Jury Grand Prix, Berlin International Film Festival

**Directed by** Béla Tarr and Ágnes Hranitzky  
**Written by** Béla Tarr and László Krasznahorkai  
**Produced by** Martin Hageman, Julie Lepoutre, Marie-Pierre Macia, Gábor Téni, Ruth Waldburger  
**Music by** Mihály Vig  
**Cinematography by** Fred Kelemen  
**Film Editing** by Ágnes Hranitzky

János Derzsi…Ohlsdorfer  
Erika Bók…Ohlsdorfer’s daughter  
Mihály Kormos…Bernhard  
Lajos Kovács…Bernhard  
Ricsi…Horse  
Mihály Ráday…Narrator


Tarr—THE TURIN HORSE—


**Brief Biography**

Known for reinvigorating the tradition of contemplative cinema, Bela Tarr belongs to that group of young Hungarian directors who came to prominence in the 1990s through their dour, enigmatic, and highly stylized films.

Tarr was born in Pecs, Hungary in 1955. As a teenager, he worked as an unskilled laborer in a shipyard and as a janitor, but he was also serious about film, and he began directing amateur movies at age 16. His movies eventually attracted the attention of the Bela Belazs Studio for young filmmakers, a government-supported organization that provided professional equipment and funding for budding directors. The studio funded Tarr’s first feature, *Family Nest* (Csaladi Tuzfészek).

In 1977, Tarr entered the Academy of Theatre and Film Art in Budapest. While a student, he directed his second film, *The Outsider*, which was shot in the semi-documentary style that characterized the “Budapest School.” Like most films from this movement, *The Outsider* captured the problems and daily lives of ordinary Hungarians in the hopes of improving conditions. Tarr graduated in 1981.

His style began to change in 1982 with a version of *Macbeth* that he directed for Hungarian television. With this film, Tarr not only moved away from the realistic style of semi-documentary but also from his use of raw close-ups. Instead, he exhibited a preference for long shots in long takes, which pushed his work closer toward abstraction. Just over an hour, *Macbeth* consisted of only two shots.

Often compared to Michelangelo Antonioni and Andrei Tarkovsky, Tarr pursued a distanced, detached style in the films that followed *Macbeth*. In 1994, he garnered international attention with *Satan’s Tango* (*Satantango*), a seven-and-a-half-hour film about a failed collective farm that seemed to capture the malaise and decay of post-Communist Eastern Europe.

Bela Tarr has been employed by MAFILM Studios, Hungary’s primary film studio, since 1981. Between films, he serves as a visiting professor at the Film Academy in Berlin, Germany, and he has been a member of the European Film Academy since 1996.

**Why I Make Films**  [Bela Tarr, during preproduction for *Damnation*, 1987]

Right at the center of a seemingly incomprehensible world, at the age of 32, the question “why do I make films” seems unanswerable. I don’t know.

All I know is that I can’t make films if people don’t let me. If I don’t receive trust and funding I feel like I don’t exist. The last one-and-a-half to two years of my life went by in such a state of apparent futility—I was given no opportunities to realize my plans through the official channels. Two courses of action were left open to me: to gradually suffocate or search for some alternative. Then followed a terrible year of begging for money and trying to discover whether it’s even possible to make a different type of film in Hungary, one that doesn’t depend on the official and traditional sources of funding. And once the money’s finally all there and I’ve managed to create some small opportunity, kidding myself that I’m “independent,” that’s when it hits me that there’s no such thing as independence or freedom, only money and politics. You can never escape anything. Those who give you money also threaten you. All that remains is obligation. The film has to be made. Then you desperately clutch onto the camera, as if it were the last custodian of the truth that you had supposed existed. But what to film if everything is a lie? All I can be is an apologist for lies, treachery and dishonorableness.

But in that case, why make films?

This also leads to internal conflicts, as my self-confidence wanes, the crew start to leave because the venue appears uncertain and I can’t pay them enough. And I am left with a general feeling of anxiety. So I flee from this form of desperation into another—the film.

Probably, I make films in order to tempt fate, to simultaneously be the most humiliated and, if only for a few moments, the freest person in the world. Because I despise stories, as they mislead people into believing that something has happened. In fact, nothing really happens as we flee from one condition to another. Because today there are only states of being—all stories have become obsolete and cliched, and have resolved themselves. All that remains is time. That’s probably the only thing that’s still genuine—time itself: the years, days, hours minutes and seconds. And film time has also ceased to exist, since the film itself has ceased to exist. Luckily there is no authentic form or current fashion. Some kind of massive introversion, a searching of our own souls can help ease the situation.

Or kill us.

We could die of not being able to make films, or we could die from making films.

But there’s no escape.

Because films are our only means of authenticating our lives. Eventually nothing remains of us except our films—stripes of celluloid on which our shadows wander in search of truth and humanity until the end of time.

I really don’t know why I make films.
Perhaps to survive, because I’d still like to live, at least just a little longer. ....

R. Emmet Sweeney: “Interview: Béla Tarr, the Complete Works (Film Comment, 2 February 2012)
Instead of a golden watch, the Film Society of Lincoln Center is giving Béla Tarr a complete retrospective for his retirement, along with a theatrical run of his magisterial final film, The Turin Horse. The bleak (and bleakly funny) maestro of modernist black-and-white ruin, Tarr turned the post-communist landscapes of Hungary into elemental playgrounds of loneliness and decay. His films are populated by smoke, fog, and rain as much as the weathered faces of his brooding, binge-drinking protagonists. Tarr spoke with Film Comment about his career before the retrospective begins this weekend.

Could you talk about joining the Béla Belázs studio, and how that led to the making of Family Nest (79)?

It was really simple. I just wanted to do a movie, and it was one place I could go without a diploma. They said, OK, you can try, and they gave me a little bit of money. I shot it in five days, and it cost $10,000 or something like that.

The actors are all nonprofessionals, working-class folks in Hungary. How did you cast them?

I knew them from before I started the movie. I was close to these kinds of people. I was working in a ship factory, and was always close to the ugly, miserable proletarians. I just wanted to show their day-to-day routines, their striving for a better life. I worked in a factory from 1973 to 1976, when I hurt my back, and couldn’t do physical work anymore.

What made you interested in making films, coming from that background?

I loved the cinema always, and I loved to go watch movies. But what I saw there was just stupid lies and fake stories. I never saw life and I never saw anything about the people I knew. I never saw real passion, I never saw real emotions, or real camerawork. I never saw a real movie. I thought, if they cannot show me, then I have to do my movie.

Were you seeing Hollywood films or local ones?

Everything everywhere is the same. The whole fucking storytelling thing is everywhere the same. That’s why I decided I have to do my movies.

When you did The Outsider (81), how did you find lead actor András Szabó? He has a wonderful face.

He was just a musician. He never acted in any movies. You have to understand that it doesn’t matter if I’m working with a big film star, or someone from the next factory. I’m looking for their personality, how they react… And when I choose them, I’m searching for how they are, like real human beings. When I get into real human situations in a scene, I want them to react how they would in their lives. They have to be natural, they have to be dancers. If someone is acting in my movies, I become mad and I stop them and say, “OK, this is nice, what you’re doing, but not in this movie. I’m interested in what is happening inside of you.”

Szabó embodies that approach, with a very quiet, expressive “being” rather than an act. Where did you meet him?

I was watching one of his concerts and afterward I asked him.

How did you work with Ágnes Hranitzky on The Outsider and other films? She is listed as editor and co-author.

It’s quite simple. I set most things up, in terms of the location and the set. Since the beginning, I prefer that she is there because everything happens once you get to the location, and she has a very sharp eye. She can always see if something is wrong. It’s more helpful to watch a film with four eyes, not only with two.

On Prefab People (82), why did you decide to cast real actors?

Prefab People was the first movie in which I worked with professional actors, and that was the first moment when I moved away from the social aspect toward capturing human connections, of the couple. They were a real couple. I wanted to work with them because I love them, and love watching their personalities.

Talk about the transition from the social realist style of your earlier films to the greater artifice of Macbeth (82).

I don’t like this term “social realism.” If you create a movie, you create a fiction. It’s something that looks real, but of course it’s not real because it’s created. For me, they are not political movies. The real art is to show real human conditions and relations, and that’s all I try to do.

What attracted you to Macbeth?

When I went to film school, my professor said I had to do a kind of examination, and shoot something not in my style, something that’s classical. I was thinking, OK, I can do Macbeth. He was very surprised. But anyway, I did it, and really loved to do it. I loved to do it because my same mania came up. What is the relation between the man and the woman? What is happening within them? We cut out about half of the drama, because I was only focusing on these two people. What are their interests, what is their sexuality? A lot of things came up. And of course I did the whole movie in one take. Because it was video and we could do it. I enjoyed it!

What I like about is that in many scenes, you can see the actors’ breath, as if they were already in the cold of a morgue. Where did you shoot it?

By the end we got the support of TV, and got professional quality support, and we shot it in a castle in Budapest. There is a very long cellar, and we were shooting there.

How long did you rehearse for the hour-long shot? How many takes?

We rehearsed for a while, and I think we did 10 takes. We could shoot twice a day, because afterward everyone was over [exhausted?]. I think we had eight takes. By the end I chose the best.

Almanac of Fall (84) is another step towards greater artifice after Macbeth. Was it shot in a studio?
It was shot in a real flat, which I used like a studio. We wanted it to look fake, like a cathedral of lies. About each person’s interests and how they betray each other and fight with each other. And how the fucking money and these interests destroy the human condition.

The characters are like zombies circling a void. And this is the first time you worked with Mihály Vig, whose droning scores seem well matched to your films.

He was in a rock ‘n’ roll group and made some really beautiful music, so I thought why not, we should try. And you know, he’s a poet, a very clever man.

Next was Damnation (88), your first collaboration with László Krasznahorkai. How did you meet and conceive of this project?

A friend of mine, who is a college professor here, was reading the manuscript of Satantango, Laszlo’s first book, and he called me and said, “Here is a beautiful work for you.” He explained to me that it was Laszlo’s first book, and that I had to read it. I read it, and fell in love immediately. Afterwards I called him, and we sat together, and I don’t know how it happened, but our first discussion was totally OK, and we became friends.

We wanted to make Satantango into a film immediately, but no one let me do it, and I was in really deep shit. I had no chance to work in Hungary because the politicians here really didn’t like Almanac of Fall, saying it was decadent, really ugly and dirty. It was stupid. Anyway, we were thinking of something else to do, and I thought we should do a simple thing. So we wrote what became Damnation, and went to the Hungarian Film Institute, the Hungarian Film Archive, which had a small amount to give, and the lab, and somehow we made this movie. It was really cheap, but we were independent of the state censorship.

Damnation has elements of film noir, from the torch-singing femme fatale to the regular guy getting caught up in a web of criminality. Was American film noir an influence?

No, not at all. If you go to a small Hungarian town, a miner’s town, you don’t need American film noir. You have the real thing.

The central character in Damnation is one of many passive observers in your films (like the Doctor in Satantango). Instead of delivering the package himself, which he would do in a traditional crime film, he simple passes the job off and watches from the outside.

You know, it’s a very cheap story. It’s not about the story. I wanted to show more than the story, because all stories are the same. But I really love the people, and I wanted to show you the people.

The landscape seems to become more and more important to you as well.

The landscape is one of the main characters. The landscape has a face. We have to find the right location, like we have to find the right music. That’s why I need the music before shooting, because music is also one of the main characters.

Then came Satantango (94). How were you able to get it made?

Damnation went to the Berlin Film Festival, but in Hungary everybody hated it. The politicians hated it, and they told me very clearly that I could not make movies in Hungary any more. We moved to Berlin, and lived there. When we were there, the wall fell down. Afterward, I went back to Hungary, and started to make Satantango.

How much of the book is in the film? The English translation is finally coming here next month.

We kept the structure of the book. Like the tango, it’s six steps forward, six steps back. We kept the chapters, and we kept a lot of things. It is not a direct adaptation, because literature is one language, and film is another. There is no direct way between the two things.

But do you think your use of long tracking shots is a way to translate Laszlo’s winding sentences into film?

The takes get longer and longer to go along with my thinking. I don’t know how my takes are getting longer and longer. It was good meeting Laszlo, because his point of view — how he was watching the world and how I was watching the world — it was similar. And that’s why we work together. We never talk about the movie, we never talk about the art, we are always just talking about the life. Of course he is a very good writer, he writes beautiful sentences, and I have to find a way to show them, in the real. When you shoot a movie, you can only shoot the reality, something that definitely exists. You know, the feel of this movie is very concrete.

And you can see that in the actors you use.

They are not actors, they are friends. It was a big mess.

A mess?

Yes. Because everyone was totally crazy about this shoot. It took two years. We could not shoot in the summer, because of the leaves on the trees, and we could not shoot in the winter, because of the snow. We could only shoot early spring or late autumn.

I think Satantango is your funniest film.

All my movies are comedies! Except The Turin Horse.

Agreed. The comedies continued with Werckmeister Harmonies (00), and the casting of the pinched-face Lars Rudolph. Is it true you had no intention of making it until you met Lars?

Yes. I read the book [Melancholy of Resistance] and loved it, but I could not conceive making a movie out of it, because I didn’t think anyone could play the main character, Valuska. Later, I was in Berlin, doing a workshop with young filmmakers. One of them did a casting call for her short movie, and I watched him sitting in the corner. He wasn’t an actor — at this time he was a street musician. I was watching him and I thought he was amazing, that he could be Valuska. Then I called Laszlo and said, I think now we can do the movie, because I found Valuska.

What was it about Lars that made him perfect for the role?

I loved his personality and his presence, which is totally enough for me.
You have said how much you hate stories, but with *The Man From London* (07) you adapted a very famous storyteller in Georges Simenon.

It’s not an adaptation, I just loved the atmosphere of the novel. I read Simenon’s novel 20 years ago, and I only remember it for the atmosphere, images of a man over 50, who has a very monotonous daily life, with no chance for change. He sits in his cage alone, while the city is sleeping during a dark night. He is a really lonely man. I just wanted to do a movie about the loneliness. Someone over 50 who has no chance. And what happens when he gets that chance, a temptation.

It is one of your more oppressive works, and seems to move even slower than the others. You used a new DP, Fred Kelemen here. What was his input?

Fred was my student in Berlin in the beginning of the Nineties, his first years in film school. Afterward he became a filmmaker, and we made a short video together for Hungarian television called *Journey on the Plain*. On pre-production for *The Man From London*, I started thinking he could do it. I called him, and he came. And he did it perfectly. He was always very close to me.

The presence of Tilda Swinton in the film is a bit jarring in the context of your usual performers. How did she get involved?

It was a funny thing. We had everything cast, except for the mother. Agnes went through actors and agencies, and she found a small photo of Tilda. But her name wasn’t on the picture, just an ID number. And so we were asking, “Who is this woman?” It was an unknown picture of her. And then they told me, and I thought…fuck. So I was calling her and asking her if she wanted to come, and she immediately said yes. I loved to work with her.

Now on to your first non-comedy, *The Turin Horse*. How did it originate?

When I first met Laszlo, it was 1985. We just started to talk, and became friends. Once he had a lecture in a theater, and in closing he read this Nietzsche anecdote, but he added this question about what happened to the horse. After this moment, we would always discuss, from time to time, what happened with the horse? We always came back to that question. I decided after *The Man From London* that it was over, that I was going to close the shop. But I was thinking and talking with Laszlo, this is our debt. We have to answer this question, “What happened with the horse?” We talked about it, and I knew it would be my last movie.

How did you meet Erika Bók, who is the daughter in *The Turin Horse* and an important part of *Satanango* and *The Man From London* as well?

She was a small girl in an orphanage. She really looked like a wild girl. Somehow we domesticated her. She wasn’t able to say hello, because she was incredibly closed. But she had these beautiful eyes and looked like a small rabbit. She was always in the corner, always afraid. She has grown up, and has a special presence, and was an amazing experience working with her.

The character of the neighbor who gives a philosophical rant about the state of the world in *The Turin Horse* is representative of a lot of holy drunks and fools in your work. Who wrote this particular speech and what affinity to you have for these end-of-the-bar prophets?

It was written by Laszlo. It just came up during the situation of the shooting, but it was written by him. It’s a normal human situation. If you are going to the next bar, and people are waiting for a drink, they are always talking, talking, talking, and then he gets the bottle…

Your films have some of the greatest boozing scenes in history. What do you yourself get out of drinking?

A kind of joy. And of course it is part of human life. We have to show the joy. The quality of the joy comes through much more clearly and the quality of the life.

* What happened with the horse, according to the epigraph to *The Turin Horse*: “In Turin on January 3rd, 1889, Friedrich Nietzsche steps out of the door of number six Via Carlo Alberto, perhaps to take a stroll, perhaps to go by the post office to collect his mail. Not far from him, or indeed very far removed from him, a cabman is having trouble with his stubborn horse. Despite all his urging, the horse refuses to move, whereupon the cabman—Giuseppe? Carlo? Ettore?—loses his patience and takes the whip to it. Nietzsche comes up to the throng and that puts an end to the brutal scene of the cabman, who by this time is foaming with rage. The solidly built and full-moustached Nietzsche suddenly jumps up to the cab and throws his arms around the horse’s neck, sobbing. His neighbor takes him home, where he lies still and silent for two days on a divan until he mutters the obligatory last words: “Mutter, ich bin dumm,” and lives for another ten years, gentle and demented, in the care of his mother and sisters. Of the horse…we know nothing.”

Donato Totaro, “The Turin Horse: A Numbers Game. Bela Tarr’s Final Film” (*Offscreen* 16:4, April 2012)

“Unlike in Andrei Tarkovsky’s movies, time in Béla’s movies is not metaphysical; time in Béla’s films is existential. It has to be endured.” (Fred Kelemen, DP of *The Turin Horse*, trans. By Phil Cooksey. “The Last Dance,” *Sight & Sound*. June 2012, Vol. 22 Issue 6, p.39.)

The theatre where I saw *The Turin Horse*, Cinema du Parc (in Montreal) was playing concurrently with *The Turin Horse* in an adjoining theatre, *Prometheus*. I had a chuckle at how a theatre could be showing two films so vastly different. One hundred and forty-six minutes later I had a second chuckle at how two vastly different films could also have one major thing in common: both films ask one BIG thematic question (and neither film answers the question). Prometheus asks, “Who are we?” Who created us, and why? Why do our creators seem intent on destroying us? *The Turin Horse* asks, “Why do we bother to live on?” “What possesses us to drive on with our miserable lives?”
Director Ridley Scott (of *Prometheus*) proposes the question from a theological angle, whereas Tarr asks from an Existentialist angle. Which may explain the film’s title and the reference to Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900), who is seen in some philosophical circles as a forerunner of 20th century Existentialism (or at least a strong influence on Jean-Paul Sartre). In the film’s opening, black titled scene the film’s random omniscient narrator recounts the supposed story of how Nietzsche, living in Turin, witnessed a man flogging his stubborn horse on the far side of the Piazza Carlo Alberto. Struck by compassion for the poor horse, Nietzsche ran to the horse’s defense. The incident caused enough of a disturbance that two policemen came to investigate. The incident occurred on January 3, 1889. A few short days after this incident the once brilliant man suffered a slow medical meltdown that eventually left him mentally incapacitated for the last ten or so years of his life, living under the care of first his mother until her death in 1887 and then his sister until his death in 1900. Was there a connection between the horse flogging and his mental descent into insanity? Like *The Turin Horse*, this story, whether true or not, asks a similar question: “What breaks a person?” “What makes a person turn from brilliant thinker to helpless child in such a short time?”

But Béla Tarr being Béla Tarr isn’t interested in Nietzsche’s psychic breakdown. The narrator wonders, “what happened to the horse?” This is the perfect example of the kind of mini-question that informs what Noel Carroll calls the classic “eroticet narrative”: in narrative films a scene will raise either a major or minor question, which will be answered in subsequent scene, the minor question often in the next scene and the major question at times not until the final scene. The narrator wonders about what happened to the horse, and the scene cuts to a horse. Perhaps not that horse but a horse, in a simply wondrous five minute long take (which is about the average shot length for the whole film) travelling with our protagonist potato farmer/cart driver named Ohldorfer (Janos Derzsi) leading his horse and cart through a blistering wind storm, one that will last most of the film’s narratively plotted six days. The horse may not literally be that horse, but it can be figuratively, as a link between Nietzsche’s existentialist dilemma and Tarr’s (filtered through his two principal characters, a male farmer and his adult daughter, played by Erike Bok, both of whom also appeared in *Satantango* and *Man From London*).

For the next two hours plus we watch these two people struggle to survive the wind storm amid an arid, isolated rural landscape. They live frugally. Much like the viewers, they don’t have much to go on. Their life consists of repetitive quotidian acts, followed through with numbing (and for us perhaps hypnotic) regularity. There is no joy or fun in these lives, just work, duty and subsistence. The man has a sleepy eye and a dead right arm. His daughter helps him dress for bed and work. She goes for water at their well to cook the two singular potatoes they eat every day. They go to the barn to feed the horse, or take him out to the fields to work (when the horse feels like it….it is old and sickly). They eat. He cuts wood. After eating he sits in front of the window staring out into the bleak landscape. She sits behind at the table, sewing or doing a chore. At times she takes a turn at the window. They light the kerosene lamps. This is their life. It is all they do. For the average viewer the film may feel like the equivalent of watching paint dry. Perhaps, but WHAT paint! Like David Hanley, in his tandem review in this issue, “The Turin Horse and the End of Civilization As We Know It”: I too was riveted and enthralled by Tarr’s visual and aural depiction of the lives of these two poor souls. The luminous black and white, the stately camera movements that sculpt the inside of the house into picturesque blocks of architectural density, like the slow dolly forward to the back of the man seated at the window. Or the liberating camera movement forward following the father or daughter from inside to outside through the front door, recalling John Ford’s similar treatment of the door separating the inner domestic and the outer wilderness in *The Searchers*.

Or the slow dolly back from the man at the window to the daughter facing the opposite way seated at the kitchen table. Although there is much repetition in their acts —for example we see them eating the same solitary boiled potato at least five times— there is always variety in how the acts are filmed, with the camera movement, angle, composition or lighting being different. I was also struck by how the film could be read as a variation on two numbers, a major motif, the number two, and a minor motif, the number six. I’ll conclude my analysis by a not very rigorous but hopefully enlightening breakdown of how these two numbers inform the formal and thematic structure of the film. I’ll begin with the formal.

The “Form” of Two: More than Just a Number

Two colors, Black and white: Like most of Tarr’s recent work, *The Turin Horse* is filmed in glorious black and white, something which adds realism, poetry and formal beauty to the dreary narrative actions. Aside from describing the film stock the black and the white are two colors used by Tarr. The film begins in black, with the voice-over narration, and ends in darkness when the sun refuses to rise and the kerosene lamps don’t light. In between there are many fades to black and fades in from black, and the black often shares the frame with white in the chiaroscuro interiors. White is a color less used. Sometimes we see brightness trying to peek inside a window from the outside, but the most striking use of white is when the daughter hangs clothes on a clothes line and the camera dollies in to a white shirt which fills the frame in an embossed white.

Two sounds, Music and Wind: The only two sounds of note we hear in the film (not counting the smattering of dialogue lines) are the powerful wind noises caused by the perpetual storm and the dirge-like minimalist music (mainly strings and organ). These two sounds bounce off each other throughout the film, one rhythmically giving way to the other. I may be wrong but based on my single viewing I don’t think the two sounds ever overlap. The sound of the wind is louder when outside and tempered when the father and daughter enter the house.
Two Places, Inside/Outside: The rhythm of the film is also modulated by the way the two characters spend their time between the inside, their shanty home, and the inhospitable outside. Certain duties take them outside: fetching water, feeding the horse; others make them stay inside: sleeping, resting, cooking, eating. They seem just as miserable inside or outside, neither seeming like a reprieve or a moment that provides some fun or relaxation.

Thematic and Narrative Variations on the Number Two:
Two Characters, Father and Daughter: For the majority of the film these are the only two characters we see. They seem to tolerate each other rather than enjoy each other’s company. Yet they seem tied to each other as with an umbilical cord.

Two Intrusions into Their Routine: The life of this man and his daughter is rigidly predicated on the routines of their daily life. Without smile or fanfare, they eat, sleep, work, sit, rest. There are only two intrusions into this routine that snaps their mundane rhythm for a spell. The first is a visit from a “neighbor” who drops by to buy some palinka, an Hungarian fruit based brandy (though my guess during the film was that it was a potato based white alcohol). When the father asks the man why he didn’t go into town to buy the palinka this sets him off on a long, meandering, abstract monologue on how the town is “in ruins” and the world is going to pot, “everything is in ruin,” that “God does not exist.” In all honesty I can’t remember the details of his talk but it was decidedly existentialist. I like the hypothesis suggested by blogger Brandon of Brandon’s Memories that perhaps this man’s rant comes directly from Nietzsche. The man’s excessive loquaciousness stood in comic contrast to the father’s stone cold taciturn silence. The second intrusion is a cart full of noisy gypsies who stop at their well to steal water, an act which brings them both out to confront them, with the father threatening them with his axe.

Two Things they Imbibe and Eat: The simplicity of their lives is matched by their diet. All we ever see the daughter cook and the two eat is a single boiled potato. The father attacks the potato, ravaging it with his single good hand, and, never having the patience to wait until the skin cools, scalding his hand. The daughter by contrast eats her potato quietly and calmly. They never seem to finish the potato, and he always leave to sit by the window. And all they ever drink is the clear alcohol, palinka I imagine.

Two Horses: There are two horses in the narrative, one mentioned in the opening voice-over anecdote and never seen, the titular “Turin Horse” that triggered Nietzsche’s compassion, and the old, scrawny farm horse owned by the father and daughter. The farm horse seems to share the stubbornness of the Turin horse; and by extension, it should be noted that the grizzled, mustachioed farmer bears some resemblance to Nietzsche. There are also two long tracking shots featuring the farmer riding the horse and cart. Beyond these sets of two, the film is filled with two-shots, many featuring the father and daughter seated across from each other at the kitchen table, or across the space of the room, one in the background the other in the foreground, but also shots of two objects, like two plates and two glasses on the table, etc.

The Number Six
For reasons that are not entirely obvious, the films’ temporal arc is structured around title cards denoting, “First Day,” “Second Day,” “Third Day,” “Fourth Day,” “Fifth Day,” and “Sixth Day.” The use of ‘days’ gives the film a sense of order, allowing for the scenes of readying for bed and rising to begin the day. Up until the final title card, each of the days were of the same approximate length, but the final sixth day is far shorter. It is morning yet the sun does not appear to rise, casting the father and daughter seated opposite each other in some darkness, alleviated only by a kerosene lamp. When the lamp also refuses to continue to light, total darkness sets in and the film concludes on this near apocalyptic note. Hints of such an event appeared earlier in the film; like the moment when both father and daughter stop what they are doing to look off screen and wonder, “What’s that?” There is no cut to what piqued their curiosity and nothing more is made of it, but the audience feels the hint of mystery, which is reintroduced in the conclusion. But why six days? Given the overall sense of mystery and the noted hint of the apocalypse, perhaps Tarr is alluding to the Biblical notion of Creation. According to the Bible, it took God six days to create the world, and he rested on the seventh day, Sunday. Could Tarr be taking the Creation myth and turning it in reverse, with six days the time needed to bring the world to an end? Or as some reviewers have suggested, the end of cinema? And indeed, if this is, as Tarr has said in countless interviews, his final film, could it not be his way of saying the same: it is time to rest?

Andrew Shenker: The Turin Horse (Slant, 27 September 2011) Béla Tarr is the cinema's greatest crafter of total environments and in The Turin Horse, working in his most restricted physical setting since 1984's Almanac of Fall, he (along with co-director Ágnes Hranitzky) dials up one of his most vividly immersive milieus. Excluding one of the director's now-famous virtuoso, film-opening tracking shots, the film is entirely confined to the dilapidated rural spread where a farmer lives with his daughter and the horse he depends on for his livelihood, but in Tarr's hands, the unpromising setting teems with textures and, if not exactly vitality, then an almost tangible sense of presence. The remarkably expressive black-and-white cinematography fixes both the scrubbiness of the exterior terrain and the dankness of the house's interior, while registering with a shock the difference between dim darkness and the occasional burst of exterior light when the door is opened. The sound design, always exquisitely detailed in Tarr's films, is attentive to both the noises squeaked out by quotidian chores and the ever-present wind that howls throughout the film. And Fred Kelemen's camera, guided by the director's now legendary, but here less virtuosically showy, tracking shots, guides the viewer through every inch of the terrain, whether it's the natural landscape, the domestic architecture, or the characters' faces.

In fact, it's Tarr's attention to visages that tempers his
bleak and sometimes cruel view of humankind's fate, countering cosmic absurdity with human (and equine) brokenness and blind, but vaguely heroic, determination. Whether training his camera on the horseman's bearded, weathered face, his daughter's alternatively worried and deeply sad mien (never more effectively so than in a late, Wavelength-inspired ultra-slow track-in to the fixed point of her head through a window), or the unfathomable eyes of the horse, it's these close-ups that keep the film fixed at the level of individual endurance. In these shots, it's almost as if Tarr is convinced that if he looks long and hard enough at a character's face, he'll penetrate through to some sort of essential meaning, but, for all that, these figures remain as dumb and inscrutable as ever.

The Turin Horse is a cyclical fable of daily drudgery that strips human life to its barest elements and banalities, that tantalizes us with the prospect of a higher meaning only to deny that possibility all together, and then ultimately finds whatever little value is present in humankind's (or animalkind's) existence in the ability to simply carry on. In this most Beckettian of films, the characters endlessly enact the same quotidian tasks over the course of six days, unable to leave their property both because of a windstorm that rages the entire time and because of the horse's stubborn Bartleby-like refusal to not only pull the man's wagon, but even to eat or drink. This defiance on the part of the animal, the result, we're told in an opening monologue, of a severe whipping the animal received from his owner which was viewed by and profoundly affected Friedrich Nietzsche, is at once heroic (he refuses not only to serve, but to receive sustenance from his abusive owner) and a pointedly contrasting example to the tenuously adhered-to routines of his owners.

Samuel Beckett famously ended his trilogy of increasingly abstract novels (Molloy, Malone Dies, and The Unnameable) with the line “I can't go on. I'll go on.” Part admission of defeat and part desperate, if not quite determination, than example of a bare will to endure, the sentence is structured to end on a note, however tenuous, of positivity. In The Turin Horse, a film in which defeated characters act out the process of bare-bones endurance, Beckett's formulation becomes simply “We must eat,” the final words spoken by the farmer. But the man's assertion feels hollow, an empty set of ciphers no longer believed, as the characters' determination to carry on has been seriously eroded both by external threat (the storm, a band of menacing gypsies who steal their water) and internal inertia. If the great Irish writer gave us “I can't go on, I'll go on,” the Hungarian filmmaker can be said to reverse the emphasis: “I'll go on, I can't go on.”

And yet, as we watch man and girl perform the same tasks over and over again, Tarr emphasizes not only the banality of the actions, but a certain, sometimes ironic, grandeur in the simple act of surviving. Every day the pattern repeats. The girl wakes up, goes to the well for water, dresses her father, makes potatoes; the father drinks a few shots of palinka; the pair eat the potatoes, ripping them apart with their bare hands and stuffing them into their mouths; they make futile efforts to rouse the horse; and they settle in for afternoon tasks like sewing and chopping wood. But Tarr shoots some of these scenes as a sort of mock-heroic that nonetheless exudes something of the genuinely heroic. He films, for example, the daughter dressing her haggard father from a low angle in starkly dramatic chiaroscuro, and lets Mihály Vig's rousing strings-and-organs score run free on the soundtrack, a gesture that both mocks and commemorates the baseness of the characters' situation.

And then, again, there are the faces. Because Tarr is essentially shooting the same events over and over, he's able to include a series of alternating views of the various quotidian tasks the characters perform. This cubistic approach announced in the opening sequence, in which the camera tracks alongside the farmer as he rides his horse home, darting around the animal's body to take in different angles, different details, recalls that of his celebrated project, Sátántangó. But whereas the earlier film would repeat an identical scene from a range of viewpoints, The Turin Horse offers up different instances of what amounts to the same activity from a variety of shifting perspectives. In Tarr's latest there are no wild dance parties or cat killings, the focus is on the banal, but, just to take one example, by training in on the faces of first father, then daughter as they eat their potatoes on two consecutive days, the film tells us at least as much about the raw human need for sustenance and the difference between the characters' specific modes of eating, of living, of being, as do the more lavish sequences of Sátántangó.

Ultimately, The Turin Horse is a film that asks what meaning there is to be found in the daily toil, in the quotidian chore. Almost as if to mock this idea of meaning, Tarr includes a sequence mid-film in which a neighbor pops in to beg a glass of palinka and while he's drinking his booze, launches into a lengthy monologue which, with abstractly apocalyptic overtones, attempts to give some significance, any significance, to what he calls the “degradation of humanity.” In one of the film's most cruelly comic moments, the father responds to his neighbor's harangue with a simple “Come off it, that's rubbish” at which point the neighbor shrugs, drops a few coins on the table and leaves.

It's almost as if Tarr is dismissing even the possibility of there being any meaning to life, even if that meaning were to be strictly negative. Similarly, a scene of the half-literate daughter slowly sounding out a Bible passage seems to be a wry commentary on the (im)possibility of achieving any kind of higher communion. And yet, whatever value there is in life, the film seems to be suggesting, is not to be found in any cosmic scheme, but simply in humankind's ability to live day by day. By the end of the film, that ability has been severely tested, as the father and daughter lack even the ability to bring (literal) light to their humble abode, but rarely in the cinema have such lives, such tasks been endowed with so much presence, such a sense of exhausted vitality. The characters' lives may be insignificant in any kind of larger scheme, but as they unfold on the screen, they are everything. If ever a film had a claim to being profound in its banality, The Turin Horse is it.
The Hungarian director Bela Tarr has said that “The Turin Horse,” his ninth feature, will be his last film. Could he change his mind?

He is only 56, part of a generational cohort of filmmakers that includes Spike Lee, Olivier Assayas and the Coen brothers, who all retain an aura of youthfulness in middle age.

Mr. Tarr is the opposite. From the beginning there has been something ancient and ageless about his films. Even as he reflects the influence of earlier European modernists like Michelangelo Antonioni and Miklos Jancsó, he has also seemed like a time traveler in modern cinema, an émigré from an older, middle-European world of literature and philosophy or, to go a little further, a medieval stone carver who happened to get his hands on a camera.

“The Turin Horse,” a slow and solemn black-and-white film set in a 19th-century wilderness and inspired by an anecdote involving Friedrich Nietzsche, displays Mr. Tarr’s uncompromising, atavistic commitment to darkness, difficulty and lapidary pictorial sublimity. The movie may also dispel any skepticism about the finality of his decision to abandon his vocation, since it is hard to imagine a more thorough and systematic statement of intellectual despair. Bela Tarr may be the happiest man in the universe, but the universe as he depicts it is a harsh and cruel place, indifferent if not actively hostile to the striving of human beings and other dumb animals.

The film’s first image is an extended, deep-focus tracking shot of a man and his domestic beast of burden trundling across a desolate landscape in a howling windstorm. A narrator has already recounted the story of how Nietzsche, while in Turin, Italy, one day in 1889, witnessed a cart driver beating a recalcitrant horse and threw himself, weeping, on the animal’s neck.

According to legend, this event signaled the onset of a mental breakdown from which Nietzsche never recovered. The dementia that consumed the last years of his life was more likely caused by syphilis than by anything to do with a horse, but in any case Nietzsche’s fate is tangential to “The Turin Horse,” which is concerned with the driver, whose few utterances suggest that he is Hungarian rather than Italian.

The Nietzsche story is like an absurd punch line placed ahead of an extended joke, and what follows — seven days in the life of the horse, his owner and the owner’s daughter — is a kind of Genesis story in reverse, an account not of the world’s apocalyptic destruction but rather of its step-by-step de-creation. The wind continues to howl, and existence seems to grind to a halt as darkness swallows everything.

This is not a catastrophe to be anticipated with dread, as it is in most other end-of-days movies. (Lars von Trier’s “Melancholia” and Jeff Nichols’s “Take Shelter” are recent examples.) In Mr. Tarr’s version the abyss is already here, and his task is less a matter of prophecy than of careful recording.

The lives of the young woman and her father, who live in an isolated house with a dirt floor and a wood-burning stove, are circumscribed by the routines of survival. Each day brings a series of tasks undertaken with ritualistic gravity, from the shots of plum brandy (one for her, two for him) at breakfast to the boiled potatoes (one for each of them, with a sprinkle of salt for Dad) that make up their main meal.

Those potatoes would cook faster if the daughter cut them up, but cutting — or, for that matter, making anything go faster — is antithetical to Mr. Tarr’s methods. There are only around 30 shots in the 2 hours 26 minutes of “The Turin Horse,” and it has, like certain musical compositions, the power to alter your perception of time. Mr. Tarr wants us to see, to feel, just how long things take, to experience the weight and density of time in an austere, technology-free setting.

But the point is not that life was so much harder back then; back then, after all, even poor people smiled, told jokes and had conversations. And reminders of a wider, brighter human reality intrude now and then on the domestic solitude of “The Turin Horse,” in the form of a philosophizing neighbor and then of a wagon full of gypsies whose boisterousness seems both seductive and threatening.

The horse, meanwhile, remains a passive, weirdly tender presence, and its refusal to budge or to eat, which threatens its owner’s livelihood, begins to feel like a form of metaphysical resistance as well as a plain, frustrating fact of life.

In Mr. Tarr’s earlier films — like the magisterial, nightmarish, seven-hour “Sátántangó” and the wintry “Werckmeister Harmonies” — the heaviness was punctuated by incursions of the grotesque and the surreal, which may be why he has described them as comedies. Next to them, “The Turin Horse” is a pared-down, sinewy parable, as clear and simple as Fred Kelemen’s exquisitely lucid monochrome cinematography but also as layered and mysterious as Mihaly Vig’s jaggedly romantic score.

The rigors of life can grind you down. The rigor of art can have the opposite effect, and “The Turin Horse” is an example — an exceedingly rare one in contemporary cinema — of how a work that seems built on the denial of pleasure can, through formal discipline, passionate integrity and terrifying seriousness, produce an experience of exaltation. The movie is too beautiful to be described as an ordeal, but it is sufficiently intense and unyielding that when it is over, you may feel, along with awe, a measure of relief. Which may sound like a reason to stay away, but is exactly the opposite.
Turin. The story has inspired many interpretations; Tarr chooses to focus on the horse, the man who owns it and his daughter. Set in a bleak, constantly wind-swept landscape, it is a soberly apocalyptic tale, a sort of creation story in reverse, as the characters’ world is gradually diminished and restricted over the course of six days until total darkness engulfs them. Tarr has said that it was his last film, and the disappearance of light at the end makes it a particularly poignant farewell to cinema.

Virginie Sélavy talked to Belá Tarr at the Edinburgh Film Festival in June 2011 about slowness, simplicity and Nietzsche.

Virginie Sélavy: The constant wind in The Turin Horse made me think of Victor Sjöström’s The Wind. It makes everything very claustrophobic. Was that the effect you wanted to create?

Belá Tarr: No, we just wanted to show you something about the power of nature. Since The Damnation, I’ve always thought about the questions: what is the power of humanity, what is the power of nature, and where we are, because we are a part of nature.

The Turin Horse has a very minimal set-up: a man and his daughter in hostile nature.

We were thinking, if God created the world in six days, what is happening now, and how we should destroy the world during those six days. We just wanted to say something about the six days, about the horse, and what is happening with the coachman if he doesn’t have a horse anymore. He will die, like his horse, because he has no work, he has no money, he has no life.

You said in the Q&A that it was the reverse creation of the world, the end of the world: every day the two characters have to give something up. There is an ominous, apocalyptic feeling about the film.

For me, the apocalypse is a big TV show, it’s a lot of things happening, it’s a really big event. And the way I see it, the end of the world is very simple, very quiet, without any show. It’s just going down and getting weaker and weaker and by the end it will be over. The problem is, we have just one life, and when you get to my age you will see very clearly how the rest is shorter than what is behind you, and in this case you have to think about what you have done and what will be and what else you can do.

There is very little dialogue in the film and the longest speech in the film is made by a neighbour who comes round to get more pálinka. What he says is quite oblique, but he repeats, ‘they’ve debased everything’ and seems to be connecting ‘debasing’ and ‘acquiring’. Is that something that reflects your personal feelings about the world?

No, he’s an alcoholic guy, he’s run out of alcohol and he needs some more, and while he’s waiting he’s talking and this is his vision: how we touch something and how we can make it dirty because we are dirty. He’s repeating the words in a crazy way and saying nearly the same thing but it’s not the same.

You said in the Q&A after the screening, and this is something that emerges from your other films too, that there’s something that has gone wrong with the world.

It’s not as simple. At the beginning, when I was 22, I had a lot of power and I had big ambitions, I wanted to change the whole world. I was not just knocking but beating on doors and my first movie was full of energy, like a hurricane or a big storm. And it was absolutely against society. As I grew up, step by step, film by film, I had to understand that the world is a little bit more complicated. And the problems are deeper, maybe they’re not just social problems, maybe they’re ontological problems. And then I had to understand that it doesn’t only depend on people, maybe they are cosmic, universal problems and the shit is much bigger than I believed when I was 22. And I understood that it’s really hard to say something about the world and I learnt I have no right to judge anything. I cannot say anything is good or bad because I have to accept the world, and of course I have to accept and respect people. And that’s what we created, this is the world, it’s our world. And if we want we can change, but if we don’t want, nobody will change. That’s why it’s so complicated. And I’m just a poor filmmaker. We just wanted to show you something, some pictures, just some human eyes, something that is close to you.

Is it because the world is so complicated to talk about that you’ve made your film as simple as you could?

Yes, sure. I learnt and I wanted to make a very simple movie without judging, just to show really clearly what could happen and what has happened with the horse, because that is the main question.

Apart from the horse, are there other connections with the Nietzsche anecdote?

The Nietzsche story tells me very clearly about our limitations. We create some theories, or we create something, it doesn’t matter what, maybe just a table, and we believe so much in our creations and then we are faced with something like Nietzsche was, faced with the horse and the coachman beating him. And all of his theories were gone, he just stood next to the horse and he was protecting him with his body and hugging his nape, and that’s it. And you should see very clearly that all of our theories may be fake, may be wrong, and we have to understand and get closer to the real things. Of course, I was reading Nietzsche and I know his theories very well. And the main issue when he says that God is dead is quite clear and really simple. I understand why he’s built this Übermensch theory but we just wanted to show you that the world is maybe simpler, maybe richer.

Why do you prefer to work in black and white?

Because it’s very stylised. When you see a black and white film you don’t think you’re seeing reality. It’s not. You see immediately that it is a creation. I really don’t like colour movies because every colour is too naturalistic: on the one hand totally fake, because the green is too green, the blue is too blue, the red is too red; and on the other hand, you get a very naturalistic picture at the end. It’s far from you, it’s not my style.

Your work is also characterised by a very slow pace.

In the last 20 years, what I did was I just destroying the stories and I tried to involve some other element like time, because our lives are happening in time, like space, natural elements – rain, wind – animals – street dogs, cats, horse – and lots
of things which are a part of our lives. And when I go to the movies and I watch some real movies, what I see is a really simple thing. They are following the story line – information/cut/information/cut/information/cut, or action/cut/action/cut/action/cut. But what do we call information? What do we call action? Maybe dying is also information. Maybe a piece of wall, or when you are just watching the landscape and it’s raining outside, is also a part of time – and also part of our lives and you cannot separate that. And when we only give information, which just connects human action, we are in the wrong. I wanted to look at things and say this is also information, and if somebody is listening this is also information. And if I just see someone’s eyes, it’s also information, and not everything has to connect the primitive story line together, because anyway, the stories are not interesting anymore. If you read the Old Testament, everything is in there: how it started, Cain kills Abel, and then someone fucks their mother, and then there’s the holocaust and the mass murders, everything is in there. You cannot create new stories, it is not our job to create new stories. Our job is very simple, just to try to understand how we are doing the same old story; because we are repeating the same old story but of course everybody is different and everybody has some power to influence their own lives, and this could be interesting – because the differences are always interesting.

You show similar scenes day after day but with small variations, and it seemed to me that the film was about the incremental, almost imperceptible way in which things change.

Yes, it was very important to show the differences. Daily life is always monotonous, you wake up in the morning, you get up, etc. But every day there is always some difference.

You co-wrote the screenplay with László; Krasznahorkai, on whose novels your films Sátántangó; and The Werckmeister Harmonies were based. Can you tell me more about the way you work together?

We met in 1985. A friend of mine gave me the manuscript of Sátántangó; and I immediately fell in love with this book. I called László; Krasznahorkai and we met at Easter and from that day until the end of this movie we had a strong relationship. He didn’t come to the locations, sometimes we showed him some rushes, or the rough cut, but in our case the rough cut is nearly the ready movie. It was simple because we never talked about art, we always talked about life and real human situations, what happens to different people in reality. I had to find a way to make a movie about his novel, because if I missed anything I’d be in the wrong. I had to understand his novel and then I had to go back to reality and find the same thing that he was watching when he was writing the book. And this way I can have my point of view, which is mostly the same as the book, and then I will make a movie about this reality. I’m not working from the book directly, I have to go back to his reality and then I have to build up the film language, because literature is one language and film is another, and you cannot do a direct translation.