

SLOW PLACES IN BÉLA TARR'S FILMS:
THE INTERSECTION OF GEOGRAPHY, ECOLOGY, AND SLOW CINEMA

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Clara Orban. London: Lexington Books, 2021. 209 p. ISBN: 9781793645647.

There are directors whose work has been so thoroughly analysed and studied that when writing about them one always runs the risk of repeating what has already been said. This cannot be said of Béla Tarr, on whose work only four books (including the one to which this review is devoted) have been written in English to date – more than ten years after he announced his definitive retirement.¹ This is why the publication of Clara Orban's *Slow Places in Béla Tarr's Films. The Intersection of Geography, Ecology, and Slow Cinema* will surely be welcomed by admirers of the Hungarian director.

As the title and subtitle of the book indicate, Orban's approach to Tarr's cinema is novel, differing from previous studies. Indeed, instead of taking a typical, chronological approach, Orban focuses her attention on the importance that places have for Tarr (as Tarr once stated, "every place has a face. Places are main characters"),² analysing them as a way to better understand not only Tarr's cinema and worldview but also the (mostly negative) impact that humans have on nature and other creatures (as emphasized by the term "Anthropocene", to which Orban makes explicit reference on several occasions). In this sense, Orban's main goal is to show the interconnectedness of geography, ecology, and Tarr's slow cinema (p. 4).

In the last two decades, "slow cinema" has been used to refer to the work of several filmmakers (such as Andrei Tarkovsky, Ingmar Bergman, Michelangelo Antonioni, Robert Bresson, Abbas Kiarostami, and more recently, Apichatpong Weerasethakul, Tsai Ming-Liang, Carlos Reygadas, and Béla Tarr himself, among many others) who use techniques such as long takes, slow or static camerawork, an emphasis on time and duration, reduced plots, less or even no action, and a minimalist *mise en scène*, among others.³ These are all aspects that can be found in what is usually known as the second phase of Tarr's filmography – that is, the phase beginning with *Damnation*. In reality, Tarr rejects this partition of his work into two different phases and instead tends to emphasize continuity. As he stated in an interview: "These are not separate films. It is a whole process and you have to understand that there is no break. In fact, there can be no break, because that would mean that I would go to sleep one night and the next morning I would wake up a new man. Unfortunately, this has not happened so far."⁴

Whereas it is a matter of philosophical debate whether the self should be thought of as a continuum (in his *The Book of Disquiet*, the Portuguese writer Fernando Pessoa wrote that “[t]o live is to be other. ... What will be tomorrow will be something else, and what I see will be seen by reconstituted eyes, full of a new vision”),⁵ the meaning of Tarr’s words is clear: despite the several differences that can be found in relation to both content and form between his first films and the later ones, one should resist the temptation of thinking of *Damnation* as a turning point, as if there were a first and a second Tarr – just as there is a first and a second Wittgenstein. In this regard, Orban’s study is particularly interesting in that it argues for continuity in Tarr’s work not so much by focusing on formal aspects but rather by highlighting recurring patterns in physical spaces and locations, which reappear from film to film with different variations.

Loneliness and isolation constitute typical features of Tarr’s filmography. As Orban argues, these constitutive aspects of the human condition are “exacerbated by the physical spaces the characters inhabit” (p. 12). In other words, Orban’s claim is that in Tarr’s films, places, which are so often neglected and ruined, are like a mirror of the human (moral) condition. Tarr’s slow camera lingers on these places, allowing the viewer to contemplate them and to realize that “the natural world exists outside the human not only as an oppositional force to be nurtured, or tamed, or subjugated but also as a reflection of the human. Tarr’s places manifest this dual exteriority and interiority. Tarr suggests that our geographic condition mirrors our human conditions ...” (p. 6).

The central part of Orban’s book is thus devoted to a thorough and detailed analysis of indoor and outdoor locations in Tarr’s films, including a chapter on animals that are part of the landscape, fulfilling the same function as the latter: they constitute a mirror of the human condition while at the same time testifying to humanity’s impact on the surrounding world.

Orban begins her analysis with indoor spaces (ch. 3), which are more commonly found in Tarr’s first films, shot almost exclusively indoors (the short film *Hotel Magnézit* and *Almanac of Fall* are the only two films to be shot entirely indoors). Tarr’s indoor spaces are usually uncomfortable, dreary, and claustrophobic, conveying a sense of entrapment (which will be later conveyed by circularity in films like *Satantango* and *The Turin Horse*), heightened by the use of extreme close-ups. As Orban points out, their shabbiness is “indicative of neglect of places that mirrors the neglect humans often have for one another” (p. 41). The main space is the tavern (*kocsma*), which constitutes a meeting place where people are supposed to interact or socialize. In Tarr’s films, however, taverns are often dark, with dirty floors and walls, filled with drunks and dripping with a heavy atmosphere. Here, failures drown their sorrows, face disappointment, and lose themselves. Contact is often absent; people are lonely or silent. Thus, the tavern provides a bleak counterpoint to and continuation of the dreary apartments in which people live their solitary lives (p. 68).

Orban's phenomenology of Tarr's indoor and outdoor places is both rich and complete and can only be mentioned in passing in this review. Indoor spaces are divided into urban versus rural, private versus public, small (working-class) versus large (faded bourgeoisie), leisure spaces (taverns, a hair salon, a disco) versus workspaces (offices, hospitals, and factories). Particularly interesting is Orban's remark about hospitals (which appear in *The Outsider* and in the iconic scene from *Werckmeister Harmonies*, where the mob unloads its repressed anger on the helpless infirmed), which gives a clear example of Orban's methodology, which consists, as already mentioned, in showing how physical spaces are a mirror of the human condition in Tarr's films: "The hospital provides a warehouse for the infirmed but little opportunity for recovery. As with other aspects of Tarr's geographies, characters cannot affect change nor hope for improvement in their surroundings. The proximity of the infirmed to one another seems to close the walls in around them, echoing the impossibility of escape. Just as leisure spaces do not bring people together, hospitals do not allow for healing" (pp. 73-74).

Like indoor places, the mostly empty outdoors also reflects and mirrors the solitude of the human beings portrayed in Tarr's films. Here, solitude is not a symbol of peacefulness; nor is the outdoors like the idyllic landscapes that can be found in some of Werner Herzog's or Terrence Malick's films. On the contrary, as Orban points out, "outdoor spaces are deprived of joy and both create and mirror the emptiness of human lives. In outdoor locations, characters are often alone ... Even when accompanied, characters usually walk in silence. This solitude of outdoor spaces is not a respite, but a continuation of the social isolation of characters from one another" (p. 105). Thus, for instance, the public square, Orban argues, has little to do with the ancient Greek concept of the *agora* as the centre of the *polis*, where citizens used to meet and exchange ideas. In Tarr's Hungary, the role of meeting point is played by the tavern (although it rarely also serves the social function of the *agora*, as interactions are reduced to a minimum), whereas the public square is usually empty – or teeming with menacing crowds, as in *Werckmeister Harmonies*. Open fields are equally desolate and, above all, unwelcoming. With very few exceptions (such as the short film *Journey on the Plain*), they are rainy, muddy, cold, and foggy – "iconic spaces of emptiness" (p. 94). This feeling of solitude and desolation is accentuated by Tarr's use of black and white, which suggests a bleak picture of nature. As Orban points out, "any hint of optimism in landscapes must disappear" (p. 105).

As mentioned above, Orban extends her analysis of indoor and outdoor spaces to the animals that inhabit them. Animals appear in key moments or iconic scenes in Tarr's films: beyond the most obvious examples – such as the dogs in *Damnation*, the whale in *Werckmeister Harmonies*, and the horse in *The Turin Horse* (all considered by Tarr to be proper characters in their respective films; p. 123) – one can also think of *Satantango*'s cows (the famous almost ten-minute beginning shot), cat (tortured and killed by Estike), and owl (the long tracking shot in the abandoned villa). More generally, as Orban points out, Tarr's representation of animals

is analogous to that of indoor and outdoor spaces in that they “mirror or highlight the desolate plight of the humans” (p. 124). According to Orban, Tarr includes animals in key films and at important moments also “as a way to show how humans’ largely destructive tendencies can filter from themselves to encompass the world” (p. 107).

The last chapter before the *Conclusion* is dedicated to a detailed analysis of Tarr’s short films and segments, such as *Hotel Magnezit*, *Journey on the Plain*, *The Last Boat*, and *Prologue*, with the addition of a paragraph devoted to *Missing People*, Tarr’s post-retirement work at the intersection of film, installation, and performance. This chapter is a particularly welcome contribution insofar as Tarr’s short films have received considerably less critical attention than his features. Orban emphasizes the continuity between short and feature films, pointing out formal and thematic analogies between the former and the latter. After the analysis, Orban asks what we are supposed to make of these short films in the context of Tarr’s career. She answers that “[t]hey represent extremely concentrated moments, like distilled representations of human emotion, suffering, alienation, and redemption. In the way that a short story provides the nucleus that longer novels expand, so too these short films contain in them elements of Tarr’s worldview and map out his ecology that will be developed in his longer feature films” (p. 143).

Orban’s study ends with a *Conclusion*, the significant subtitle of which is *Visions of Loneliness*. Spaces in Tarr’s films are empty, lonely, dreary, and cold, embodying and visually representing our inability to connect to one another. Tarr’s worldview is bleak – or maybe simply realistic. Thus, a key question emerges: “In the end, is there something onto which we can hold?” (p. 148). As Orban points out, Tarr’s 2019 Vienna installation gives us a hint, indicating one of the main characteristics of the seventh art, namely that of being able to open the viewer’s eyes (in this case, to humanity’s condition). As Orban puts it, “Tarr demands that we see other people, that we recognize that they exist, as they bring their pain and their uneven ways of dealing with the world with them” (p. 147). Another hint may be given in the short film *Journey on the Plain*, with its romantic poetry and ruins. According to Orban’s reading, ruins in particular “show us what was, what we inevitably always do: destroy, take advantage, neglect. But they also show that there was a time when beauty was possible, when we could band together and build ... Where it would be possible to make slow spaces that could become our resting place” (p. 150).

Orban’s study is enriched by two appendices: the first reproduces the sixteen Petőfi poems (both in the original Hungarian and in English) recited by Víg in *Journey on the Plain*, whereas the second is the transcript of an interview with Orban conducted by Béla Tarr on January 24, 2021. An explained filmography and an extended bibliography conclude Orban’s insightful study, which contributes to better understanding and interpreting the work of one of the masters of slow cinema.

¹ These books include the English translation of Jacques Rancière's *Béla Tarr, The Time After* (Minneapolis: Univocal Press, 2013), András Bálint Kovács's *The Cinema of Béla Tarr: The Circle Closes* (New York: Columbia University Press), Thorsten Botz-Bornstein's *Organic Cinema: Film, Architecture, and the Work of Béla Tarr* (New York and Oxford: Berghahn, 2017), and Clara Orban's book, to which this review is dedicated. Other books have been published in other languages, among them: Marco Grosoli's *Armonie contro il giorno: il cinema di Béla Tarr* (Bologna: Bébert, 2014), Corinne Maury and Sylvie Rollet eds., *Béla Tarr. De la colère au tourment* (Crisnée, Belgium: Editions Yellow Now, 2016) and Mariel Manrique ed., *Béla Tarr, ¿Qué hiciste mientras esperaba?* (Santander: Shangrila, 2016).

² See Corinne Maury and Olivier Zuchuat, "Tout lieu a un visage. Entretien avec Béla Tarr", in *Béla Tarr. De la colère au tourment*, op. cit., 14. Orban quotes this passage from the interview on p. 3.

³ See Tiago de Luca and Nuno Barradas Jorge, "Introduction: From Slow Cinema to Slow Cinemas", in *Slow Cinema*, Tiago de Luca and Nuno Barradas Jorge eds. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016), 1-21.

⁴ See Corinne Maury and Olivier Zuchuat, "Tout lieu a un visage. Entretien avec Béla Tarr", in *Béla Tarr. De la colère au tourment*, op. cit., 13.

⁵ Fernando Pessoa, *The Book of Disquiet* (London: Penguin, 2001), 100.