Aesthetics of Visual Expressionism:
Béla Tarr's Cinematic Landscapes

Jarmo VALKOLA

*"Deep emotion pierces everyone...
they have escaped the weight of darkness."*
Valushka in Werckmeister Harmonies

Theoretical Framework

Understanding works of art is centrally a perceptual process than an inferential one. There is no significant step between how we perceive the work, and how we understand it. Understanding is rooted in scrutiny of the aesthetic surface of the work. Perception supplies premises for an inference of the meaning of the work of art. A certain cognitive stock allows the construction of critically relevant evaluations, from which the judgement of meaning can be deduced. The arts are cognitive and a matter of active thinking. The symbol system approach to cognition identifies the different arts as each being a different symbol system, and thinking in the arts as processing, or conducting operations on, the symbols of one of these systems. This establishes the arts as cognitive. It also establishes them as unique because each art medium is a different symbol system, and therefore thinking within each symbol system is a unique kind of thinking, although they might overlap.

Art films are usually expressive of national concerns, and they are generally characterized by the use of self-consciously artful techniques designed to differentiate them from merely entertaining popular cinema.

Hungarian director Béla Tarr is one of the truly original filmmakers of our time. His special use of time, space, and extremely long takes puts him into the front row of European pictorialism, a way of stylizing narrative. In that field his closest cousins are another Hungarian Miklós Jancsó, Russian Andrey Tarkovsky and Greece's Theo Angelopoulos. The purpose of the following text is to examine the special language and visual aesthetics of Béla Tarr's film art.

Mapping the Aesthetics

Cognitive and Visual Thinking

Parts and relations are the basic ingredients of artistic form. When we make statements about the form of an artwork, we are speaking of the relations between parts of the work. The artistic form is the structure of repeating themes, where the themes are the parts and the relation between them is repetition. Artworks have many elements, and these can be related in many ways. Some of these ways may be co-ordinated, such as the way in which the characters are related to the plot in many films. Or they may be relatively uncoordinated. When we speak of artistic form of an artwork, we may take that to refer to all the *webs of relations* that obtain between the elements of an artwork.[1]

Over the past 30 years cognitive science has revolutionized our understanding of mental processes. At the heart of this discipline is a central dogma, which plays a role analogous to the doctrine of atomism in physics, the germ theory of disease in medicine, or plate tectonics in geology. This central dogma is the 'Computational Theory of Mind': which means that mental processes are formal manipulations of symbols, or programs, consisting of sequences of elementary processes made available by the information-processing capabilities of neural tissue.[2] The computational theory of mind has led to rapid progress because it has given a precise mechanistic sense to formally vague terms such as 'memory', 'meaning', 'goal', 'perception', and the like, which are indispensable to explaining intelligence. Dudley Andrew touches this same regard: "...we are now witnessing American film theory audaciously tendering a psychological model, often set explicitly against psychoanalysis, labelled cognitive science."[3] A theory consists of a systematic prepositional explanation of the nature and functions of art. Related to film this means that theory plays many contingent roles in film interpretation.

As David Bordwell puts it: "A theory can provide the critic with plausible semantic fields (for example, sexual relations as power relations); particular schemata or heuristics (for example, looking as a privileged cue); and rhetorical

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[1] Carroll, Noël (1999) *The Philosophy of Art: A Contemporary Introduction.* London: Routledge, 141.

[2] Pinker, Steven (1988) A Computational Theory of the Mental Imagery Medium. *Cognitive and Neuropsychological Approaches to Mental Imagery,* ed. M. Denis, J. Engelkamp and J.T.E. Richardson, NATO ASI Series, NO.42 Boston: Martinus Nijhoff, 17, 387.

[3] Andrew, Dudley (1989) Cognitivism: Quests and Questions. *Iris 9* Spring: 1.

resources (for example, the appeal to a community holding the same theoretical doctrines in common)".[4]

Devising a theory is a process of creative imagination, much like a work of art. And like a work of art it may be arrived at by careful research followed by sudden flashes of intuition. Intuition may be how the theory is arrived at, but of course intuition does not ensure its truth, which must be tested in the crucible of experience, in which the most brilliant and imaginative theories may be found wanting. Since a theory encompasses so many more things than it was originally designed to explain, some of the events will probably be future ones, thus one function of scientific theories is to offer predictions. The success of a theory is its ability to make detailed and accurate predictions.

Minds are the most complex and sophisticated systems known to exist. It is to be expected, therefore, that the concepts which we have evolved for dealing with mental processes should be among the most complex and sophisticated concepts that we possess. Given that the causal theory is correct, it is quite certain that the causal roles involved will be exceedingly complex and correspondingly difficult to spell out. What was just said about purposes, for instance, can be no more than the crudest first sketch for an analysis. It turns out, in particular, that the different causal roles which constitute different mental processes are of an interlocking sort, so that it is not possible to give an account of one sort without giving an account of others, and vice versa. For instance, purposes and beliefs involve a package-deal so that, although their causal roles in the production of behaviour are different, the one causal role cannot be described without reference to the other.

According to Rudolf Arnheim perception itself is cognitive, to see is to perform operations on visual materials. The cognitive operations called thinking are not the privilege of mental processes above and beyond perception but the essential ingredients of perception itself. It is a question of active exploration, selection, grasping of essentials, simplification, abstraction, analysis and synthesis, completion, correction, comparison and problem solving. These are the ways how the mind treats cognitive material at different levels.[5] Each of these operations are components of intelligence and of perception. Take, for example, the fundamental operation of selection. If one is to select some aspect of a visual situation for attention, and for further processing, then one must select a particular shape, colour, patch, or line. The same is true of all such operations,

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[4] Bordwell, David (1989) *Making Meaning: Inference and Rhetoric in the Interpretation of Cinema*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 250.

[5] Arnheim, Rudolf (1969), *Visual Thinking*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 13–17.

which are thereby shown to be indisputably both cognitive and conducted from the very beginning in visual terms. That is why Arnheim called them *visual thinking*.

A Search for Structures

The same can be said about thinking in other media. For example, kinaesthetic thinking requires the selection for attention of particular bodily movements, and verbal thinking requires the selection of particular words and sentence structures. Thinking is the performance of these kinds of operations on the elements of a particular medium. So, if thinking is conducted in the terms of a particular medium, then to put it into the terms of a different medium is to change it. Visual thinking cannot be put exactly into words, because all translations are distortions of the original thought. That is why thought can remain true to itself only if it remains faithful to its medium, and this is the reason for insisting that we keep kinds of thinking separate.

In Arnheim's notions related to perception, the media correspond to our sensory channels. In the case of sight, the medium is visual and in the case of hearing, the medium is sound. These are the two sensory channels that Arnheim thinks as the most important for thinking. In thinking about language, the situation is different, because there is no single sensory channel corresponding to it. Language can be spoken, in which case it is heard, or written, in which case it is seen. So, language is not so much a medium of perception but of representation, a medium in which we often speak of the visual arts as different media like painting, drawing, sculpting, etc.

According to Arnheim: "In the perception of shape lie the beginnings of concept formation. Whereas the optical image projected upon the retina is a mechanically complete recording of its physical counterpart, the corresponding visual percept is not. The perception of a shape is the grasping of structural features found in, or imposed upon, the stimulus material... Perception consists in fitting the stimulus material with templates of relatively simple shape, which I call visual concepts or visual categories. The simplicity of these visual concepts is relative, in that a complex stimulus pattern viewed by refined vision may produce a rather intricate shape, which is the simplest attainable under the circumstances. What matters is that an object at which someone is looking can be said to be truly perceived only to the extent to which it is fitted to some organized shape. In addition, there generally is an amount of visual noise, accom-

panying and modifying the perceived shape with more or less vague detail and nuances, but this contributes little to visual comprehension."[6]

Thinking about art media as a media of representation, one can conclude that just as perception is not a passive reception of sensory impressions, so representation is not imitating, because perception is an active search for visual structures and representation is an active search for equivalent structures in a medium of representation. This search requires active and constructive experimentation within the medium of representation. Representation is as thoroughly cognitive as is perception.[7]

At the basic level the meaning of a sign is internalised by the process of perception. This is the intersection of our senses with reality-based data as information from the perceived world is registered. This include both personal observation and individual experience. Vivian Sobchack thinks that existentially embodied perception functions in a threefold manner.[8] First, perception presents itself to the world as the concrete manifestation of intentionality. It is intentionality commuted to existence through the body's presence in the world; it is the body's material presence that gives intentionality existential form as a concrete activity. And second, perception connects intentionality with the world; it points to and indicates the world's presentness to consciousness and its objective presence – a presence toward which intentionality is directed through the lived-body and its perceptive activity. Third, perception represents itself to itself and to others in the world as the existential condition and expressive convention of intentionality. As consciousness is aware of itself in existence, it is aware as a perceiving consciousness capable of perception; percep-

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[6] Ibid., 27.

[7] Can theories of mental imagery, conscious mental contents, developed within cognitive science throw light on the obscure but culturally very significant concept of imagination? Three extant views of mental imagery are considered: quasi-pictorial, description, and perceptual activity theories. The first two face serious theoretical and empirical difficulties. The third is (for historically contingent reasons) little known, theoretically underdeveloped, and empirically untried, but has real explanatory potential. It rejects the "traditional" symbolic computational view of mental contents, but is compatible with recent situated) cognition and active vision approaches in robotics. This theory is developed and elucidated. Three related key aspects of imagination (non-discursiveness, creativity, and seeing as) raise difficulties for the other theories. Perceptual activity theory presents imagery as non-discursive and relates it closely to seeing as. It is thus well placed to be the basis for a general theory of imagination and its role in creative thought.

[8] Sobchack, Vivian, (1992) *The Address of the Eye: A Phenomenology of Film Experience.* NJ: Princeton University Press, 72.

tion is not only intentionality prereflectively presenting itself to the world and others through its projects, but it is also intentionality reflectively representing itself to itself as consciousness and its significant experience of existence.

And further on Sobchack thinks: "Given these three functions of perception in existence, perception as it is lived and made concrete through the body-subject can be said to originate the correlations of the sign in the most primordial and seemingly prelogical movements of its being-in-the-world. Language and communication, however, do not emerge merely because I have a body as an instrument of perception that brings them into being. Rather I am my body. My body as lived perceptively, as engaged intentionally with the world, is already languaging and communicating by virtue of its systemic structure and material correlation with the world."[9]

We can categorise the world into separate objects in perception, and we can describe the world as being made up of separate objects by the words of language. It is an interesting question how far perceptual and verbal classifications into objects are the same. They are certainly similar, but there seem to be hardly enough names for the objects into which the world is divided perceptually."[10]

Aesthetic and Artistic Experiences

Nelson Goodman considered the idea of art media as symbol systems, which differ from natural languages in that they are nondiscursive and are capable of being replete with significance. The use of these systems to create meanings is governed by rules, which are mostly intuitive and natural, but are also partly conventional. In this view, artistic thinking is the processing of the terms of a symbol system, creating significance and following the appropriate rules.[11] Aesthetic thinking is the perception of that significance in the arrangement of those terms.

Thinking in art is the goal of aesthetic education. While aesthetics as a concept is surrounded by some ambiguity, much of it emanates from the very nature of aesthetics itself. Aesthetics deals with how perceivers interpret the nature of art and why they respond to art as they do. Aesthetics as a philosophical discipline deals with the description of aesthetic experiences and the evaluation of reasons given for the judgements made upon them. Aesthetic experience is

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[9] Ibid., 73.

[10] Gregory, Richard, L. (1981) *Mind in Science: A History of Explanations in Psychology and Physics*. London: Penquin Books (reprinted 1988), 420.

[11] Goodman, Nelson (1976) *Languages of Art: An Approach to a Theory of Symbols*. Indianapolis: Hackett, 40, 143.

an art response, one that involves either detecting and discriminating the aesthetic properties of a work and/or contemplating the relation of the form of an artwork. Still it is important to stress that aesthetic experience is neither the only kind of art response, nor the only appropriate form of experiencing art.[12]

Aesthetics as a normative science must clearly distinguish between the aesthetic and the nonaesthetic on the one hand, and the aesthetic and the unaesthetic on the other. It is obvious that the latter depends on the former, so, all the judgements depend on the exploration of the conditions under which the statements concerning the objects have been made.

Aesthetics is based on observation of the arts, and it is co-operating with the sciences. It rises into general theory from concrete works of art and historical knowledge about them. This knowledge is based on detailed observation and analysis of specific works of art with making use of all the relevant scientific techniques. In moving from the details to conclusions of philosophical generality aesthetics should continue to be scientific, objective and descriptive and draw on a wide body of verifiable knowledge on art to support its most general theories with empirical generalizations.

For example, artistic value is a constitutive, and unique property of works of art. A possession of a certain degree of artistic value seems to be a necessary condition for an artefact to be considered as a work of art. Artistic evaluation is an evaluation of an art object as art object. It tries to determine in what way and to what degree a given work of art realises the values considered unique to the given artistic genre to which it belongs. It pertains not only to the perceptual qualities of an assessed work but also to the work's place among other similar works, and in the broader history of art. Also, artistic evaluation depends on the cultural and historical context in which the work is created, and on properties of realism, stylistic consistency, artistic conventions, formal originality, craftsmanship and vision of the world, as well as suggestive and expressive qualities, and the depth of thinking.

Aesthetic value is considered as a peculiar property of natural and cultural objects, which renders the objects capable of evoking aesthetic experiences in adequately prepared and aesthetically inclined perceivers. Aesthetic evaluation and aesthetic value seem to be very intimately connected with the aesthetic experience, which forms the basis for aesthetic valuation. Aesthetic evaluation is connected not merely to art but to all kinds of objects, which are capable of evoking different aesthetic experiences. The objects of evaluation are both the directly perceived and the imagined aspects of the object in question.

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[12] Carroll, Noël (1999), 200.

The ambiguous and problematic issues related to aesthetics emanate from variable character of individuals and human cultures generally, and the subsequent variable interpretations and meanings given to artistic phenomena. In this sense, aesthetic study deals with the phenomenological and cultural dimension of artistic experience. Aesthetics deals with the variable nature of art, and involves contested concepts. For example, Morris Weitz's theory of art as a contested concept is based on the work of Ludwig Wittgenstein who argued that no one trait can be found in common among some categories of meaning and for some types of objects and activities that are called art. Weitz followed this and described the quest for a single theory of the nature of art as a fool's errand. No one theory sufficiently explains art for all times and all places. Artistic meanings, functions, and forms are adjustable to changing individual and social contingencies.[13] Aesthetic study can proceed from the premise that the aesthetic instructional enterprise is problematic and embedded in social implications and significance.

Meanings in a work of art are parts of its formal components, they are its system of cues for denotations and connotations. Meanings can justify the inclusion of stylistic elements which might be the focus of interest. In cinematic thinking it is possible to consider that meanings differ from one film to another. In analysing cinematic sequences it is possible to concentrate on any single element or structure that has a significant role in a work of art. All devices of the medium are equally important in their potential for building up meanings inside an artwork.

Aesthetic Scanning

The historical, philosophical approach to aesthetic deals with what aestheticians have said, styles in aesthetic dialogues, and schools of aesthetic thought. It offers a structured approach, closely resembling the content structure and teaching methodologies found in general education. This kind of educational and philosophical perspective is compatible with academic rationalism, because it is an intellectualized approach to aesthetics. Aesthetics is a unique form of perception and experience, and the proponents of this approach usually believe that art can provide intense experiences that entail perception of visual and tactile qualities integral to the object being viewed. There are real differences in aesthetics concerning the works of art. Some of them are better than others, and

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[13] Weitz, Morris (1962) The Role of Theory in Aesthetics. In J. Margolis (Ed.) *Philosophy looks at the Arts. Contemporary Readings in Aesthetics* (pp. 48–62). New York: Charles Schribner's & Sons.

this means something different than that a given person simply likes some works of art better than others. At the same time, I want to work toward a theory of establishing questions around aesthetics that are open and flexible. There must be room for reasoned argument concerning the relative aesthetic merit of various works of art. Aesthetic experience occurs within the perceiver and not literally in the object itself. In a cognitive framework the perceiver is active, performing different operations. A perceiver is, in a way, a hypothetical entity who responds actively to the cues within the work of art on the basis of experience, knowledge of the world, and on the basis of automatic perceptual processes. The human organism checks out the environment for information which is afterwards checked against some perceptual hypothesis. The hypothesis is then confirmed or disconfirmed. In the latter case it is possible to make a new hypothesis. Cognitive processes seek to help, fix, and frame perceptual hypotheses. They also sort and remember things.

A central difficulty in establishing a theory of aesthetic judgement is that aesthetic value seems always to come back to experience, and experience is by its nature subjective. The primacy of aesthetic experience in establishing aesthetic value must be maintained. Great works of art are considered great, ultimately, because of the quality of the experience they are able to provide. Regardless of any formal qualities that could be pointed out in a work of art, e.g. intricate line, complex harmonies, fully-developed character, etc., if the work as a whole did not incite an aesthetic experience of a certain quality, it would not be considered a great work of art. Works of art have in common that they have been crafted, composed, designed and possibly presented by individuals, whose intent is that the work will be used as an object of aesthetic interest in some way. Aesthetic study entails developing skills that will enchance one's ability to respond aesthetically in a variety of contexts. For purposes developing aesthetic skills, one can call it *aesthetic scanning*.

By aesthetic scanning, it is possible to mean examination of the sensory, formal, expressive, and technical aspects of the art object in question. It is possible to use aesthetic scanning as a tool leading to heightened responses to works of art and translating into an aesthetic sensitivity to all of the visual surroundings. An expressive context of a work of art is composed of surface and depth counters, and the significance of the context is experienced as the counters fund into perceptual closure. The work of art is the object of perceiver's awareness, and aesthetic perception may take place in varying degrees of intensity.

According to formalists, in our experience and appreciation of a work of art we should concentrate exclusively on its formal aspects, not only on the ar-

rangement, construction or composition of elements (sensual qualities or words), but also on those very sensual qualities (colours, sounds pitches, rhythms, dynamics, bodily movements). This should be so because it is only when we act this way that we value the work of art as a work of art, as an art object which is autonomous and self-sufficient. The only relevant aesthetic properties are its formal ones, they are the real unique, and truly significant for its artistic value. According to his view, all the other values are irrelevant, and if, for the better understanding of the work of art, we have to beyond the work itself, and look for historical, psychological, or other facts, the work of art must be artistically defective.[14] The aesthetic ideal is often called pure form, understood as a structure of elements combined into a unity, a whole, a construction of pure formal elements.

Béla Tarr And The Visual Aesthetics Of Cinema

Narration in an Art Film

Art films are usually expressive of national concerns, and they are generally characterized by the use of self-consciously artful techniques designed to differentiate them from merely entertaining popular cinema. This strategy enables the art film to be viewed at home as part of a national culture, and abroad as exotic and sophisticated, and therefore as worthy of attention of an educated audience.

In aesthetic terms, art cinema encompasses a diverge range of options, but within this diversity some consistent trends and patterns stand out. David Bordwell has argued that by the 1960s a distinctive art cinema 'mode of narration' had emerged.[15] Where the Hollywood film typically featured a sympathetic protagonist pursuing his or her goal until an unambiguous conclusion was reached, the art film dwelt upon characters with less clearly defined and singular desires. This produced a narrative less clearly structured by explicit temporal markers like deadlines, and enabled the self-conscious use of style to evoke atmosphere and ambiguity in general, the art film foregrounds narration (the process of storytelling) as much as narrative (the action itself, assumed to be the locus of attention in the classical film). Distinctive uses of style and idiosyncratic narrational stances in turn become associated with individual directors, around which the marketing of art films centre.

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[14] Bell, Clive (1958), *Art.* New York: Capricorn.
[15] Bordwell, David (1979), The Art Cinema as a Mode of Film Practice. *Film Criticism*, 4/1, Fall, 56–64.

Bordwell sees this form as a modification of classical norms of narration and style, not a radical departure from them.[16] Although the art film director has more freedom to explore stylistic options, a story with recognizable characters must still be told. Bordwell characterizes art cinema narration as a 'domesticated modernism', and contrasts it with the more radical departures from classical form found within the artisanal avant-garde. Bordwell's description certainly applies to many art films during the last decades, but it is a description only of the typical form of art films during a specific historical phase, and for this reason particular art films and directors will fall outside of it.

Consequently, structures are not simply forms, they also generate content (the form in a text entails content in the spectator's mind), and it is a mixture of images that creates the synthesis; thus the cinematic experience has this feeling of several processes operating together and visual forms converge with the factors of meaning to create tensions. Cinema functions on many perceptual levels simultaneously through its own specific structures.

One can say that there are different meanings in which the concepts of *form* and content are used with reference to works of art. First of all, the content of a work of art may mean everything represented and expressed in a work, while the form may describe the means and ways of representing and expressing that something. Form may be understood as a certain arrangement of parts, a structure of elements, or a global composition of elements of a work or some other object. In such a case, its correlative is content, understood as a selection of all the elements of the work, its matter of a work of art, or its substance. When the form is understood this way, the individual sensual qualities, such as colours, shapes, lines, sounds, sonorities, are not considered to be formal elements (only their interrelations are considered as such) – they are the substance of the work of art. Sensual qualities may be treated as the formal aspects of a work of art, if by form one means those things, that are directly and sensually perceived in the work. Sometimes theoreticians the form to signify not some significant aspect or side of a work of art, but the artwork itself, in which the formal elements and elements of contents are united into a certain organic totality, in to certain self-contained structure abstracted from the world. In this sense, one can not talk about the form of a work of art , but about the work of art as an artistic form. Form is thus considered to be either the so-called idea of the work, or the material substance of the work.[17]

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[16] Ibid.

[17] See, for example, Ingarden, Roman (1960) The General Question of the Essence of the Form and Content. *Journal of Philosophy*, 56/7.

In evaluating a work of art, like a film from Béla Tarr, we should take into consideration not only the formal properties of a work of art but also such elements as the ideas contained in the work, emotional expressiveness, the fidelity to the represented external reality, the depth of insight into, and an analysis of, the moral and psychological problems of man. In the reception and evaluation of a work of art, we do not limit ourselves to appreciation of its formal properties, we need also to look for possible cognitive and moral dilemmas presented in the work.

In Béla Tarr's films formal elements are referred to as choices, since when an artist contemplates the best way to articulate essential points, he has an array of options before him. Creating an artwork involves electing the forms that the artist believes will function optimally toward realizing the purpose of the work. Forms are formal choices because they are elected from a certain amount of options. Also, forms are selected because they are designed or intended to perform certain functions. For example, Clive Bell thought that painting is art if and only if possesses a significant form.[18] Though the importance of form was made especially apparent by the tendency of modern art toward abstraction, significant form was a property said to be possessed by all artworks, past, present, and future. Significant form is compromised of arrangements of lines, colors, shapes, volumes, vectors, and space. Genuine art, on this view, addresses the imagination like the figures of Gestalt psychology, prompting the viewer to fill the artwork in such a way that we apprehend it as an organized configuration of lines, colors, shapes, vectors and spaces.

Moments to gaze upon
Béla Tarr's newest film *Werckmeister Harmonies* (Werckmeister harmóniák, 2000) is a mesmerising and visually very interesting mediation on popular demagogy and mental human manipulation. Tarr is a highly acquired and original filmmaker, and has yet to acquire the broad critical following of fellow Hungarian Miklós Jancsó and Greece's Theo Angelopoulos who are often referred as his closest filmmaking relatives.[19] *Werckmeister Harmonies* may start to change things and prompt rediscovery of his earlier works, including especially *Damnation* (Kárhozat, 1987). Tarr is one of the few genuinely visionary filmmakers in our time. Adapted from László Krasznahorkai's novel *The Melancholy of Resistance* (1989), *Werckmeister Harmonies* also reunites the technical team behind *Sátántangó* (Sátántangó, 1994), photographer Gábor

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[18] Bell, Clive (1958).

[19] Personally Tarr admires the work of Bresson, Ozu, Cassavetes, and Fassbinder.

Medvigy and composer Mihály Vig for an opus that's recognizably a Tarr film but, in comparison with *Sátántangó* also different. Events move forward at a relatively rapid pace related to Tarr's earlier films, to a final half-hour that brings in a greater emotional dramatic. The setting of the film is usual to Tarr: a small and bleak Hungarian village, in a freezing winter temperature but without snow.

Béla Tarr has described *Werckmeister Harmonies* as follows: "The novel was written by our friend László Krasznahorkai with whom we've worked for more than problems and we had a studio where some film makers worked together and it was very independent – but it was closed by the Hungarian government. It was the end of '85. And afterwards there was no chance of us working in Hungary anymore. So we couldn't do *Sátántangó* but we found a small publicity studio which just made some commercials. And we said we would like to make a small movie, not one as long as *Sátántangó*. And we called our writer in. And that became *Damnation,* which we did in the small publicity studio and which was a big success. Then we left Hungary for Berlin and we lived in West Berlin and then the Wall carne down. Somebody invited us back to Hungary and we said 'Okay, we'll go back to Hungary if the new Hungarian government gives us money to do twelve years.' We met with him after we read his book *Sátántangó*. It was his first novel. We read his manuscript and we decided immediately we would like to make this *Sátántangó*. It was '85. At that time we wanted to make *Sátántangó,* but we couldn't do it because there were political *Sátántangó*. And ten years after we first thought of it we finally did *Sátántangó*. And afterwards we found another writer and during this time László wrote his second novel, *The Melancholy Of Resistance*. And we read this book and liked it very much, but we said to him 'we definitely don't want to make a movie of this novel!'. And several years later we met our main character in Berlin. His name is Lars Rudolph and when we met him we decided immediately 'we have a Valushka now' and we called our writer and we said 'Okay, let's go ahead because we found the perfect guy to play Valushka and we would like to make a movie about him. And we would like to use your novel'. But the movie is different from the novel and that's the reason why the movie has a different title."[20]

As the camera pulls away from an image of a stove and embarks on the opening ten-minute take, the audience is plunged into a rural bar at closing time with the drunken people gradually falling under the spell of a young man, local

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[20] Daly, Fergus and Le Cain, Maximilian (2001), Waiting for the Prince – an interview with Béla Tarr. *Senses of Cinema*, January.

postman and a kind of holy fool Valushka (Lars Rudolph), who leads them into a performance imitating the solar system.

As in *Sátántangó*, an outsider becomes the catalyst for an attempt to change. The world described in the narration is clearly standing on some kind of brink: jobless people hang around in the streets, families are disappearing, and some kind of revolution is in the air. The time is right for people's imaginations to be seduced. A mysterious circus run by unseen foreigners has come to town, and villagers have flocked from all over, drawn by a promised appearance by a mysterious figure called "The Prince". At the moment, however, all that's on show is a life-size stuffed whale inside a large truck, and the people have to pay 100 forints to gaze upon it. As the locals talk about revolution and leadership, tension grows among those who have braved the cold to see the circus. After the manager announces that the Prince can't appear, the passive mob finally rebels and – in a chilling sequence that in some mysterious way recalls the silent, rebellious work force of Fritz Lang's Metropolis (1927)[21] – marches on the local hospital and starts trashing the place. It is here that Tarr develops the films most memorable moves: In a moment of transcendent cinema, (powered by Vig's magical music), the mob is halted in its steps by an unexpected sight and disperses of its own accord. The military then ruthlessly hunts down and crushes the resistance.

Werckmeister Harmonies has the sense of some impending crisis that's not quite happening in a place where people have been thrown back on their basic living resources. Tarr takes from Krasznahorkai's, novel the key moments: there's the visit to the town of 'the largest whale in the world' organised by the 'Prince', a shadowy, unseen figure. Tarr films the slow progression of the whale by lorry through the night-time streets as a creaking ritual of impending doom. Then at the start of the film there's the inspired speech about the nature of the cosmos in the local bar at closing time by Valushka, which Tarr *orchestrates* into a single take.[22]

There is a sense of Dostoyevski and Kafka in the air, a kind of somehow similar atmospheric notions in this fable of a foreboding disaster which might seem a bit obscure, but works as a powerful adjunct to the emotional impact of the film. Krasznahorkai puts this uncanny quality into words which Tarr then transforms into an extraordinary composite of cinematic storytelling, language, music, sounds and images. Once you start looking at the images you're trapped

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[21] Elley, Derek (2001), Magyar maverick's moving meditations. *Variety*.

[22] Orchestration is a term used by Stefan Sharff ; see Sharff, Stefan (1982), *The Elements of Cinema: Toward a Theory of Cinesthetic Impact*. New York: Columbia Univ. Press.

into a world of involuntary attention. This brings in a sense of pure aesthetic experience when the "nightmares conform to reality".[23]

Searching for The Lost Time

Béla Tarr's earlier film *Damnation* is a visual poem concerning the life of a man totally alienated from himself and his surroundings. It is an example of East-European surrealism, *pictorialism* and also a kind of "figures in a landscape" -theme. The milieu of the film is an abandoned rainy landscape where concrete textures reflect the essentialism of the film. The film is full of visual fragments, loosely running dogs and water, all reminiscents of a Tarkovsky - film.

Damnation builds itself up to a kind of synthesis of imagery, poem and music. As David Thomas Lynch has pointed out:

"Tarr's style and choice of weighty moral themes put him in the modernist camp of filmmakers, a group that is now mostly dead, retired, or self-destructing into aphasia (see Angelopoulos's *Le Regarde D'Ulysse*, the modern intellectual's version of *The Great Dictator*) and not hip anyway."[24]

Béla Tarr has been called the Hungarian Tarkovsky because of his use of space and time. In *Damnation* time is basically controlling everything, although it seems that time doesn't matter to the main characters at all. Tarr's time is in a way lost time. The spaces have been modified so that all the deep-focuses are there. The action takes place on different levels of the composition. This makes it possible for Tarr to use his own stylized camera calligraphy. Also sounds create spaces (on- and off-screen) in the film. Stylistic, social and semantic changes are all present in Tarr's personal oeuvre.

David Thomas Lynch thinks that "The subject matter of Tarr's films is misery in interpersonal relationship, depicted with an unflinching intimacy; this closeness is offset by formal and structural elements that provide a distance from narratives that would otherwise seem overwhelmed by despair, and that point towards political, psychological and metaphysical interpretations of these problems that devastate the characters."[25]

In a way, Béla Tarr is fascinated with the continuity, because it has a special tension. The spectators are much more concentrated than when you have few shorter takes after the real long ones. Tarr is conceiving the scenes through the movements implied in these long shots. So, the film becomes a real psycho-

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[23] Liehm, Antonin, J. (1975), Franz Kafka in Eastern Europe. *Telos 23.*
[24] Lynch, David Thomas, The Films of Béla Tarr. *Cineaction*, no. 39, 31–35.
[25] Ibid., 32.

logical process. Béla Tarr's characters seem to have no future and probably not even past, although one can see many references related to Hungarian history in his films. With Béla Tarr one can find traces of a sort of *fin du siècle* melancholy, a tendency towards portraying psychological crises.

Earlier Influences, Symphonic Approaches

The material of expression most characteristic of the cinema is the multiple, mechanically moving image and its placement in sequences. One of the specific codes of cinema is camera movement. This code involves the totality of the film field of vision as it relates to the stasis of mobility that can occur within the cinematic shot. Obviously, at any moment the camera either may rest static or may follow some path of movement (vertical, horizontal, circular), or some combination of those paths. Every shot is constantly making its choices explicit by having eliminated all the figures of potential movement or stasis that are not present. This code is specific to film because it requires the utilization of materials of cinematic technology. Unusually clear examples of the utilization of camera movement as codes specific to the cinema occur in the films of Hungarian director Miklós Jancsó.[26]

Stylistically speaking one can see Tarr's style, for example, in *Sátántangó* (1994), as a continuation of the Miklós Jancsó -style in some earlier Jancsó-films (especially *Agnus Dei & Red Psalm,* 1969–71). These films flamboyantly flaunted the mastery of camera movement. Jancsó's near-schematic technique relied heavily on camera set ups and long, wandering, and elaborate compositional scenes that compellingly use the integration of figures with the landscape. From the Soviet montage tradition came the idea of a group protagonist, which Jancsó turned into dedramatising ends.

Jancsó's dramaturgy emphasised large-scale forces and momentarily fluctuations. The scenes were played out in very long takes with constantly moving figures and ceaselessly panning and tracking cameras. In *Még kér a nép* (Red Psalm) the groups have become pure emblems of social forces, playing out symbolic rituals in abstract space. Any attempt to make sense of Béla Tarr's films in strict narrative terms is as doomed as an analysis of Jancsó's abstract political parables. Tarr's films lack the choreographic grace and visual allure of his fellow countryman's classic works of the 1960's and 1970's, and their black and white –photography bring in elements more related to Expressionism in art. Uniting both directors, is a distrust of power structures and a resolutely Hun-

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[26] Aumont, Jacques, Bergala, Alain, Marie, Michel, Vernet, Marc (1992), *Aesthetics of Film.* Austin: University of Texas Press, 162.

garian interest in mass resistance. Where Tarr is different from Jancsó is in the spiritual element of his films.

Werckmeister Harmonies is a classic demonstration of his symphonic approach to filmmaking. Tarr's images and sounds work subliminally on the spectator's emotions over large expanses of time even when the spectator is dimly aware of what's going on. Through Gábor Medvigy's hypnotic camerawork the perceiver is not a passive subject but an active one, contributing substantially to the final effect of the work. There are many processes involved with this, physiological, preconscious, conscious, and unconscious. Some perceptions are automatic responses beyond control, for example, film's medium depends upon these automatic abilities of senses and human brain. A lot of the object recognition is preconscious, and these kind of mental processes differ from physiological activities because they are available to the conscious mind. Much of reaction to film's stylistic devices might be preconscious because one learns different cinematic techniques, for example, from classical films. Photography depends on freezing the movement of that moment, so photography falsifies the world by freezing it, and by falsifying it, it gives the world expressive strength. Film works exactly the opposite way: it starts with a movement, and it unfreezes the world; even when the world is static, one can, by moving the camera, give movement to the static world. Film is not a photographic art so much as it is a performance art because still-photo thinking is a reverse of moving image thinking. So one essential filmic operation can be considered sequential linking of spatial images. The motion picture in itself is an event because it looks different every moment, whereas there is no such temporal progress in painting or in sculpture. Motion being one of its outstanding properties, the film is required by aesthetic law to use and interpret motion. Consequently, for a spectator many kinds of shifts in viewpoints (through varied camerawork) may be completely invisible, because he or she looks through the images, not at them, and therefore has little or no idea where one shot ends and another one begins. Performances are disciplined, and essentially marionettes in Tarr's hands.

Though never explained in the film, the title of the film refers to the 17th century German organist-composer Andreas Werckmeister, esteemed for his influential tomes on harmony and musical construction. It's a fitting parallel for a filmmaker whose films work on the emotions in as unfathomable a way as the compositions of great symphonists.

In an age when an average film contains approximately 1000 shots per 100 minutes, Tarr's two-and-a-half-hour *Werckmeister Harmonies* has an improbable 39 shots in 145 minutes. Viewing its intense contemplation of an atavistic

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world of strange catastrophe and grim survival is both an unnerving and fascinating experience.[27]

Poetic Storytelling

Scenes have their own episodic, repetitive rhythms that turn the straight lines of storytelling into poetic wave patterns. Nowhere is this truer than in the triptych's centerpiece Sátántangó, which forever rolls back on itself each episode mimicking the rhythms of the tango of the title, the forward and backward motion of the dance. Damnation set in place the recurrent motifs of all three black-and-white narratives, the clammy setting of the small provincial town; a visceral fascination with its topography of rainy and windy streets and squares, run-down smoky bars and dancehalls; a population of the dispossessed indulging in obscure haggling; and a sense of impending doom that seems to come from nowhere.

Tarr explores and extends stylistic options current in his milieu, bending them towards specific goals which include dedramatisation and a kind of muted emotional expressivity. At the same time Tarr creates a kind of subtle direction of the audience's attention, a concomitant awareness of the process of film viewing. Tarr concentrates to his devices so imaginatively that they have come to be identified with his work. They give each film a theme-and-variations structure; Tarr explores throughout his imagery their visual and dramatic possibilities.

In Sátántangó a mysterious small-time crook returns to a tiny community in the Hungarian plain, having been thought dead. The people welcome him back as a saviour; exploiting the recent suicide of a young girl, he takes all their money and takes them away to what he assures them is a brighter future. The film is also based on a novel by László Krasznahorkai and it lasts over seven hours. Tarr elaborates his scenes through a carefully choreographed mise-en-scéne.

Jonathan Rosenbaum has compared Damnation and an earlier Tarr-film Almanac of Fall (1984) as follows: "The two films are quite different in other respects. Damnation is in black and white and steeped in gloomy atmospherics (in exterior shots rain, fog, mud, and stray dogs, and in interiors lots of murk and decay). Almanac of Fall is in color and has the dramatic economy of a tightly scripted play. But the two films have one striking thing in common: the

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[27] Orr, John (2001), Béla Tarr circling the Whale. Sight & Sound, April 2001.

story and the mise en scéne are constructed in counterpoint to one another, like the separate melodic lines in a fugue."[28]

Orchestrative Movements

The movement of Tarr's camera is always suspenseful. At the opening of *Damnation* we see in long shot huge moving buckets suspended on wires like cable cars, hear them shunting in the distance back and forth from some unseen quarry. The camera slowly retreats until we're behind an apartment window that becomes a frame within a frame. What had seemed an exterior shot quickly becomes an interior one; what had seemed omniscience is in fact the point of view of a man staring out of the window at the cables. Tarr's camera moves back behind the man's head without showing his face until the head itself blocks the image of the moving buckets.

Without a cut we are then made to realise that what we've been looking at is what he sees, but now his very presence obliterates the image that was once ours and is now his, as it had been all along. As if to prove he can move in the other direction, Tarr later films an interior two-way conversation in long shot framed by billowing curtains. The camera tracks sideways along the curtains until the speakers are out of frame and then pulls back through the open window before lowering itself to ground level where we read a 'Police' sign on the front of the building. Only as we're leaving do we find out where we've been. But this is not merely a demonstration of auteur virtuosity: reversal is a crucial element in the repetitive circular structure on which the film is based.

The opening long shot of *Sátántangó* makes a different point. In a grey landscape under grey skies we watch a herd pass – some attempting to mount others – slowly into a soggy field. Sluggish bovine movement may well be an involuntary parody of the demonic tango to come. Yet unexpectedly the camera tracks behind farmhouse buildings to match the movement of the herd until it vanishes out of sight. As the camera's gaze glides across the surface of the distressed wall, at once the weight of the time passing turns into foreboding. This world seem the sport of malign deities. Later in the film, a young girl in a desolate barn overlooking a rain-swept plain punishes in real time the cat she loves. And further on Tarr presents a tableau-like scene, straight like from a Brueghel-painting, when the girl watches trough a bar window as the locals dance accompanied by accordion music.

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[28] Rosenbaum, Jonathan (1995), *Placing Movies: The Practice of Film Criticism*. University of California Press, London, 57. Rosenbaum thinks that Tarr is much more of an artist than Peter Greenaway, especially when it comes to the use of lighting.

There are themes of sexual betrayal, surveillance and criminal actions in *Damnation* and *Sátántangó*, but in *Werckmeister Harmonies* all this spreads up into more collective levels of existence. The riot and mayhem at the end of the film are based squarely on the book, but Tarr's idea comes from an incident that was of passing interest in the novel: the sacking of a hospital once the riot is well under way. Tarr places it later in his narrative and with restrained suspense withholds the violence until a key moment. As it merges into a headstrong crowd, the camera tracks back in front of the throng in a near-endless take that shows its members running angrily on a road to nowhere. Still Tarr lingers, and then a sudden cut alters the meaning. A reverse-angle shot, unusual in this film, reveals the target of their hatred: a decrepit hospital building which they enter and ransack in a sequence-shot that follows the destroyers into a series of rooms peopled by ailing inmates unable to protect themselves. It's a sustained image of the helplessness of victims and the pointlessness of destruction, an apocalypse that stresses the banality of evil in an era of European history where it lurks ever-present beneath the surface.

Is this view a commentary on 1989, or, it might be a meditation on 1956, or something else.[29] The two prolonged sequences defy simple reading. The hospital patients are so shrivelled they are hardly appropriate symbols of communist gerontocracy, more plausibly the victims of the Gulag. Is this a genuine uprising or a malevolent crowd intoxicated by its own power?[30] There is no final answer. The long take eschews obvious meaning and gives us instead a set of shifting signifiers. As each new puzzle prompts our hunger to arrive at a solution, more urgent questions take over. Present in virtually every shot Tarr's camera movement is almost always locally motivated. For example, someone is walking and the camera is panning or tracking. The camera may move a little more quickly than its subject, but the figure's movement nevertheless supplies an initial impetus for the unfolding of space. In the course of the movement, the camera may drop a character, pick up another figure, and follow that figure for a time.

In all, this tactic allows Béla Tarr to keep the shot alive, to quicken our visual interest while also linking or developing his characteristic compositions. Moreover, since we cannot see what is off-screen, camera movement offers a chance to arouse and foil expectations. Springing such surprises is a fairly traditional use of camera movement. More distinctive is the way in which Tarr's camera movements participate in a larger dynamic of opening and filling space

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[29] Orr, John (2001).
[30] Ibid.

at a tempo which allows us to form anticipations about how the blocking will develop. Thanks to the long take and silent intervals, Tarr prolongs the very process of staging, leaving us plenty of time to recognise that we are forming expectations about where the character or camera will go next.

Tarr's extremely slow camera movements often move away from or past the characters creating up a mood and sensation related to formal suspense. This makes it possible for Tarr the use of different perspectives during the same shot. For example, in Sátántangó he changes perspectives from people to the landscape, and so on. The spectator of a Béla Tarr -film is, in a way, forced to see these changes, share the immobility of happenings, waiting and the expectations of the characters, while the shot proceeds. David Thomas Lynch thinks that this is the way how, for example, Sátántangó combines distance with empathy, aided by a complicated chronological rearrangement of the story and careful attention to the particularities of the characters.[31]

For example Andrei Tarkovsky melded time according to the dictates of the film's memory, producing a film that seems to turn inward, to take the spectator inside the mind's eye of the narrator. To the extent that the force of cinematic images systemically deconstruct codes for narrative continuity, the position of the narrating mind's eye constantly shifts between various planes of film space-time, eluding a stable hold on the events of the narration.

The movement of the narrative point of view dislocates the position of the spectator's eye in turn. The spectator no sooner finds a footing in the events of the fiction than the editing breaks the terms of scopic identification and opens up yet another space-time and yet another locus in which the spectator must insert herself. The intrication of narrating and spectating subjectivities never quite achieves a coherent unity in the present and presence of the film image, but follows a movement without origin, present, or presence, a movement that perpetually postpones the closure of eye to an unlocatable future-past. For Tarkovsky, rhythm in the images, is not the metrical sequence of pieces, but the *time-thrust* within the frames. Montage brings together time, imprinted in the segments of film.

Pointing to Leonardo Da Vinci's portrait of a woman (shown in *The Mirror*), Tarkovsky claims that the famous painting is powerful precisely because in it one cannot find anything that one might particularly prefer, one cannot single out any detail from the whole ... and so there opens up before us the possibility of interaction with infinity.[32] He adheres to the same principle while

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[31] Lynch, David, Thomas, *Cineaction*, 35.

[32] Tarkovsky, Andrey (1987), *Sculpting in Time: Reflections on the Cinema*, 108.

showing a human face on the screen: rejecting facial expression as a way of conveying ideas, Tarkovsky attempts to reach into our innermost feelings, to remind us of some obscure memories and experiences of our own, over-whelming us, stirring our souls like a revelation that is impossible to interpret in any particular way.[33] According to Vlada Petric this attitude relates to the concept of *la photogénie* defined by Louis Delluc and Jean Epstein in the 1920s as the most unique feature of the film medium.[34]

As Delluc puts it: "All shots and shadows move, are decomposed, or are re-constructed according to the necessities of a powerful orchestration. It is the most perfect example of the equilibrium of photographic elements."[35]

William C. Wees thinks that the concept of photogénie did not get to the heart of the matter, because it directed attention to the image, but not to the properties or elements of the image itself.[36] So it is a question of orchestrating all the elements of the film: narrative, actors, words, pictures, music, and each aesthetic element intimately influences the meaning of every other.

Tarr's camera movements are related to the general scene, subordinating to it any calligraphic side-effect. As compared with cuts, the slowly moving cam-era's gradual angle changes allow a more solid, sustained sense of scene. Long takes stay with a stretch of world. Tarr's reflective moments flatten those sharp peaked rhythms of action, decision, or suspense, that might disrupt or supersede our sense of time. Working together these features of form elongate our sense of duration. The takes seem even longer than they are, approaching a vision of sequence shots. In one respect Tarr's cutting nudges closer to montage editing than Hollywood norms. In Tarr's oeuvre the hard-edged landscapes are impor-tant, and people being distant make small pictorial movements, encourage cuts on strong, almost static universe.

Landscape Variations

Tarr's physical landscape is marked by the long shots, where the different elements function as parts of the natural setting, but they too are part of a sub-textual language that calls up both private and universal associations from one

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[33] Ibid.

[34] Petric, Vlada (1989-90), Tarkovsky's Dream Imagery. *Film Quarterly*, Vol. 43, No. 2, Winter, 32.

[35] Delluc, Louis, quoted in Stuart Liebman (1983), French Film Theory, 1910–1921. *Quarterly Review of Film Studies*, 4, no. 1, Winter 1983, 12.

[36] Wees, William, C. (1992), *Light Moving in Time: Studies in the Visual Aesthetics of Avant-Garde Film*. University of California Press, Berkeley, 12.

film to the next. Tarr orchestrates the various elements in his own way: the action consists of what the characters and the camera do in relation to one another, so, there is the possibility of moveable and shifting relationships between the elements. Tarr's approach deals with the character's hidden agendas and duplicitous motives, adding to the overall paranoid and conspiratorial atmosphere. Tarr's strategy creates various kinds of movements within stasis, and freedom within confinement.[37]

Tarr's commitment to long takes, distant views and *temps morts* places an enormous weight upon the unfolding shot. Camera movement is the most obvious accessory here. In Tarr's films the camera movements seem locally motivated. This tactic allows Tarr to keep his shots alive, and shift our visual interest. This is the way how Tarr's camera movements participate in a larger cinematic *dynamic,* filling the spaces in a slow tempo; they offer a chance to arouse and foil expectations. The strategy with the long take is to take it to a moment of heightened expressivity. Its source is in a modernist aesthetic, the absence of drama can command our attention and emotional investment along different lines. The strategy of building a long take to a moment of *heightened* expressivity, in the absence of drama which can command our attention and emotional investment along mainstream lines, has its source mainly in modernist aesthetics.

Temporality in landscape experience is further complicated by the movement of the body itself, a phenomenon we call kinesthesis. When moving across landscape space there is not only a dynamic flow of perceptions derived from external sources, but there is also the muscular and nervous movement of the body itself through space and time.[38] This is something that is related to cinematic thinking. There is a complicated interrelationship between, for example, the perception of the movement of surroundings and the movement of the body, which is displayed in what is known as 'parallactic movement'.

For example, Raymond Durgnat thinks that the Greek film director Theo Angelopoulos is a virtuoso of long takes, especially the "figures in a landscape" kind.[39] In this kind of thinking 'landscape' includes streets, interiors, and any sizable area. According to Durgnat's thinking, Angelopoulos's camera tracks between follow-shot phases and "free-range" rovings, between extreme (scen-

[37] See, Rosenbaum, 1995, 58.

[38] See Gibson, J. J. (1979), *The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception.* Houghton–Mifflin, Boston, 1979.

[39] Durgnat, Raymond (1990), The Long Take in Voyage to Cythera: Brecht and Marx vs. Bazin and God. *Film Comment*, November–December, 43.

ery with distant figures) and the old mid-shot distance (knees-to-head), at which modern wide-angle lenses allow plenty of landscape above, around, and between people.[40] It is an example of European *pictorialism* and montage-thinking where there is plenty of time for people to come into the frame and walk slowly over it, while the camera tracks down after them. Also, many scenes start with a long shot, and avoid close-ups.

As Durgnat points out: "The camera movements sub-serve the general scene, subordinating to it any calligraphic or camera-conscious side-effect; they pick out details less than they change or vary its *aspects* and general configuration. 'Aspect' here, carries its original, visual, sense: the particular facet seen. It's as crucial to pictorial meaning as *what* is seen. It dictates the camera-angle, not vice versa (albeit film theory regularly misattributes to camera angle meanings stemming from aspect). As compared with cuts, the moving camera's gradual angle changes allow a more solid, sustained sense of scene."[41]

In a similar way Tarr strengthens his universes by a feeling for a man-in-environment -theme. This is possible by an unhurried choreography of camera and characters, and by heavy emphases on people's silent or cryptic thinking. It seems that Tarr rejects montage (or uses montage-within-shot) as too manipulative a technique for capturing the reality or essence of a given moment in a given place. Andrew Horton thinks that, for example, Angelopoulos forces the spectator, through the slow pace and continuous takes of his films, to become more *aware* of the environment, whether it be man-made or natural.[42] In the hands of Angelopoulos the long takes transform into 'sequence-shots'.

"Hard-edged landscapes, like architecture, and people who, being distant, make pictorially small movements, encourage cuts on strongly static forms; these strengthen the graphic collision dear to montage editing (hence Hollywood usually preferred cuts on movement, as more self-effacing)."[43]

Montage In A New Way

Walter Benjamin has recognized that the meaning derived from landscape and architectural space is received 'by a collectivity in a state of distraction', slowly appreciating its symbolic environment through 'habitual appropriation',

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[40] Ibid.

[41] Ibid.

[42] Horton, Andrew (1987), Theodor Angelopoulos and the New Greek Cinema. *Film Criticism*, Vol. XI, Nos. 1–2, Fall-Winter, 88.

[43] Durgnat, Raymond, 1990, 43.

or through everyday use and activity.[44] Béla Tarr creates new relationships between the camera and the scene. It is a question of montage within the camera and montage within the shot which seems to become a more 'normal' way of expressing than the usual montage thinking.

The Russian montage theory was based on the idea of shot as a unit that does not change much.[45] But when we have long tracking shots and pans, the shot ceases to be just one unit, one look, and becomes several (25, 50, etc.) units, which do not distract the attention towards the shot as a whole. In a way, it is distracted, because when the scene proceeds and moves forward, the spectator looses the touch of places and forgets the veridical relations of things. When one usually perceives things, one knows exactly where one's body is, and one relates all that what one sees into a feeling of one's body. That is important in a human vision, because when one concentrates on something, one does not separate it from its surroundings. When the camera rolls over a scene, it shows only parts of the whole, so after 60 seconds camera movement, the spectator has forgotten the places of things, and that is important related to editing. The structures of film are largely function of our knowledge of the world, and our expectations as to what we will, or need to be, shown. Stefan Sharff has spoken of slow disclosure, which means the gradual introduction of pictorial information within a single shot or several.[46] As a method it can be applied to one scene or to a whole narrative; basically it is a way of avoiding a simplistic and over-expository flow of information.

In a Tarr's film reality and imagination mix and *reflect* each other. This all has a specific quality which creates stimulating differences. Tarr extends many dedramatising tactics. His special interest is in the landscape and stretches of dead time. Tarr's camera examines the scenes with its own curiosity, enumerating the contents of the shot before it with only small movements, and after that, panning in the appropriate direction. Béla Tarr is a modernist in creating a recognisable, self-conscious style which he carries throughout his works. In his

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[44] Benjamin, Walter (1969), *Illuminations*. ed. by Hannah Arendt, Schocken Books, New York, 239.

[45] See about Eisensteinian concepts of montage in Aumont, Jacques, *Montage Eisenstein*, BFI, London, 1987, also in *Eisenstein S. M., Selected Works, vol. 1.: Writings, 1922–1934*, edited by Richard Taylor, BFI, London, 1988, and in J. Dudley Andrew's book *The Major Film Theories: An Introduction.*

[46] Sharff, Stefan (1982), *The Elements of Cinema: Toward a Theory of Cinesthetic Impact.* Columbia University Press, New York, 6.

films the long takes and camera movements create a dialectic among different elements in the shot.[47]

Tarr blends European cinematic traditions with a new kind of cinematic awareness. Tarr has openly expressed his admiration for Jean-Luc Godard and Abbas Kiarostami, but in terms of style their work is at some distance from his. His use of the sequence-shot (a single shot that takes in a significant amount of action and information) to orchestrate complex movement and edit it within the frame without cutting links him, of course, to Miklós Jancsó, as well as to early Sergei Paradjanov, and to Tarkovsky, Angelopoulos and Sokhurov: all figures who have been in major roles in the cinema of Central and Eastern Europe. Tarr's vision, though, is distinctively his own. His films have a presentness, a being-there that marks them off from the historical preoccupations of Jancsó, and a fixity of place and time that separates them from the perpetual Odysseys of Angelopoulos. Nor, as a non-believer, does Tarr share in Tarkovsky's sacred vision of the four elements of the material world, transmuted from Russian Orthodoxy. The sheer weight of his images seems to make them immune to the temptations of a lustrous transcendence.

Cinema of Wonders

Tarr's thematic and stylistic concerns have their expressive motifs in showing the subjective logic, a kind of movement of thoughts. The subtlety of the lighting effects is not simply a source of legitimate aesthetic pleasure in its own right, but part of the thematic and psychological structure of the film. The stylistics of Béla Tarr are a world apart not only from Hollywood but also from the fractured forms and shock techniques of western modernism. Tarr has developed a new cinematic art from the long take, multi-planar composition and the complex orchestration of characters, sounds and objects in and out of the frame. It's a meeting place for themes and styles, a kind of wonder cinema: a fascination with the interface of nature and culture that co-exists with a sense of the terror lurking in the material world. This has been called "magical realism", but it is not supernatural by nature. Instead this kind of cinema exists in the face of adversity, both human and natural. In Tarr the very presence of different elements percolates the texture of the image, with its intimations of infernal wind, rain and cold and the flood of biblical proportions that threatens at the end of *Damnation.*

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[47] Valkola, Jarmo (2000), *Aesthetic & Cognitive Perceptualism: Signs, symbols, and Concepts in Art Educational Context.* JULPU: University of Jyväskylä, 100–102.

Tarr's cinema is an art of filming more than of editing or montage. Its rhythms come from the weight of duration and the choreography of the image. The 39 shots of *Werckmeister Harrnonies* may indeed contain one or two surgical stitches. Yet the approach is uncompromised by such tidying up of loose ends. Tarr's camera movement registers both immanence and imminence. It acts as a slow unveiling of a psychic landscape that produces both narrative suspense and an abiding sense of mystery.

We can now return to the ending of Werckmeister Harmonies. As a coda to catastrophe, Tarr goes back to source, to the largest whale in the world which still lies, beached, in the town square. A slow track along the surface of the dead skin ends with the face and then the eye, which comes to fill the screen. The gaze of the camera is met with a counter-gaze. The baleful look may well be a reproach, yet equally it could be holding up a mirror to the camera lens. It could be the sign, reflected back, of disaster that emanates from the lens itself. Is the camera standing-in for the malevolent gaze of a fallen angel that fixes human folly with an evil eye? We can certainly sense here what this camera's spectral gaze is not: it's not the high-angle 'divine' POV, that ingenious makeover of Orthodox iconography it had been in Tarkovsky's *Solaris* or *Andrei Rublev*. It is something much darker altogether.

Yet the promise of good is never quite liquidated - which brings us back to Valushka's yearnings, the ramblings of the holy fool. In spite of everything, he must go on believing in something. This belief may foment further disaster, but equally it ensures that hope is never extinguished. In a malign world, the power of life may come from the power of human illusion. Valushka can still believe the whale a thing of infinite beauty. Valushka is physically heading for some destination. His passage involves real space and time. The "evil" which the man encounters can be external and concrete, but also diffuse and hard to define. For Tarr it is also a moral question, in a world where humanity seems to have lost, and for which his protagonist increasingly seeks. Moreover, the promise of a perfect tone and scale of the *Werckmeister Harmonies*, on which his musicologist uncle endlessly speculates, is a promise of harmony and beauty for distraught nephew, a promise of order out of chaos. In his willingness to believe, Valushka adheres to the promise against all odds. In a world darkness light will always break through some day.

Béla Tarr's films are fine examples of artistic originality, because Tarr can create direct perceptual and imaginative engagement with the films themselves, and can give rise to a distinctive aesthetic mode surrounding the films. Tarr is an European filmmaker who can mould sensuous or imaginatively intended material into original symbolic form. Tarr brings the rational, sensible and his-

torical aspects of experience into an internal relation. All the different elements of his films are, in a way, inseparable, coherent, and mentally and physically embodied.

Béla Tarr's cinematic syntax makes possible increasingly complex combination of shots, which can the generate an even *greater* variety of messages and meanings. Such combinations touch on the mystique of cinema: a peculiar and original cinematic reality. Tarr's film phrases, constructed through fragmentation, also tamper with reality by showing the total geography of a setting and spatial relationships between the shots. Tarr shows that the intensity of viewer involvement depends on the energies, which radiate from the screen according to the filmmaker's arrangement of dramatic sequences.

The resulting cinematic experience is the sum of several *processes* operating together. Tarr shows that visual forms converging with the factors of meaning create many sided tensions. Tarr's films function on many perceptual levels at once through their own specific structures, properly arranged according to the rules of performance.