

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



