóniák*, 2000) – in terms of the real (rather than realistic) and the creative (rather than fictional).

A herd of cattle drifts out of a barn, and wanders off to a muddy, open ground past the houses of an apparently deserted village before disappearing between the buildings. This is accompanied by a ghostly sound of wind and deep tolling bells. The almost ten minute long opening shot of *Satan's Tango* (*Sátántangó*, 1994) is the time-image, a “pure optical and sound situation” where the narrative causality of action/reaction gives way to the architecture of aesthetics, and where the meaning of a story consents to the logic of poetic thought.

Hungarian director Béla Tarr's films are set in small Hungarian towns where the people seem stuck, and drenched under persistent rain. The inhabitants of *Werckmeister Harmonies* (*Werckmeister harmóniák*, 2000) seem to have tragically fallen under the spell of a mysterious circus visiting the town. The main characters of *Damnation* (*Kárhozat*, 1989), longing to escape the mundane and senseless existence, traverse the empty streets [Fig. 1.] or pass time in a local pub. *Sátántangó* revolves around the slow decay of a small farm collective, where the dreams, weaknesses and betrayals of its people are revealed in the slow rhythm of a tango. As András Bálint Kovács has pointed out, these wretched souls seem to have just arrived here somehow and cannot escape. We do not know who they are, what they do, how they got here, and when or where the story takes place. This world which does not promise anything good keeps the people living in it captive, while they desperately try to get out. The characters "simply move toward their grim fates as if they were no smarter, no more audacious in their choices than the lumbering cows of *Sátántangó*" (Kovács 2000, 132). The absence of a storyline, the non-professional actors, found locations and long shots uninterrupted by editing might be reminiscent of Italian Neorealist tradition where ideas or points of view are omitted in favour of being lost in the experience of reality. As Tarr commented in an interview: "It is not like shooting a movie, it is like a part of life" (cf. Eric Schlosser). At the same time the long takes and "painstakingly choreographed shots" based on the novels of László Krasznahorkai, are the results of meticulously thought out directing. One could argue after Bazin that reality here is filtered, not analyzed or interpreted, but containing both a depiction of perceptual reality and more abstract qualities associated with time and the flow of life; qualities such as the fortuitous, the unexplained, the ambivalent.¹ Here, however, it is a neither realistic nor non-realistic representation but "a sum-total of dealings with the world around" – which is real –, both imaginative and very concrete. The long, slow, black-and-white time-image of Béla Tarr's world, verging on hallucination or *déjà-vu*, opens by re-evaluating the very category of "reality."

It could be argued that in these films reality functions on two levels interacting with each other and operating between creation and perception. As presented by the director, it is a world informed by the post-communist reality of Hungary, a consciously constructed image of "misery and moral decay." It is a "state of amnesia," where the characters are condemned

¹Bazin proposes a complex and ambiguous concept of reality, and its representation, as filtered material but containing both perceived reality and more abstract qualities associated with life itself (Bazin 2005).

to repeat the past, the life of tragic or tragicomic (as might be the case) immobility, in a hopeless search for something or somebody to liberate them. On the other hand there is a “collection of sensations,” the indescribable “something,” stored in the subconscious of the film, reaching our innermost feelings to bring up some obscure memories and experiences, “stirring our soul like a revelation that is impossible to interpret in any particular way” (Petric 1989/90). That inner experience to which we will never find a strictly appropriate language – pure *affects* or *percepts*, irreducible to the affections or perceptions, non-subjectified, virtual entities – as proposed by Deleuze – equivalent to philosophical concepts.² Film is a construction, a world of its own, an art. As a work of art, it departs from the domain of representation in order to become an experience, the “science of the sensible” (Deleuze 1994). It is not reality objectively perceived and independently existing, nor a metaphysical beyond, but rather a presence, both actual and virtual, in the process of becoming.³ Thus, despite the seemingly realistic portrayal of the world stricken by poverty and corruption, the reality constructed in the films is not that of social realism, nor is it the representation of historical events, but a creative exploration of reality in the form of a thinking image, where real is not a representation of reality and virtual is not a negation of the real. It is art and philosophy.

In place of an argument or story, we are presented with a series of events which, instead of creating an illusionistic space of judgment/identification, offer a different space – that of encounter, where the film, the viewer, the world and the outside are interconnected in the process of creative transformation. How is this reciprocal “encounter/event” possible?⁴ Béla Tarr’s rainy image of Hungary is a powerful and unique “vision” stored in long takes, deep focus photography, “any-spaces-whatever,” characters’ faces, “architextures” of settings, and sound. Like the spider web of interwoven pieces of a non-told story, it is an image of time reflected now in the long shot of beer glasses or in the slow scanning movement through the walls of buildings, objects and faces. The formal configurations employed by the director acquire a style that

²These for Deleuze are the virtual entities, non-personal and non-linguistic signs that art and literature are capable of “producing” (cf. Deleuze 1997 and 2005b).

³Becoming is the key theme of Deleuze’s philosophical thinking and refers to a process of production (or “return” of difference), and presentation anew. It is the very dynamism of change, situated between heterogeneous terms and tending towards no particular goal or end (Parr 2005).

⁴Encounter-event is the term used by Bracha Ettinger to discuss the intersubjective, matrixial (border) space of encounter outside of the Oedipal structure of subjectivity in psychoanalysis (cf. Ettinger 2006).

produces affect and thinking through creation. Aesthetics of duration – a style, “controlled” by the rhythm of cerebral and haptic visuality, determined by the camera consciousness defined no longer by movement but by mental connections that it is able to enter into. The art of description, obsessive framing, low light, and stark black-and-white photography are the means that endow the image with the intensity of the real and the space of encounter.⁵ Long takes enable the actors to live, the landscape to breathe, and the light to persevere, rendering the film with a cosmological significance and the viewer with a space of affect and thought.⁶

Brilliantly conceived opening scenes announce the wandering characters of the films whose ‘amnesiac’ reality is inscribed in the style of hopeless/timeless repetition. Such are the sluggish, automated motion of coal dumpsters, creaking around in a circuit above the town in *Damnation*, the aimless wandering cows of *Sátántangó* and the first scene of *Werckmeister Harmonies* where János choreographs the local drunkards into a working model of the universe. What follows are the endless walks and endless camera prowls capturing the spaces and the characters from every possible angle in the narratives of disconnected and directionless, concerning no-one events. Independent, singular sequences tend to break free from the overall shape like polyphonic composition, locked in a directionless, rhythmic structure in which anything or nothing can happen. At times inanimate and somnambulistic dance sequences break the narrative, locking the characters and the viewers in a mad perpetuation, providing a kind of circular dance in which the walls, the rain and the dogs also have their stories. Locations have faces, in a certain kind of space, which Deleuze calls any-spaces-whatever, irrational, disconnected, aberrant, no longer obeying commonsensical causality. Man and space become one. Blank, shrouded in fog looks, and non-expressive, alienated faces coexist and intermingle with the light, textures of crumbling buildings, “schizophrenic” landscape, and stray animals. The characters are played not by professional actors, but by different types of artists, all with distinctive faces and characters that seem to be matched by the scenery, weather and time, creating the necessary tension; the professional non-actors, actor-mediums, capable of living

⁵Description is used here in relation to Deleuze’s idea of description as “process” of “creating and erasing the object” which enables the collapse of the oppositional dichotomy between subject and object, real and imaginary, which he developed from French novelist Robbe-Grillet, also in relation to Svetlana Alpers’s discussion of Dutch seventeenth century painting as descriptive rather than narrative, as a characteristic of Italian Renaissance art (Alpers 1983).

⁶Béla Tarr often talks about the cosmic dimension of his films in a number of interviews.

the situation or seeing rather than acting. On the other hand, the sound, camera and landscape also become characters. The autonomous, rhythmical and 'otherworldly' haunting sound endows the image with strangeness and reiteration - outside it is pouring with rain and dogs wander by. Spectacular moments give way to the most banal ones and vice versa, or tragic to comic ones, without any sense of rational logic. The scenes of cat torture and the girl's subsequent suicide in *Sátántangó*, to give one example, interwoven with the drunken monologues and absurd/comic dance sequences [Fig. 2.], are far from both the principles of narrative continuity and the dialectic logic of montage. In the end, "the cinema's 'trip' into ambiguity is so overwhelming that the imaginary and the real become indiscernible" (Frampton 2006, 68).

In this hallucinatory world of the towns' lives, without a beginning and without an end, time has no meaning – it is "out of joint." In long, monotonous and repetitive shots past, present and future merge or exchange generating a sense of vertigo, or a dream. As the films end, "we are waking from a bad dream that is about to start again" (Romney 2001, 8). The films' wanderings, plodding along, lead nowhere. There is only the framed image, and torturous emotion arrested in time.⁷ Neither spaces nor characters reveal anything, or point to anything outside the situation itself. Instead, the viewer is left to read the "freeze-frame tableau and the contradictions held within it as an open image."⁸ Tarr's characters are visionaries but it is a labyrinthine view, neither or both subjective or/and objective, where the film, the director, the viewer and the outside coincide and interact. At every turn the hope for resolution is frustrated.

Deleuze called this kind of narrative, or rather the lack of it, the "crystalline narrative" developed out of anomalies, irregularities, and false continuity. Here the spaces are disconnected, characters are no longer defined by their actions but by their visions and narration becomes essentially falsifying. Both the "real-ism" and the "story" are disposed of in favour of what he called "the false" and its artistic, creative power. The "story" of a film does not refer to an ideal or the truth but becomes a "pseudo-story," a poem, "a story which simulates or rather a simulation of a story" (Deleuze 2005b, 149). What we have is the perception of an independent aesthetic consciousness (Deleuze 2005b, 77).

⁷The image is no longer restricted to what we "see." There are moments when discursive "hiatuses, holes or tears [...] widen in such a way as to receive something from the outside or from elsewhere." This "something seen or heard" that seeps through this hole, Deleuze says, is called Image (cf. Flaxman 2000, 12).

⁸On the idea of the open image see Chaudhri and Finn 2003.

While the characters sit or drink or walk, the camera is scanning: the space, the faces, and the objects. In an “insistent” or “obsessive” framing it moves between spaces and characters, stopping for a while, hesitating on the space, lingering a little longer after the characters have left or returns again and again to the same spaces each time from a different point of view; as if in search for some truth. It never rushes into the depicted space, inviting the eye to linger on the surface and the viewer to remain on the edge. [Figs. 3–4.]

It is through “the art of description” that Tarr’s poetic vocabulary resists realism and symbolism. Most concrete, earthy and embodied situations and textures are brought to the surface of the screen by the equal treatment of visual elements in incompossible compositions. Meticulously observed, mundane and detailed everyday chores are performed as if in slow motion or in a dream. Time is carried by the outer and inner surfaces of buildings, reduced to their own descriptions. Derelict buildings, dark, empty squares covered by rain, swamped by harshly lit attics and muddy streets, rise up to the surface like old black-and-white photographs, where the utterances of forgotten worlds might resonate. As if attempting the pre-symbolic grasp of agile reality that leads not to illusionistic depth but to the “untimely meditation” of shape, light and texture begins again in order to obliterate its object, like the body in the world, neither fully conscious nor unconscious, erasing the opposition between subject and object. Time exhausts the image, which becomes its own “matter,” description without before or after like a microcosm of eternity. These are no longer “long takes,” but as Daniel Frampton pointed out: “thinking of the human gaplessness of experience” (Frampton 2006, 139). In other words the long take becomes the long *durée* of lived experience. Description no longer describes a pre-existing actual reality, but stands for its objects, creating and erasing them at the same time in “fantastic decompositions.”

Perception becomes overwhelming, hallucinatory, and unbearably intense. In one of the most “hypnotic” scenes of *Sátántangó*, the camera performs a 360 degree tracking movement across the sleeping people, returns to the first sleeper, then continues again in the same arc, and again, and again. The movement and the space covered create the impression of a slowly moving ceiling fan’s point of view (cf. Totaro). In *Weckmeister Harmonies* the camera gets lost in the loop of “blurred,” crowded faces gathered in the town’s square. These extremely long, disconnected and enduring moments, no longer images but thoughts, establish the contact with the real – the unclear and dispersive outside. It is “hypnosis that reveals thought to itself” (Deleuze 2005b, 119).

Reality becomes “the memory, brain, superimposition of ages or lobes” (Deleuze 2005b, 121). Simultaneously, “the screen itself becomes the cerebral

membrane where immediate and direct confrontation take place between the past and the future, real and imaginary, the inside and the outside, at a distance impossible to determine, [and] independent of any fixed point" (Deleuze 2005b, 121). It is no longer the social reality of a particular historical time – post-communist Hungary – but any time of “this world.” The oppressive and alienating environment – the landscapes of identities – is dissolved in the any-spaces-whatever and brought back in the event of becoming something else; something that is at the edge of language as it is on the edge of the narrative. The deglamourizing, disaffected style rises up as “the powerful, non-organic Life that grips the world;” a new kind of health that the cinema, as proposed by Deleuze, is forced to discover in the nauseating, devastated, death-strewn landscape (Flaxman 2000, 42). This is the “vitalism” as accepted by Deleuze: not a mystical force, but the abstract power of Life as a principle of creation.⁹ It is a manner of thinking “towards the world” or with it, a belief in this world, and not another, transformed one.

What might be perceived as prolonging the never-ending hopelessness and deterioration is in fact a strategy that endows the image with a creative, productive potential, which transcends the language as a system of signs, beyond syntax or signification.¹⁰ Hence, it is being taken beyond narration and symbolism. These are the signs that we cannot simply recognize but encounter, as such, at the very limit of the sensible. The sudden encounter of a man in a bath at the end of the muted and ritualized violence of the hospital massacre in *Werckmeister Harmonies* for instance, or the silent look of a girl in the pub’s window in *Sátántangó* – the “irrational cuts,” beyond language of representation or communicative speech, are not merely a sign of alienation or impossibility of communication. They are sensations “stored” in the image – “opsigns,” “sonsigns,” “tactsigns” as Deleuze calls them, which do not refer to anything outside themselves. They are pure “mechanical” intensities before or outside of any meaning that have a “capacity to derange the everyday, to short-circuit the mechanism of common sense and bring a different kind of thinking at the threshold of what we might call ‘the thinkable’”¹¹ (Deleuze 2005b, 172). This is something one can only sense, ambiguous, singular beyond individual experience; physical, concrete, and virtually present, real in a non-realistic sense; a space of “unfixed” identity. Here the outside, the virtual

⁹See Daniel W. Smith’s introduction to *Essays Critical and Clinical* (Deleuze 1997).

¹⁰For the discussion on what he refers to as Deleuze’s “theory of language” see the work of Jean-Jacques Lecercle 2002.

¹¹These are affective signs, the idea of which Deleuze developed from the semiotics of C.S. Peirce as an alternative to the language-analogy based semiology of Saussure.

nothing, opens into other outsides to infinity; embracing all: the “negative,” the pessimistic, the sad, the melancholy, the real, and death, in the eternal return of no longer amnesiac repetition of the same but of difference; a creative process of eventing, where one and the same event is played out in these different worlds, in incompatible versions. Such a universe goes beyond any lived experience; it exists only in thought and has no other result than the work of art. But it is also “that by which thought and art are real, and disturb the reality, morality, and economy of the world” (Deleuze 1997, xxvii). With cinema, it is the “world which becomes its own image, and not an image that becomes the world” (Deleuze 2005a, 59).

This beyond is not an existential, human redemptive void and neither is it nihilism. Rather it is an intuition that restores “faith in the world” precisely by tapping into the intensity that creates it, giving forms to nothingness.¹² It is the “whole” which brings out the thing in itself, literally, in its excess of horror or beauty, in its radical or unjustifiable character, because it no longer has to be “justified,” for better or for worse (Flaxman 2000). These images have their own logic of non-linguistic communication, the logic of utterance, enacting a free, indirect, trans-subjective film thinking. Unspeakable, non-representable, silent image, like a stamp or a birthmark “implanted” on the body of experience no longer possible and which “pierces” through in a desperate attempt to voice itself. No longer one’s own experience but an “experience-event.” The image that is living, vibrating, real and dynamic in its “emptiness” touches the level of existence from before existence, an image without any point of reference, immersed in a virtual history of the world, an “image” that transcends nothing.

With no particular entry or one point of view, outside of familiar paradigms of identification, the viewer is pushed off the path of conventional reading and placid acceptance of meaning, and instead into a state of intense curiosity and yearning. Béla Tarr sets the world in motion, then traverses it slowly, and patiently, allowing his work to “live” on a personal or particular, as well as cultural or universal, plane of creative consciousness. His films enable the art of encounter: fragmentary, ephemeral, missed encounters. These are the “real,” open and affective interactions with an image from the position of not-knowing “haptic visuality,” as Laura Marks would have it, or “reflective judgement” proposed by Deleuze.¹³ Explaining the cosmos to the drunks, Valuska pleads,

¹²Steven Marchant (2008) has written interestingly about the event of *Werckmeister Harmonies* in relation to nothingness as developed by Heidegger in *What is Metaphysics*.

¹³On the concept of haptic visuality (sensual rather than cognitive) see Laura Marks 2000. The reflective judgement, which he adopted from Kant, is for Deleuze the shift from metaphor to the position where “nothing is given from the standpoint of the active faculties;”

“All I ask is that you step with me into the bottomlessness,” and that perhaps is, as Jonathan Romney argues, essentially Tarr’s invitation to the viewer (Romney 2003). At the bottomlessness sensations are born and change is made possible.

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where there is no pre-existent context but rather “free and indeterminate accord” between all the faculties (Flaxman 2000).

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