

Empire of Rain

Béla Tarr, **Damnation** (Kárhozat), 1988

A long line of pylons beneath a gray sky. Neither its beginning, nor its end can be seen. Cable-cars are running. Their contents cannot be seen either. Ore of some sort, no doubt. But we will see no more of the mine than we will of the miners. It is merely a long rosary stretching to infinity, never stopping: the pure image of uniform space and uniform time.

Yet something happens: whereas the cable-cars advance without end, the camera has begun to draw back. A vertical black band appears: a window frame. Then a black mass obstructs the screen. Little by little its form takes shape: a man is there, motionless, behind the window. We see only his head and shoulders, from behind. But we reframe the situation immediately: the long, uniform rosary beneath the gray sky is what he sees from his window.

This sequence shot, with which **Damnation** opens, is like the signature of Béla Tarr's style: a movement in one direction and the camera moving in the opposite direction; a spectacle and the slow displacement that leads us to the one who watches it; a vague, black mass, which is revealed to be a person seen from behind. The man

behind the window will return several times in his films, in a variety of forms. There is the doctor who we see at the beginning and end of **Satantango**, busily spying on his neighbors. There is Maloin, the worker who, at the beginning of **The Man from London**, sees the suitcase thrown from the boat's upper deck and the murder of one of the accomplices through the glass panels of his signal box. There is the pane of glass at the end of **The Turin Horse**, at first completely obscure, but which, with the backward movement of the camera, gradually allows us to make out both the lone tree, stripped bare, looming on the horizon of wind-swept hills, and the man, prostrate upon his stool, who no longer expects anything from this desolate landscape, nor from the worn-out horse, shut away by the stable doors as if by a tombstone.

A style, as we know after Flaubert, is not the embellishment of a discourse, but a manner of seeing things: an "absolute" manner, says the novelist, a manner of absolutizing the act of seeing and the transcription of perception, against the narrative tradition that rushes on to the effect that follows from a cause. For the writer, however, "to see"



is an ambiguous word. It is necessary “to make the scene visible,” says the novelist. But what he writes is not what he sees, and it is this very gap that brings literature into being. The situation is different with the filmmaker: what he sees, what is in front of the camera, is also what the spectator will see. For the filmmaker, though, there is also a choice between two ways of seeing: the relative, which instrumentalizes the visible in the service of the succession of actions, and the absolute, which gives the visible the time to produce its specific effect. The counter-movement carried out in the first shot of **Damnation** takes on its full meaning when compared to the movement with which Hollywood films often begin. Let us think of the panoramic shot of an urban setting with which **Psycho** begins, and of the way in which the field is contracted in order to lead us up to a window: that of the hotel room where Marion Crane and her lover come to make love between two and three. The surroundings thus brushed aside, we are quickly focused upon the theater of the drama, in order to put the characters and their relationships into place.

The establishing shot no longer works this way in Béla Tarr’s films: it is not a matter of setting the scene of the small, industrial town where the characters’ actions take place. It is a matter of seeing what they see, for the action is ultimately only the effect of what they perceive and feel. “I cling to nothing,” says Karrer, the man in the window, “but everything clings to me.” This intimate secret of one character is just as much a declaration of cinematographic method. Béla Tarr films the manner in which things cling to individuals. Things, whether the tireless cable-cars in front of the window, the decrepit walls of buildings, the piles of glasses on the bistro’s bar, the noise of billiard balls, or the seductive neon of the Titanik Bar’s italic letters. This is the meaning of the first shot: it is not the individuals who live in places and make use of things. It is the things that first come to them, that surround, penetrate, or reject them. This is why the camera adopts these extraordinary rotational movements, which give the impression that it is the places that move, welcoming the characters, casting them into the out-of-field, or closing in on them, like a black band occupying the entire screen.

This is also why the setting is usually there before the characters enter, and remains when they have gone. It is no longer relations (family, generations, the sexes, or others) that determine situations; it is the external world that penetrates individuals, invades their gaze and their very being. It is what the woman at the coat-check of the Titanik Bar (played by the actress who played Hédi in **Almanac of Fall**) explains to Karrer (played by the actor who, in the same film, played her favored auditor, the taciturn Miklós): the fog seeps into every corner, it penetrates the lungs, and installs itself, at last, in the soul itself. In the bar of **Satantango**, Béla Tarr entrusts the miserable Halics with the task of transforming this same idea into a prolonged complaint: the incessant rain destroys all. It has not only stiffened the coat he no longer dares to unbutton. It has been transformed into an interior rain, which springs forth from the heart and floods all the organs.

With **Damnation**, the rain installs itself in Béla Tarr’s universe. It is the very stuff of which the film seems to be woven, the environment from which the characters emerge, the material cause of all that happens to them. The hallucinatory scenes of the ball testify to this. The ball, or at least the dance scene, is a quasi-obligatory scene in Béla Tarr’s films. This, too, allows us to follow the evolutions and the ruptures. The lens of **The Outsider**, or of **The Prefab People**, placed us unceremoniously among the dancers, and showed them moving to the rhythms of refrains whose silliness guaranteed the documentary-like authenticity. Nothing of the sort here. The very rhythmic, utterly simple melody (*la-ti-do-ti-do-la / mi-fa-mi-re-do-ti*) that sets the tone first accompanies the lone stream of

water on a wall. The tune of the dance gives rhythm to the rain, rather than the collective celebrations. The slow, lateral movement of the camera will then reveal, alternating with the faces of decrepit walls, three groups of people frozen in the doorways of the dance-hall, their dumbfounded gazes fixed upon the out-of-doors. Perhaps they are simply looking at the torrential rain. Perhaps it is the strange scene that we will see in the following shot. Outside, beneath the downpour, a solitary man dances frenetically, but without music, upon a flooded dance-floor. It is from above that we will later see—first from one direction, then from the opposite—the agitated farandoles of those who had first appeared to us as statues of salt, sculpted by the fog and the rain. And at dawn, the water will have invaded the dance-hall where the steps of a man (the same?) continue to smack furiously in the puddles.

Without a doubt, we will have seen the relationships among the four characters at the heart of the film woven and unwoven over the course of the ball. In brief episodes, we will have seen each of these four conspirators trick the others, before the affair is brought to a close at dawn with a report to the police. The devil will have sent them turning in circles like the dancers of the farandole. But the devil is ultimately nothing but the fog, the wind, the rain, and the mud that penetrate walls and clothes, in order to install themselves in hearts. It is the law of repetition. There is ordinary humanity, which submits to it—and even risks mimicking it—in the joyous farandoles of the holidays. And there are the characters of the story [*les personnages de l’histoire*],¹ who seek to escape from it. Indeed, a story is quite necessary. But, as Karrer says, all stories are stories of disintegration: stories in which one seeks to pierce the wall of repetition, at the price of sinking deeper still into the “interior rain,” into the mud of corruption.

In order for there to be a story, it is necessary and sufficient that there be a promise of escaping from the law of the rain and of repetition. In **Damnation**, this amounts to the 20% commission, promised by the bistro’s owner, on the value of unspecified wares that must be fetched and brought back in a three-day journey. The innkeeper makes this proposition to Karrer, for whom he can do such a favor since the latter has no occupation other than that of haunting the town’s bistros. But such an adventure is too much for Karrer. This is not only a character trait. Béla Tarr’s typical character, from this point on, is the man at the window, the man who watches as things come toward him. And to watch them is to allow oneself to be invaded by them, to subtract oneself from the normal trajectory, which converts solicitations from the outside into the impetus to act. In order to act, however, impetus does not suffice. There must be ends. Before, the end was a better life in the snug family nest. But with the end of socialism, this modest dream, the individual aspect of collective prosperity, disappears. The new slogan is not “be happy,” but “win.” To be on the side of those who win, that is what is proposed to Karrer. This will be the great dream of Madame Eszter in **The Werckmeister Harmonies**, and the lesson that the wicked child Sanyi teaches to his idiot of a sister in **Satantango**. But there is nothing human over which little Estike would be able to prevail. Her sole victory will be over her cat, whom she tortures and poisons in the loft while the rain rages outside.

This, then, is the problem that casts back into insignificance all the talk and the cunning of the “winners”: one does not win against rain or repetition. Karrer is Schopenhauerian like his inventor, the novelist László Krasznahorkai, who enters into Béla Tarr’s universe with **Damnation**. He knows the nothingness of the will that is at the heart of things. He does not want to look at the rain, he says, like the dogs who await the puddles in order to drink from them. He does, however, know a dog of this sort, who he can recommend to the smuggler. It is the



husband, buried in debts, of the woman he loves: a cabaret singer he goes to hear in the darkness of the Titanik as she whispers a crepuscular song—eyes closed, accompanied by obstinate arpeggios—with the words that return with equal obstinacy: “Everything is over. It is all over. Nothing anymore. Never again.”

Yet Karrer is not entirely without practical aims. To send the husband to retrieve the compromising wares is his chance to take his place in the singer’s bed, with the hope that some incident along the way—which one might even help to bring about—will prevent him from returning. But physical possession is not an end in itself. A sex scene devoid of any frenzy, as if in time with the uniform movement of the cable-cars, testifies to this. He will say it to the wife: for him, she is the guardian at the entrance of a tunnel leading to something unknown, to something he cannot name. This unknown, in the depths of which something new is to be found, is the single thing to which those who do not act, to which those who are nothing but perception and sensation can aspire. But the woman at the coat-check has already warned Karrer: the guardian of the tunnel is a witch. She is a bottomless swamp, which will only devour him. And while he awaits the husband’s departure, standing lookout in the rain, she comes, surrounded by a horde of dogs, to remind him that the only future to expect is the perdition announced by the prophets of the Lord. From this point on in Béla Tarr’s work, this figure, the prophet of disaster, will be opposed to those who traffic in promises. But perhaps it is too much to speak of a bottomless swamp. The humanity represented in **Damnation** is not responsible enough for itself to deserve the promises of destruction by war, of plague, and of famine proclaimed, in the manner of the prophets of Israel, by the woman at the coat-check. The shallow puddle where the dogs drink is the most likely destiny promised by the rain, and by the vain attempts to escape its influence. It is over the course of the ball, surrounded by the downpour, that the destiny of the four hostile accomplices is sealed. All stories are stories of disintegration, no doubt, but this disintegration is itself only an ordinary episode in the empire of rain. Thus, in a corner of the ball, the camera will briefly follow the husband, whose return spells defeat for Karrer, and whose wife seems to make this known by dancing amorously, hanging from the neck of the “victor”; then, in the restroom, the owner of the bistro complaining to Karrer that there are things missing from the delivery, before taking the singer for a good time in his car. It will then return to the nocturnal farandole and to the tireless dancer in the puddles of the early morning, before moving from the columns of the Titanik toward those of the police station, and passing through the window into the room where Karrer, seen from behind, murmurs his denunciation to a silent police officer.

In this way, everyone will have betrayed everyone else. But the betrayals are not what interest Béla Tarr, no more than successes. For him, the true events are not articulated in enterprises, obstacles, successes, or failures. The events that comprise a film are sensible moments, slices of duration: moments of solitude in which the fog of the exterior slowly penetrates bodies from the other side of the window, moments in which these bodies are brought together in a closed place, and in which the affections of the external world are converted into repetitive accordion tunes, feelings expressed by songs, footsteps on the ground, collisions of billiard balls, insignificant conversations at tables, secret negotiations behind a glass, fights behind the scenes or in the restroom, or coat-check metaphysics. Béla Tarr’s art is that of constructing the global affect in which all these forms of dissemination are condensed. This global affect does not allow itself to be

translated into feelings experienced by the characters. It is a matter of circulation between several partial points of condensation. The matter proper to this circulation is time. The slow camera movements, which depart from a stack of glasses, from a table, or from a person, rise toward a glass partition, reveal a group of drinkers behind the partition, glide to the right toward some billiard players, return to the seated drinkers, and then leave them aside in order to alight upon the accordionist—these make up the events of the film: a minute of the world, as Proust would have said, a singular moment of coexistence between the assembled bodies, in which the affects—born of “cosmological” pressure, the pressure of rain, of fog, and of mud, and converted into conversations, tunes, shards of voice, or gazes lost in the void—circulate.

From this point on, a Béla Tarr film will be an assemblage of these crystals of time, in which the “cosmic” pressure is concentrated. More than all others, his images deserve to be called time-images, images from which duration is made manifest—the very stuff of which those individualities, which we call situations or characters, are woven. This has nothing to do, then, with the “pieces of nature” that Bresson wanted to take from his models, and to assemble into a painter’s canvass through montage. There are no pieces, no demiurge of montage. Each moment is a microcosm. Each sequence shot has a duty to the time of the world, to the time in which the world is reflected in intensities felt by bodies. During a burlesque episode in **Damnation** we hear a character explaining the necessity of lifting the true veil to two topless strippers: the veil of Maya, the veil of representation that covers the unnameable reality of the true world. For Schopenhauer, the art that lifts this veil is music. A Béla Tarr film accomplishes this function of music. The successful sequence shot, in this sense, is truly the unnameable, vainly sought by Karrer in the tunnel guarded by the singer. But Karrer is at a crossroads. The camera turns around him, passes over his face, and carries away the secret. As a character, he can only see the unnameable through the veil. As such, he can only betray it—like he betrays his accomplices—and receive the only unnameable that he will have deserved: the puddle beneath the rain from which the dogs drink, the dogs with whom he barks at the end of the film.

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The aforementioned difficulty concerning the word “histoire” is accentuated here in the phrase “les personnages de l’histoire.” While the word “personnage” has been translated as “character” in most cases, it can also be read as meaning “figure” (in the sense of an important or influential individual) in certain contexts. Accordingly, this phrase might also be translated as “the historical figures” [TN].

* Chapter III of **Béla Tarr, The Time After**, trans. Erik Beranek (Minneapolis: Univocal, 2013); originally published as **Béla Tarr, le temps d’après** (Nantes: Capricci éd, 2011). Courtesy of the author and Univocal Publishing.

