Directed by Béla Tarr
Co-director Ágnes Hranitzky
Based on László Krasznahorkai’s novel The Melancholy of Resistance
Screenplay by László Krasznahorkai & Béla Tarr
Produced by Franz Goëss, Paul Saadoun & Miklós Szita
Original Music by Mihály Vig
Cinematography by Patrick de Ranter, Miklós Gurbán, Erwin Lanzensberger, Gábor Medvigy, Emil Novák & Rob Tregenza
Film Editing by Ágnes Hranitzky

Lars Rudolph...János Valuska
Peter Fitz...György Eszter
Hanna Schygulla...Tünde Eszter
János Derzsi...Man In The Broad-Cloth Coat
Djoko Rosic...Man In Western Boots (as Djoko Rossich)
Tamás Wichmann...Man In The Sailor-Cap
Ferenc Kállai...Director
Mihály Kormos...Factotum
Putyi Horváth...Porter
Enikö Börcsök...Aunt Piri
Irén Szajki...Mrs. Harrer
Alfréd Járai...Lajos Harrer
György Barkó...Mr. Nadabán
Lajos Dobák...Mr. Volent
András Fekete...Mr. Árgyelán
Sandor Bese...The Prince


A 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 (Családi Tuzfeszek).

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 \( \text{Damnation, 1987} \)]

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 lead 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 clichéd, 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—strips 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….

The Melancholy of Resistance: The Films of Bela Tarr

This essay was excerpted from a longer article by Peter Hames on the films of Bela Tarr that was featured in the online film journal Kinoeye, September 3, 2001. Hames, a noted authority on Eastern European film, is the author of The Czechoslovak New Wave and editor of Dark Alchemy: The Films of Jan Svankmajer.

“Who is Bela Tarr?” runs the title of an article in an American film magazine. To the initiated, he is a Hungarian filmmaker who has built a growing reputation on the festival circuit with a trio of uncompromising films—Karhozat (Damnation, 1989), Satantango (Satan’s Tango, 1994) and Werckmeister Harmoniak (Werckmeister Harmoniak, 2000), which, particularly with the latter, seems set to make the first genuine international breakthrough by a Hungarian auteur since Milos Jancso in the sixties.

Why Bela Tarr and not Peter Gothar, Janos Rosza, Gyorgy Feher, or other talented directors? The answer probably lies in the extreme formal challenges presented by his work. His most radical film, Satantango, runs for over seven hours, is in black and white, has script that is the reverse of feel-good and is, in its lack of concern for linear narrative, incomprehensible. After ten minutes of looking at a herd of cows, Hollywood executives would leave; it would never receive funding from Britain’s Film Council, and it has no chance of screening in a multiplex or being shown on television. It is the polar opposite of the blockbuster and the multiplex or being shown on television. It is the polar opposite of the blockbuster and the Miramax-backed foreign-language Oscar-winner. It is a slap in the face of consumerism and corporate taste.

A Growing Interest in Form

Tarr’s growing interest in formal experiment is particularly apparent in what can be described as his two “transitional” films, a video version of Macbeth (1980) made for television, featuring Gyorgy Cserhalmi in the leading role, and the clausrophobic and theatrical Almanac of the Fall (Orsi Almanach, 1985).

Macbeth is an essentially experimental piece filmed in two takes (one 5 minutes long, before the credits, the other 67 minutes). Milkos Jancso has, of course, taken us here before (notably in Meg K er a Nep or Red Palm) but unlike Jancso, Tarr is restricted by his text. Filmed largely in closeup with few breaks in verbal delivery, the film achieves a strange poetry, emphasizing the internality of the subject and transforming it into a kind of epic poem. From a Shakespearian perspective however, one misses...
the space between events, dramatic distance and the conventional emphasis on theatrical mise-en-scène.

Claustrophobia

Almanac of Fall focuses on life in an apartment, but Tarr has now moved away from his documentary style. An older woman owns the apartment and lives there with her son. She is ill, and a young nurse has moved in with her to administer injections, accompanied by her lover. The fifth resident is a teacher.

In this film of resolute pessimism in which sex seems to function as little more than an escape from despair, there are references to impending catastrophe and the absence of and necessity for love. The lover lacks motivation, the teacher has his financial problems and the son covets his mother’s money. In the course of the film, the nurse sleeps with all three men, one episode (with the son) functioning virtually as rape. The mother tells the lover that the nurse’s sleeping with the teacher is a matter of no consequence, speaks of her loneliness and of the fact that she is a member of “the generation that cannot relax...the reliable generation.” The relations between individuals reflect a “time of indifference”—to recall the title of Albert Moravia’s novel about fascist Italy—and while there is little direct political comment in Tarr’s film, it’s fair to make the same kinds of inference.

If the subject follows the themes apparent in Tarr’s earlier work, the obsession with style marks a new departure, beginning with the quotation from Pushkin and reference to the devil’s movement in circles. In the opening scene, the lighting is heavily stylized, one character in red, another in blue and the background in green. Extreme closeups and confrontational images of opposing heads are used at various stages and the camera constantly frames the characters as if they are in a cage. In one scene, the set is tilted, and an overhead shot of the apartment is complemented by the physical struggle between two men filmed from beneath through a glass floor. Scenes of violent action contrast with those of virtual stasis. At the end of the film, a miserabilist rendition of “Que sera sera” verges on self-parody.

Word and Image

All three of Tarr’s subsequent features are the result of his collaboration with the writer, Laszlo Krasznahorkai, a leading novelist whose work has achieved recognition outside of Hungary via German translations. Only one of his novels, Az Ellenallas Melankoliaja (The Melancholy of Resistance, 1989), the origin for Werckmeister Harmonies, has so far been translated into English. Satan’s Tango is also based on a novel by Krasznahorkai, while Damnation was developed from a short story.

Damnation is close to being a genre film in its story of love and betrayal, a theme that Tarr has described as being very simple—even “primitive.” Karrer lives a withdrawn life in a mining community where his evenings all end up in the Titanik bar. He is offered a smuggling job by the bar’s owner but passes it on to Sebestyen, husband of the singer at the bar. In Sebestyen’s absence, Karrer and the wife sleep together and Karrer seeks a lasting relationship. He considers denouncing Sebestyen to the police. On Sebestyen’s return, there is a confrontation between the two men and the bar owner takes the woman to his car, where they have sex. The next day, Karrer denounces them all. In the final scene, Karrer approaches a waste tip in the pouring rain where he confronts a barking dog. Getting down on his hands and knees, he barks at it until it is forced into retreat.

However, what is most striking about the film is its style—the emphasis on formal composition, the use of the long take and the sequence shot, the slow movements of the camera and the experimentation with sound and time. It is worth recalling Antonioni’s comment on his own films that his main claim to fame lay in the reinvention of cinematic time—a claim that could also be made for Tarr. Other filmmakers who could be said to work in this tradition include Jancso, Andrei Tarkovsky, Theo Angelopoulos and Alexander Sokurov. Tarr, however, maintains a much stronger sense of narrative, even if it is subverted in various ways.

Getting Closer to Life

The opening shots of Damnation indicate that we should not expect anything like a conventional development. The camera is placed behind Karrer’s head as he looks out through an open window, black coal buckets move towards us, and we hear nothing but the runners on the wire. The camera moves slowly forward until the head fills the whole of the screen. The scene then shifts to the bar where there is a panning shot taking in a range of people, bored, drunk, or asleep.

There is a long held shot of beer glasses, the offscreen sound of balls on a pool table and the sound of accordion accompaniment by the player at the bar. Outside, it is pouring with rain, and dogs pass. In the framing of images, there is an obsessive emphasis on the textures of walls and plaster with the film’s characters placed in front. In one sequence, accompanied by a pan, walls alternate rhythmically with group portraits of human misery. The accordion music attains a strange, hypnotic and hallucinatory quality. Flat, sideways images of cars become two-dimensional icons. The film’s mise-en-scene functions as a counterpoint to the story.

Tarr says that it is not his objective to tell a story but to get closer to people—“to understand everyday life.” But he points out that even his earlier films were unconcerned with psychological processes. His interest was always in the personal “presence” of his actors. Damnation provides a kind of circular dance in which the walls, the rain and the dogs also have their stories. The rain falls down on a humdrum town. The human protagonists are matched by the scenery, weather and time. However, it is also an artificial world, since the town was constructed from seven locations and, in some instances, houses and sets were specially built. The driving rain is almost transparently artificial.

A Diabolical Masterpiece
Tarr first read Krasznahorkai’s Satan’s Tango, their second collaboration, as an unpublished manuscript in the late eighties. The story gradually reveals the failure and destruction of a farm collective during a few autumn days, partly seen from the perspective of different characters. Tarr notes that the form of the film, like the novel, is based on the tango, a factor apparent in its use of overlapping time, its twelve sections and the choreography of its camera movement.

The film begins with a much-quoted opening scene in which cows move from a shed towards the right of the screen. The camera moves with them, tracking alongside to take in walls, outhouses and hens. The whole sequence is accompanied by haunting and reverberating sound. A narrative title informs us that the whole town has been cut off by the bog, mud and the incessant rain. “The news is that they are coming,” announces a title. The narrative voice is that of the doctor, who watched events and records them from his desk at the window, the film returning to him at the end as the narrative begins again.

Cosmic Images

The first section of Satan’s Tango is spent in anticipation of the arrival of Irimias who, together with his Romanian disciple, Petrina, is reported to be heading towards the village. There had been rumors that he was dead. He eventually emerges as a Messiah-like figure who cheats them out of their money and their expectations. It’s possible to interpret the breakup of the collective farm as the end of Communism and the promises of the false Messiah as the introduction of capitalism, but the Tarr/Krasznahorkai approach can be more properly described, in Tarr’s words, as “cosmic.”

Again, the film’s formal devices dominate. Some scenes, with their elaborate and slow camerawork and noises offscreen become exercises in visual experience and a sense of time in their own right, recalling the structural aesthetics of the Canadian sculptor and filmmaker Michael Snow (for example in Wavelength, 1967). In one scene, a fly becomes a significant structuring element. Camera movement with its slow zooms and vertical movements, particularly when combined with music, plays a dominant expressive role.

The long take, depth of field and use of the Steadicam produce extraordinary images—figures walking away from the camera into the far distance, figures walking forward in closeup for extended period, cameras on the heels of Irimias and Petrina, surrounded by rain, wind and cascading rubbish. The film’s endless walking (of Irimias and Petrina to the farm, of the farmers to their “promised land”), “plodding along” according to the conductor Kelemen’s endless pub monologue, seems to lead nowhere.

Comedy or Miserabilism?

Scenes often last for a great deal of time, extending well beyond the film’s narrative requirements. While this is to be anticipated, they also go beyond what might be described a normal observational necessity. Two examples are the endless dance sequence in the pub and the scene where the doctor writes

of horses like refugees from a Jancso film. “The horses have escaped from the slaughterhouse again,” is the apparently ironic comment.

Tarr is again concerned with the “presence” of his characters. For this reason, he explains he always works with friends, whose personalities’ own reality is somehow present on screen. This sounds remarkably like an updated version of neorealism. Arguing that films should be made with more openness, fairness and honesty, he regards his audience as partners. Audiences can, after all, he argues, use their eyes.

In several interviews, Tarr has referred to the terrible state of contemporary cinema and of the need “to kick the door in.” Although he first used the term in connection with his debut films since, as he puts it, there were rules you could not transgress, criticisms that could not be made, a social reality that could not be shown—one suspects that his targets are now wider. He still wants to examine a reality that is routinely excluded from cinema.

The End of the World as We Know It?

In Werckmeister Harmonies, the film that seems likely to provide Tarr’s breakthrough in the arthouse market, Tarr has adapted Krasznahorkai’s novel The Melancholy of Resistance, the main section of which in entitled “Werckmeister Harmonies.” There are obvious parallels with Satan’s Tango. The setting is a provincial town cut off by ice, but there are also unclear rumours of events to come—this time robbery, violence and maybe apocalypse. A travelling circus comes to town offering to exhibit the biggest whale in the world, accompanied by a mysterious and uncontrollable figure referred to as “the prince,” who has the capacity to attract violent followers and whose presence alone is sufficient to trigger his policies of destruction.
The impact is reflected in the community—the reclusive Eszter, who is conjured out of his paranoid rejection of the world, his estranged wife, who uses the opportunity to organize a group to fulfill her own ambitions, her lover, the police chief, who lapses into an alcoholic coma. Tarr makes something of a concession to convention in focusing on the central character of Valuska, who functions as a kind of holy idiot, repeatedly organizing the inhabitants of the local bar into a version of the solar system, but who, in his nighttimes ramblings becomes attuned to what is happening long before the other members of the community.

By normal standards, the film’s style is radical, yet it is more subject to the demands of Krasznahorkai’s story than either Damnation or Satan’s Tango. There are nonetheless some striking scenes—the headlights of the tractor pulling the corrugated shed which houses the stuffed whale light up the village in a mysterious and threatening glow. Valuska’s nightly perambulations through the village streets, the endless march of workers bent on undiscriminating violence. The destruction of the town hospital becomes a climactic element in the film (which it is not in the book). The callous attack on both the ill and the well (not far removed from the effects of technological warfare) only ends when the main protagonists of violence face the withered and naked body of an old man standing in a bath.

Werckmeister Harmonies is, in many ways, a faithful account of the novel, with the long takes and the sense of time, place and sound providing a visual equivalent to the enveloping prose of the original. In fact, it is worth noting that Tarr, his editor and partner Agnes Hranitzky and Krasznahorkai take joint credits on these films. Nothing is done without Hranitzky’s approval, says Tarr, and Krasznahorkai often conceives or recreates his original ideas or inspiration in film terms. It seems fair to accept their claim for joint authorship.

Tarr’s concern with the problems of human interaction in small apartments has gradually extended to a wider canvas, the nature of power and relations in the community and the significance of that within a broader perceptual reality. Tarr denies that his films convey any symbolic or allegorical meaning—“film is always something definite—it can only record real things.” On the other hand it is hardly surprising if audiences seek to interpret figures such as the whale or the prince and the repeated biblical references.

Werckmeister Harmonies certainly explores these issues and promotes reflection on the roots of violence, ever ready to destroy the illusion of a stable social life. But the film also offers us the no doubt illusory search for the perfection of tone and scale sought after by Eszter, the wonder of the whale (a thing of beauty) and the beauty of the film itself, with the grace of its camera movements and attention to the rare sensibilities of everyday sound and perception.

The Tarr/Krasznahorkai films are never far from the threats of apocalypse and damnation, but it is clear that they offer no easy interpretation. On the other hand, it is evident that their ambiguity is designed to force an interpretative effort—the audience is intended to enter into a partnership not as a means of decoding a secret meaning but as a means of exploring reality. It would be a mistake to view his work in the same light as a Tarkovsky or a Sokurov—he really does want us to re-see and re-experience the world in both social and perceptual terms. The revolutionary quality of the films rests in the fact that these objectives are seen as part of a single project.


Bela Tarr’s Werckmeister Harmonies charts the nightmare disintegration of a smalltown community. Was a whale to blame, asks Jonathan Romney.

Until recently Hungarian director Bela Tarr enjoyed something of a mythical status on the international scene. Relatively few people had seen his seven-and-a-quarter hour drama Satantango (1994), and if his name was bandied around it was largely because of its inclusion in a controversial essay by Susan Sontag, who heralded him as a standard-bearer for an unapologetically serious-minded film culture.

Even now that his films are more widely seen, Tarr’s reputation remains quasilegendary. This is because he represents a hardline belief in a cinema of patience and severity, of tableaux and long takes, in some ways echoing that of his countryman Miklos Jancso. Partly too it is because of his films’ revelatory effect on viewers: Gus Van Sant, for instance, seems to have experienced a Damascene conversion on discovering Tarr, resulting in his recent quixotically minimalist Gerry.

Tarr’s films since 1987, in collaboration with screenwriter/novelist Laszlo Krasznahorkai may be challenging in their often extreme use of duration, but they are hardly short on narrative drive or solemn romanticism. Werckmeister Harmonies based on Krasznahorkai’s novel The Melancholy of Resistance is Tarr’s first truly gothic film, introducing an element of the fantastic, even the supernatural. Yet there is no spectacular illusionism involved in the fabulous whale from a visiting circus is a prop as transparently theatrical as the rhino in Fellini’s And the Ship Sails On, and all we see of the apparently satanic Prince is a dwarfish shadow on a wall.

As a metaphysical horror story, Werckmeister Harmonies deserves to be Tarr’s breakthrough with a cult audience, especially since its atmosphere bears comparison with early David Lynch. The hermetic world Tarr creates is ineffably mysterious, yet the film’s representation is rooted in a scrupulously mundane naturalism (Tarr started out making dramas of working life beside which the Dardenne’s films look wilfully baroque).

Werckmeister Harmonies is a collaborative film par excellence: the opening titles credit it jointly to Tarr, Krasznahorkai and editor Agnes Hranitzky, Tarr’s wife and longtime collaborator. The strength of their collective vision is proved by a remarkable unity of tone and look, despite an extended production period that involved seven cinematographers (including Rob Tregenze, a specialist in slow take cinema in his own right). Throughout, the film maintains its harsh chiaroscuro
and a style of camera movement that creates a forever shifting space: closed to the outside world, the small town where the action takes place contains endlessly explorable interiors, such as the cavernous, Wellesian expanses of Eszter’s house, unfolded by a roaming camera.

The haunted, bony features of German actor Lars Rudolph, who plays lead protagonist Valuska, may suggest a Dostoievskian holy fool, but the tone of Krasznahorkai’s novel radically stripped down in his and Tarr’s screenplay, its vernal torrents reduced to a chill autism is closer, as W.G. Sebald has suggested, to Gogol. The universe of Werckmeister Harmonies is ruled by Gogolian quality of poshlosht, best described as a transcendental crassness and incarnated here by the fearsome Tunde, played by Hanna Schygulla (dubbed, like Rudolph, into Hungarian). Initially it comes as a shock to see Fassbinder’s perennial vamp as an elderly, well-padded babushka, though it may be Tunde’s deceptive guise, for the next time we see her, dancing with her drunken lover, she seems to have regained a calculating sexual force.

The film is dominated by a brooding atmosphere of apocalyptic unrest, though it is implied that the cosmic ‘evil’ pervading the town is the product of bourgeois paranoia. Tempting as it may be to relate the story to political changes in Hungary in the last days of Communism (Krasznahorkai’s novel was published in 1989), Tarr has insisted that his film contains no allegory. Yet the narrative is certainly one of anxiety about the breakdown of an old, enfeebled order and the explosive release of repressed popular energies. Little in recent cinema is as terrifying as the sequence in which the masses attack a dilapidated hospital, beating up patients as they go: the violence, in an eight-minute shot, is accentuated by the ghostly placidity of the camera’s drift along passageways and round corners, like a distracted onlooker. At last the hordes stop dead at the sight of a skeletal, naked old man (the decrepit earthly remnant of God, perhaps?) and lumber out like George Romero zombies while Tarr holds a closeup of Valuska’s stare.

Yet it is impossible to determine the ultimate cause of the chaos. From the very start rumours are rife about the universal disruption heralded by the anticipated eclipse. But is any of it really caused by the arrival of the whale, or is the huge dead creature, with its glassy eye, simply the witness to human destructiveness? Is the supposedly demonic demagogue Prince anything more than an impotent, robotic-voiced homunculus? The one truly identifiable centre of malevolence is Tunde, a reactionary opportunist exploiting superstition to gain power in the name of order. It may even be that her musicologist ex-husband Eszter, obsessed with the theories of 17th-century German composer Werckmeister, has himself contributed to disturbing the harmonic order of things by withdrawing from any active involvement; at the very least he is a representative of an enfeebled intelligentsia, vainly fiddling with abstractions while the world burns.

The other great enigma is Valuska’s role in events. Seemingly an innocent treated with gentle indulgence, he has an implicit megalomania: directing a bar of drunks in a reenactment of cosmic motion in the opening scene, he plays not only a beer-parlour deity but also a film director figure within the fiction. He is characterized above all as a seer, gazing at the world, whether staring into the inscrutable eye of the whale or as a mute witness to violence. But his part in the terrible night remains unclear: when he reads a diary account of events we never quite know whether he’s reading a narrative of his own involvement or whether he has ‘authored’ the events in a more oblique way whether he has somehow, if only by passive collusion with Tunde, catalyzed the apocalypse.

In the end the defeated thinker Eszter finally visits the whale, now beached and exposed in the wrecked square and more inscrutable than ever. It’s hard to imagine a more downbeat ending than the complex triumph of entropy and reaction yet this conclusion derives a profound grace from the extremity of its pessimism. Explaining the cosmos to his drunks, Valuska pleads, “All I ask is that you step with me into the bottomlessness”, and that is essentially Tarr’s invitation to the viewer. The enigmatic harmonic preoccupations alluded to in the title suggest that this film rich in movement, low on dialogue aspires, as the old phrase has it, to the condition of music. But Tarr’s true achievement is to attain the condition of silence, and of a bottomless, awesomely inscrutable nightmare.

from FilmCritic.com, Jeremiah Kipp

At two and a half hours, Werckmeister Harmonies is an eye-blink in comparison to director Béla Tarr’s seven-hour-plus epic Sátántangó (which was acclaimed by Susan Sontag as the future of cinema and ripped off by Gus Van Sant in Elephant, Last Days, and Gerry). Tarr actually surpasses himself in this condensed format, and what felt bloated and hectored at epic length feels precise here, and engaging on every level. The tale is told through extremely long, unbroken and fluid camera movements, some drawn out as long as 15 minutes.

Sátántangó opens with 10 minutes of cows emerging onto the muddy landscape of a farming community, which let you know you had to have a saint’s patience to endure the rest of the movie. Werckmeister Harmonies, on the other hand, has a more arresting and immediately engaging sequence. It helps that Tarr follows one central protagonist this time, one János Valuska (Lars Rudolph), whom many critics have referred to as a “Holy Fool.” But in fact, this supposedly simpleminded guy is a practitioner of the theatrical arts. He has more in common with great Polish theater directors like Grotowski and Artaud than he does with holy fools, and he is first glimpsed staging a bit of performance art for the drunken patrons of an alehouse right before closing time.

This moment of theater for the poor is a reenactment of a solar eclipse, with János using the drunks and the peasants as stand-ins for the sun, the moon, and the earth. “And now we’ll
have an explanation that simple folks like us can understand about immortality,” he cheerfully intones, whirling the bar patrons into a kind of dance as the Steadicam roves around them. “All I ask is that you step with me into the boundlessness…” Tarr’s camera feels outside of the characters, in a reverential movement best described as “cosmic” in its fascination. To all those who endured the dance sequence in Sátántango, this is quite a different matter. Instead of mocking assessment of his characters in an all-encompassing wide shot, Tarr dances with them, as if responding to the poetic nature of János’s monologue.

As the eclipse reaches its peak, János stops the action, and the camera movements grow less frenetic. Then the monologue veers into the apocalyptic: “Everything that was is still. Are the hills going to march off? Will Heaven fall upon us? Will the earth open us under us? We don’t know. We don’t know, for a total eclipse has come upon us.”

The character of János is fervent, articulate yet blessedly compassionate and strangely optimistic—the antithesis of the hate-spewing, equally working class intellectual played by David Thewlis in Mike Leigh’s Naked. “We are a part of everything that has ever been or will ever be,” was Johnny’s creed, and it is echoed here, but it feels more blessed coming from János. There are forces in the solar system larger than us, but when he looks upon them it is with awe. “But no need for fear…it’s not over,” he says.

The hope and amazement carries through the rest of Werckmeister Harmonies, which plays out like a horror tale of a town on the verge of obliteration. That night, the market square becomes increasingly filled with angry peasants building large bonfires around a carnival attraction featuring a large, mummified whale. When János looks upon the whale with amazement, he stands in counterpoint to the seething resentment of a poverty class that doesn’t give a damn for the infinite solar system above them, or the price of a ticket to see the great white leviathan. The carnival’s ringleader, an unseen presence known as The Prince, spouts revolutionary screeds and has been known to incite towns to elaborate riots and destruction.

As rage build within the town square, János is cast as de-facto observer of an impending destruction—indeed, the Prince and the whale have arrived concurrent with János’s single-minded aunt (Hanna Schygulla), who has come to town with a list of names, a political ideology that may err on the side of totalitarianism, and a proposal for martial law to contain the angry masses. There are indeed forces in János’s world larger than he is, but politics is grounded in the earth, and human blood, and has no use for the sun, moon, or stars.

There only 39 shots altogether in Werckmeister Harmonies, yet it never feels dull. It marches along toward a middle section of riots and a climax of horror and purposefully. And each shot feels like a building block towards something. Each shot, in fact, is visually striking. To wit: Our hero runs through an all-encompassing darkness, covering a country mile as the camera stays in close on him as he flees the distant horizon over his shoulder. One wonders why Tarr lingers on him so long when suddenly the background erupts in explosions, and we see the long take register as a scary thought— outrunning one’s one death.

Indeed, every shot in Werckmeister Harmonies makes Goodfellas seem like child’s play. A legion of zombie-like workers barge into a hospital, tearing everything apart and beating up or killing anyone who lurks there (it feels like the pristine dolly shots from The Shining if a riot were taking place in the Overlook Hotel). A lingering long take on the hero walking through the square follows him as he passes a legion of angry peasants, each seared, weather-worn face telling a story, until he arrives at the eye of the whale, moving effortlessly from the mundane to the epic. The final image of the whale is perhaps the most succinct version of “apocalypse” ever put on screen, and dares to say the apocalypse has a startling, bleak beauty all its own.

JUST TWO MORE FILMS IN BUFFALO FILM SEMINARS 30:
Apr 28 Sylvain Chomet, The Triplets of Belleville, 2003
May 5 Joel and Ethan Coen, No Country for Old Men, 2007

CONTACTS: ...email Diane Christian: engdc@buffalo.edu ...email Bruce Jackson bjackson@buffalo.edu ...for the series schedule, annotations, links and updates: http://buffalofilmseminars.com ...to subscribe to the weekly email informational notes, send an email to addto list@buffalofilmseminars.com ....for cast and crew info on any film: http://imdb.com/

The Buffalo Film Seminars are presented by the State University of New York at Buffalo and the Dipson Amherst Theatre, with support from the Robert and Patricia Colby Foundation and the Buffalo News.