

# HUMANISM, LANDSCAPE AND THE SEQUENCE-SHOT IN BÉLA TARR'S SÁTÁNTANGÓ

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## **THE TOTALITARIAN STATE OF SÁTÁNTANGÓ**

*Sátántangó* (1994), by Béla Tarr, has a duration of four hundred and twenty two minutes, with only one hundred and fifty shots. It is based on the novel by László Krasznahorkai, a writer, also Hungarian, a contemporary of Tarr. The work, *Sátántangó*, was published in 1985, four years before the fall of the totalitarian communist regime. At the heart of the narrative are the inhabitants of a rural community in southeastern Hungary. During the post-Stalinist period, between the mid-1950s and mid-1980s, these communities represented an appeal to people's autonomy, allowing them to build their own home, while establishing a community based economy. At the end of the 1980s, due to the overall economic and political state of the country—since the end of the 1960s, a kind of *market socialism* was being experimented with, a limited model of economic reform without political reform—some of these communities were

not profitable for the new market economy. Consequently, these places were abandoned and condemned to a slow death and the workers of this socialist model became miserable.

Most of Tarr's characters are not only socially marginalized, but they also choose to be passive assuming an observer position, without the power to induce change in the system. These characters seem to reflect the second period of stagnation of the socialist regime. Unlike the older generation, the last younger Soviet generation had a common identity, formed by a shared experience of the normalized and unchanging discourse of the Brezhnev years. Tarr's characters can be situated as part of that younger generation that was born between the years 1950-1970 and came of age between the years 1970-1980 (Samardzija, 2020).

The novel focuses on the internal espionage network of a totalitarian communist state. It begins with a complex plot: the villagers' only livelihood, livestock, is sold and the villagers prepare

to abandon the property for a better life elsewhere. However, they give up on the idea when they learn that two former inhabitants—Irimiás and Petrina—who they thought were dead, are returning to the community. As they come from the neighbouring city and make the journey on foot, it is during the waiting interval that some of the stories in the film are developed. The villagers are anxious about their return, even considering one of them, Irimiás, as a kind of saviour, ignoring the fact that both are now working for the State, as undercover informants. The environment described is deplorable, the rain falls uninterruptedly and the characters that usually walk appear buried in the mud. The general trait of the characters is, on the one hand, to be socially and psychologically vulnerable and, on the other, morally reprehensible. They are villagers, including the innkeeper, a woman with several children, two of them teenagers, prostitutes—a younger one and a demented girl—the doctor, the teacher and a police captain. They live in dilapidated houses, without basic sanitation and they gather in the village tavern, infested with spiders, to dance, drink and forget their miserable condition.

## IN BÉLA TARR'S SÁTÁNTANGÓ

Tarr's work can be divided into two periods: the initial period, where Tarr has a more demanding and expectant attitude towards change and produces films with themes linked to the social problems of socialist Hungary. During this period, his work testifies, for example, to the difficult living conditions of factory workers and the difficulties of people in accessing housing. In the second period, his films follow the decline of the communist system and the emergence of capitalism. These are increasingly pessimistic films, where politics is reduced to a promise, a manipulation, as is the case of *Sátántangó*, which illustrates the end of hope for a new world of freedom and equality, and the disenchantment with the capitalist promise that followed the

collapse of the socialist era. Structurally, *Sátántangó* is the most complex of all Tarr's films, owing this complexity to a non-linear narrative where events are not always represented chronologically. The structure is divided into twelve chapters: I-VI and VI-XII, six forward and six backward, like a tango.

There are few studies available on *Sátántangó*, despite being considered by many critics as Béla Tarr's masterpiece. The reasons are diverse and the most important may be related to the long duration of the film, a characteristic that makes it difficult to disseminate and distribute in the international circuit. The most extensive publications on Tarr, and specifically on this work, belong to Jacques Rancière and András Kovács and point in different directions. Rancière (2012), in a poetic-philosophical essay, seeks to translate the images and atmosphere of the film into words, aiming at the ethical, political and social meanings; in turn, Kovács (2013) focuses his study on formal issues, aspects of light, movement, color, sound and, above all, on the analysis of the time of the shots. Lidia Mello (2015) also carried out a study on the last five films by Béla Tarr, from an aesthetic-philosophical perspective, with the aim of making the author known and exploring his cinematography through the idea of repetition. Meanwhile, Tiago de Luca (2016) contextualizes Tarr in slow cinema, considering him one of his greatest precursors in contemporary Hungarian cinema. Also Heck (2020), in his book *After Authority - Global Art Cinema and Political Transition*, recognizes in *Sátántangó* a response to the political transition of Hungary's post-communism, through the construction of a democratic image, a cinema that positions itself as anti-communist, anti-authoritarian, free from a determining role of the authority of governments. Finn (2022), in his work *Cinematic Modernism and Contemporary Film*, argues that cinematic modernism resurged in the late 1980s, extends to the present day. It is both the political response to a new capitalism crisis and also a new formal and stylistic category, countering the cultural imperialism and

eclecticism of postmodernist art film. Tarr's work is included in this movement, through neo-Bazinian realism, with narratives relating political betrayal and existential angst of the individual and the collective, starting on the particular and going to the universal (Finn, 2022: 216).

Tarr's films evoke discourses of nostalgia because they are persistently shot on black-and-white using the sequence-shot as discourse. The monochromatic image is central to the dark atmosphere that Tarr creates and its consistency is reminiscent of other black and white films, from German expressionism, through Italian neo-realism to the the 50s and 60s' modernist wave. The historical effect of this choice is not mere coincidence since the image somehow evokes a sense of the past. The sequence-shot does not exist solely to create a specific environment or to represent a certain theme, but rather as an emotional and psychological *matter*, that intends to provoke different experiences in the spectator. It is from these experiences that Tarr brings the spectator closer to the reality the characters live in his narrative.

*Sátántangó* situates itself within the Hungarian post-socialist cinema, Black Series, being one of its most emblematic films. According to Batori (2018: 146), Black Series films are characterized by the presentation of unemployed or crisis-ridden characters, who do not fit into society, living far away from urban centers, in unknown or abandoned environments. This tendency evokes the narrative mode of the parables of the 60s in an aesthetic continuity between the productions made in the socialist era and the 90s. Tarr argues that *Sátántangó* does not intend to adapt the novel to cinema, but rather to take it on a stage. The *Pusztá* (arid land), the *Tanya* (dispersed rural property) and the *Alföld* (great Hungarian plain) become the epicentre of decadence and a symbol of lost national values, contributing to Tarr's aesthetic definition, by establishing a closed and abstract universe that, while mirroring freedom, imprisons the characters (Batori, 2018).

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## TARR ARGUES THAT *SÁTÁNTANGÓ* DOES NOT INTEND TO ADAPT THE NOVEL TO CINEMA, BUT RATHER TO TAKE IT ON A STAGE

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Tarr and Krasznahorkai (2018) agree that the most important element of *Sátántangó* is not any theme or topic, but the way of approaching the human condition. For Tarr, it is very important to be on the side of the most vulnerable, representing them in his cinema and trying to give them dignity (Maury & Rollet, 2016). However, *Sátántangó*'s characters are rigid throughout the film, making it difficult for the viewer to establish relationships of identification or create empathy. The social situation in which they find themselves is precarious and they do not have cognitive or moral tools capable of improving their situation. They are vulnerable characters, psychologically and socially, incapable of cooperating in the construction of a common good.

This statement about protecting human dignity, causes us a conflict since, *a priori*, we cannot find aspects in which human dignity is defended there. For this reason we have focussed our research on understanding how Béla Tarr, uses the sequence-shot to defend the dignity of his characters in *Sátántangó*. Is it possible to identify a specific stylistic pattern in his representation of the human condition? How does Tarr approach the staging of the long take to represent a point of view of humanity? What kind of relationships Tarr establishes between scenarios and characters through camera movement and composition? How these conceptual relationships contribute to presenting a point of view of the human condition? Although we have analyzed Tarr's filmography and, above all, the film *Sátántangó*, for the purpose of this article we have selected a number of specific sequence-shots that take place in the central settings of the narra-

tive: the *Puszta*, the *Alföld*, the *Tanya* and the *Kosma* (tavern). The analysis includes a detailed discussion of how the director employs framing, camera movement, and the use of diegetic and non-diegetic sound to represent the human condition.

## THE ALFÖLD'S PRISONERS

Tarr located most of his stories, from the second period of his work (1988-2011), in the vast land of the *Alföld* and its forgotten villages. In addition to playing a key role in agricultural production, the landscape of southern Hungary was home to some of the most important historical events related to the nation's independence, becoming a national symbol, a rural heritage and a metaphor for the right to self-determination (Batori, 2018). Considered practically a treeless desert—which is why the territory is often referred to as *Puszta*, which means *barren* and *wasteland*, in Hungarian—the flooded parts of the *Alföld* were slowly being converted into arable land, meadows, fertile fields, pastures and vineyards, thus establishing a strong, self-sufficient and export-oriented agricultural sector.

In the first sequence-shot analyzed, Tarr follows the start of Irimiás and Petrina's journey to the police station (00:43:54 - 00:45:396), where the two will be notified that they will have to

work as informants. The sequence-shot begins by framing a deserted street with buildings on both sides and lots of garbage (figure 1). Irimiás and Petrina appear on their backs and, as they advance, the rubbish envelops them in their walk (figure 2). The street occupies two thirds of the frame, leaving the sky and the horizon line lost in the background. It rains heavily, the wind blows and drags the surrounding rubbish, and we hear the sound of debris and characters' footsteps. The environmental sound presents an inhospitable atmosphere that contributes to evoking a feeling of hopeless misery. The sound volume seems artificially high causing a considerable dramatic charge, which configures one of Tarr's fundamental characteristics in sound treatment—the extrapolation of reality through ambient sounds—. Here the overall sound treatment evokes the desolation of the landscape that amplifies the loneliness and impotence of the characters who seem to walk mechanically, aimlessly, adrift as if pushed by the wind. They walk backwards, not caring about the rain or the wind, defeated, as if accepting their condition. The camera follows them patiently respecting the rhythm of the walk until it finally gives up and stops leaving the characters to their fate. The silhouetted bodies are finally swallowed by the landscape, suggesting that the characters' misery is the result of the spatial context in which they live in.

Figure 1



Figure 2





Figure 3

There is a similar sequence-shot (06:32:30-06:34:08), where Tarr follows the departure of the return to the city of Irimiás, Petrina and Sanyi (figure 3), after they have led the villagers at the railway station, at which time each one received an indication of the place where they would work and sleep.

In the two long-shots, Irimiás walks in a deserted, desolate street, however, in the background of the latter, there is less rubbish and a third element, Sanyi, appears (figure 3); this difference seems to suggest that a new order is

being inaugurated, highlighting the power of Irimiás. In fact, this shot must be understood as the record of Irimiás' action, because it is the last shot of the film in which the character appears and because it can be seen that the environment changed five hours and thirty-seven minutes after the first shot (figures 1-2). Irimiás' promise of building a community project represents an idea that villagers know that has failed, however it also means a return to a past that it is consistent with the utopic ideals of solidarity. But Irimiás and his capitalist leanings, by keeping the money and promises of positive returns on investments, proposes the opposite. Irimiás is at the crossroad between communism and capitalism. This is the impasse that Tarr hopes to extend throughout the seven hours of film, and the way to complete this task is to lengthen the sequence-shot.

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**THE OVERALL SOUND TREATMENT  
EVOKES THE DESOLATION OF THE  
LANDSCAPE THAT AMPLIFIES THE  
LONELINESS AND IMPOTENCE OF THE  
CHARACTERS**

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Figure 4

After the suicide of Estike—a mentally disabled girl, who is portrayed as the most innocent character in the film and has been deceived and abandoned by her relatives (04:56:29-05:03:02), (Hidalgo, 2023: 131)—, the villagers return home to pack their belongings in preparation for leaving the village (refer to figure 4 and 5). The things they cannot pack, they destroy, so that the gypsies will not be able to enjoy them. In this emblematic sequence-shot, the villagers reach the road, starting the long walk to the new mansion, *Almassy*.

The camera first follows the group from behind, keeping a constant distance between Futaki, the last character walking (figure 4) and the position of the camera. Halfway through, the group pauses, and the camera, moving around 180 degrees, changes its position and captures the group through a frontal position (figure 5). Due to the length of the camera movement, by this time, it is only the outline of the characters that can be seen: they are backlit and their dark clothes merge into a single stain in the darkness of the landscape. In this scene, the weather conditions are less adverse than in the two previous sequence shots with Irimiás (figures 1-3), where the body is subjected to rain and cold. However, the villagers' path is also difficult, and Tarr demonstrates it otherwise, through the slowness of their movements; the drama of the scene aims to recreate, in the



Figure 5

spectator, the real experience of walking. The fact that the camera captures them from the front and from the back, allows the viewer to access a full view of what is around the villagers. This 360-degree perspective visually confirms and amplifies the sheer desolation that surrounds the villagers. They are completely alone, left to their own devices, and around them there is nothing and no one to support them. It's a long walk that evokes a funeral march and their tired bodies walk as if dragged by the fate of failure. These endless walks along the *Puszta* landscape situate the characters in a closed position which, in the case of socialist parables, imprisons the characters. If, on the one hand, the characters are lost and don't feel well anywhere—since all the places they inhabit are inhospitable—, on the other, moving around is part of life. However, it is a passive move; wherever the characters go, they always end up at the same point, in the same social situation from which they departed.

### **THE ESCAPE THROUGH KOCSMA: DRINK TO FORGET**

In the early years of socialism, *Kocsma* (taverns) hosted cultural gatherings for all levels of society. However, social and cultural changes and economic difficulties, after the change of the political system in the 1990s, emptied them of this

content, making them only places dedicated to the cheap consumption of alcohol. The interior was structured to accommodate the largest number of individuals in the smallest possible space, primarily around the counter. In this way, with their affordable prices, they have become places chosen by the unemployed and other precarious strata of society, as spaces of escape and alienation. Thus, *Kocsma* became evidence of moral decay and lost hope.

In the first scene of the tavern (03:57:45-04:08:38), while waiting for Irimiás and Petrina to arrive, the villagers begin to interact and drink (figure 6). The music that comes out of the accordion is a melody that repeats itself over and over, while the bodies sway, dancing. The characters alternate their moods, sometimes showing themselves irritated, sometimes celebrating, happy. The sequence-shot begins with a frontal general view of the interior of the bar with the villagers being the main elements of the composition. Inside the bar we find tables, chairs, a small counter and some cupboards with drinks at the back and an interior door. To the right of the shot is Futaki, seated at a table with his back to the camera; on the left, a man plays the accordion, sitting on a chair, also with his back turned, and Mrs. Kranér; at the back, behind the coun-

ter, is the innkeeper; at the center of the action, Madame Schmidt dances with Hálics and Kranér with Madame Hálics. The camera approaches, towards the characters, while Kéleman enters the frame and pulls the accordionist to the center of the action, where the dance takes place and the camera waits and observes for a few moments (figure 7). The accordion melody serves as a unifying element of the dramatic construction, conceived by Tarr, reinforcing the idea of repetition and monotony.

The villagers appear dancing in an exaggerated way, looking intoxicated, repeating the movements, with small variations. They knock objects on the tables, incessantly, or else they whirl, bumping into each other. Benches and chairs fall, but the dance continues. Alcohol, misery, the cold have turned them into some kind of mechanical, alienated creatures. All this happens without exchanging words. Throughout the sequence, the camera has an omnipresent presence, regardless of the action taking place in the space. Sometimes it is in constant motion, other times it is almost

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### KOCSMA BECAME EVIDENCE OF MORAL DECAY AND LOST HOPE

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Figure 6



Figure 7







Above. Figure 8. Below. Figure 9

stopped, however none of the camera movements are motivated by the actions of the characters. Tarr's staging of the sequence-shot suggests that all elements seem to have the same importance (empty glasses, sleeping bodies, muddy surfaces or degraded buildings), because they are all part of the scenery, just like human beings in a relationship of equality. Thus, an object, the repetitive sound of the clock, a movement, acquire an undifferentiated density: they have a space and a time, and it is the duration of the shot that outlines the dramatic power of each element.

The second long shot in the tavern (03:38:35 - 03:45:14), corresponds to the moment before the dance, in which the villagers distribute the money among everyone and, later, start to spend it, drinking uncontrollably.

The camera appears behind a stove as a kind of hidden observer, capturing the tavern keeper in a fixed sequence-shot, while he adds wood to the fire; at the bottom of the frame, the remaining characters distribute the salary they received (figure. 8). Then, the camera rises from its low position and slowly approaches the door that the tavern keeper has just closed behind him (figure 9). He opens it again and, although other characters enter the picture, who gather at the counter, the camera keeps its focus on the tavern-keeper (figure 10).

When Futaki appears in the frame, asking for a bottle (figure 11), the camera chooses to follow him as he joins the Schmidts' table (figure 12). At that moment, the frame is blocked by the stove again. There, the camera approaches the charac-

Above. Figure 10. Below. Figure 11







Figure 12

ters providing the viewer with the opportunity to attend their intimate conversation, as if sharing the same space. The claustrophobic framing also evokes a dimension of the characters' imprisonment in the space.

This can be considered a vertical enclosure, unlike what happens with the walk scenes, where the characters are trapped in the horizontality of the Alföld.

At one point, Futaki says, "I shouldn't drink. When I drink, all I think about is coffins." In Krasznahorkai's book (2018), this moment is accompanied

by numerous questions from Futaki that he deposits on the arrival of Irimiás and Petrina. However, Tarr only selects this phrase from the character's lines. In doing so, he intentionally removes other thoughts and desires from the villagers' lives, reinforcing the idea that all the characters live trapped in their own miserable condition; rain, money, food and drink are the only cross-cutting issues he presents in the film's dialogues. Without spiritual or poetic order, the characters assist to their own lives like passive spectators for they are lost in a life without meaning or direction.

Figure 13



Figure 14



Some time later, the innkeeper appears again in the image (figure 13), and at that moment the camera leaves the table of Futaki and the Schmidts and follows the innkeeper to the counter (figure 14), not fully framing him, since there are other characters that block the view. Then, the camera moves from the tavern keeper to the Halics couple (figure 15). When Halics brings a glass to his mouth to drink, the woman looks at him reproachfully and he stops. There is no dialogue between them.

In *Sátántangó*, no intimate human relationship is portrayed, nor is the desire for it. There are a few couples among the villagers, but Tarr doesn't portray them in much detail, rather as cold, alienated, rude and aggressive relationships that don't change over the course of the film. *Sátántangó* does not reveal the interiority of the characters, where they come from and how they got there. However, they are played by unique people and

faces, who carry life stories, which contribute to the way the characters express themselves.

In this aspect, the director seeks to capture the uniqueness of these faces and bodies, people to whom the story they interpret could have actually happened, even if it didn't. His films evoke testimonies of poor and marginalized people and the author gives them this spotlight because he feels a deep compassion for them, the Hungarian people. The stories are always about a (lost) time of waiting, waiting for something that would come to change people's lives, even though this change never happens. Human dignity means the same thing in the depths of hopelessness as in the most favourable circumstances; maintain the same values and principles regardless of what happens around them. Tarr's characters represent the ongoing effort made for human dignity. They are on the verge of giving up, feeling unable to provide for their survival; they do not depend on them-

Figure 15





Figure 16

selves, but as long as they live, they try to save their dignity. At the end of the sequence-shot (figure 16), the camera rises to the eye level of the characters, seeming to transform itself into a human eye that watches—just like the socialist regime—confronting people in the *Kocsma*, who remain static for a few seconds. The paralysis of the characters gives the scene a dramatic charge, accentuating the villagers' expectation for the arrival of Irimiás. Tarr's conscious choice to make drinking spaces the center of the spatial unity of the narrative reinforces the idea of the decadent social environment in which the characters are immersed. The fact that these taverns are located in the *Alföld* also confers them a particular quality that signals the transformation of the national space into a place for drinking, alienated and disorganized, full of misery and agony.

### **TANYA AND THE POWER GAMES**

In addition to the wide and uninhabited horizons that characterize the rural exterior and the meeting spaces, *Kocsma*, the landscape of the *Alföld* is also integrated by several scattered rural properties, designated by the Hungarian term *Tanya*. Over time, rural property in Hungary suffered a decline, which began with the introduction of the

socialist economic model and its collectivization in 1949. However, as these housing spaces were located far from the cities, they were not so easily monitored by the government. State and, consequently, *Tanya* was never fully integrated into the socialist collectivity model. The initial depopulation led to an influx of people from various cities who saw these abandoned houses as an opportunity to achieve economic autonomy and improve their family life. Thus, in this return to the rural world, the Hungarians kept the old traditions, in terms of housing conditions and independent ways of life, thus preserving the architectural formula of the *Tanya* houses and their communities. In *Sátántangó*, *Tanya* is represented by a destroyed territory, in the aftermath of what the colonizing process consisted of, showing the rural

Above. Figure 17. Below. Figure 18



dwelling and the desolate environment. This type of construction, which initially housed the animals of the *Puszta*, later became small communities inhabited by several family generations of farmers. These families subsisted on the resources provided by the *Puszta*, making these settlements and the *Alföld* itself a type of artisanal life. In this sense, *Tanya* has a strong emotional value in the Hungarian context, as it defines the country's identity and explains the origins of the country's rural character in architecture.

In one of these rural properties, we witnessed a dialogue between Schmidt and Futaki (00:30:46-00:38:12), as they negotiated the embezzlement of the community fund. In this sequence, the focus is on lying and deceit, aspects that characterize human relationships in the universe of *Sátántangó*.

The sequence-shot starts with Futaki and Schmidt sitting at a table, but we can only see Futaki's face, because Schmidt appears from the



**Figure 19**

back (figure 17). Lasting approximately five minutes, the sequence-shot moves into a close-up of Futaki's face (figures 18-19). The camera lingers in the rotation around his head, until it frames his back and we finally see Schmidt, on the other side of the table; Schmidt's wife is also framed, in depth, by a window (figure 20).

The moment they decide to split the money, Ms. Schmidt enters the frame and presents the money she had kept hidden in her breasts. The camera slowly frames a close-up of Schmidt's hands as he shares the money with Futaki (figure 21). We realize that the division is not made equally, however Futaki does not protest. While each character counts the money, the camera resumes its circular choreography around Futaki (figure 22), again framing him from the back. At that moment, they are surprised by Mrs. Kráner knocking at the door; Hastily, they return the money to Ms. Schmidt and she hides it back

**Figure 20**





From left to right and from top to bottom. Figures 21, 22, 23 and 24

in her breasts as she heads for the door (figure 23, 24). At that moment, the camera stops its circular trajectory, around the two characters, to accompany Ms. Schmidt, who heads towards the exit of the space where they are, closing the door (figure 25).

The sequence-shot will last a few more seconds while Ms. Schmidt talks to Ms. Kráner, already off-frame, and we wait (figure 25). After Ms. Schmidt exits the frame, the camera continues to record the door. We have no access to the conversation that is happening on the other side of the door, and after a few seconds, Futaki's voice is heard off frame: "Your wife is taking a long time", to which Schmidt replies "I break her face! ..." (figure 25) The static character of the sequence-shot by the door underlines *the idea of the camera-spy* which acts independently of the characters' actions and motivations. At the same

time, the shut door evokes secrecy and imprisonment which together with the dialogue off frame amplifies the deceit nature of the scene. In fact, the dialogue clearly states that neither of them trust Ms. Schmidt or each other exemplifying the manipulative and deceitful atmosphere the characters inhabit.

While they negotiate the embezzlement, there is a specific framing in the sequence-shot (figure 20), which resumes the manipulative and deceiving nature of the human relationships in *Sátántangó*. In this composition, Schmidt smiles ironically at Futaki. In turn, Ms. Schmidt, who watches the scene, also reveals a jocular expression. Let's remember that, a few minutes earlier, she had sex with Futaki, deceiving her husband. In this way, the composition unfolds several layers of deception: the woman who betrays her husband with Futaki; Schmidt who tricks Futaki with



the irregular division of the money; and, finally, the incorrectness of the three characters, when dividing between them the money belonging to all the members of the community.

Another example of the camera's circular motion is the sequence at the police station in which the two officers correct Irimiás' report on the villagers (06:34:19-06:49:53). In this case, the camera makes four full circles and two more semi-circles around the space (figures 26-27). This circular strategy is repeated in other scenarios in the *Tanya*, namely in the Steigerwald tavern, when Irimiás writes the report on the movement of villagers to deliver to the police (05:46:17 - 05:49:26).

The circularity of the sequence-shot creates the illusion of the possibility of a way out of the social *trap* in which the characters find themselves. This is because the circular camera movement seems to be searching for an exit in the filmic space and suggests that the characters' efforts are

Above. Figure 26. Below. Figure 27

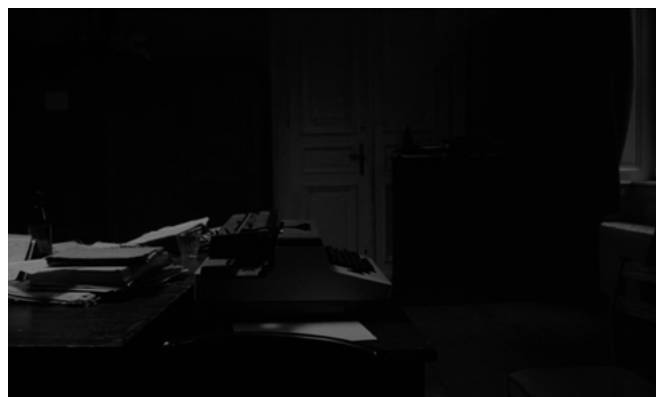


Figure 25

directed towards dismantling some sort of order that keeps villagers trapped in a given situation. This process involves the embezzlement of the community fund, lying, deceit, as the characters are in such a miserable position that they deem it impossible that regular or legal actions can improve their living condition. They feel condemned to fail from the beginning and they consider themselves prisoners and powerless against those who cannot win: the order established in the figure of the State. However, the sequence-shot closes the circle without exposing any possible exits amplifying a sense of imprisonment and hopelessness. The closed circle also alludes to the eternal circle of history, where everything returns to the zero point of events underlying the fact that the characters, however much they move around, remain always in the same position and under the same miserable circumstances. Nothing can change for there is nowhere to go. The four hundred and twenty two minutes of film prolong indefinitely the moment of transition between two political regimes in Hungary; the objective is not to return to the past in a kind of nostalgia for communism that ends, but to prolong the time of indecision. Tarr asks the viewer to see the democracy that arrives, in a moment before its arrival, presenting the human condition as the only point of reference in the narrative, with misery as an indignity, validated and reinforced by the State.



## **AESTHETICS AND HUMANISM IN BÉLA TARR'S SÁTÁNTANGÓ**

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*Sátántangó* presents a simple but compelling thesis: in the world where villagers, the State and Irimiás live, the poor, in order to subsist, have to deceive one another. Poverty as social vulnerability is a state of expectation, of *tomorrow may be different*, of anticipation, while deprivation can be associated with rebellion and spiritual disintegration. Human response to this situation on the part of the characters often appears in the form of reactive, disorganized explosions, constituting a sort of counterpoint to the established order. The villagers are isolated on the plain, isolated in the tavern and despoiled in the scattered properties because all these locations are not places of hope, they are scenarios where poverty and misery perpetuate human indignity. The only solution *Sátántangó* offers is death, examples of which are the characters of Estike and the doctor. Both are situated at the extreme poles of human decadence and ruin: the first committed suicide with a rodenticide; the second, through a conscious giving up of life that, at the same time, can be seen as an act of resistance, representing those who choose to remain in the places where they belong. The remaining deceived characters appear represented as primitive basic animals that just survive. In fact, what is at stake is survival and, for this reason, dehumanization is not innate to the characters: if the external conditions (caused by abandonment and lack of freedom and support from the State) were different, people would certainly be different. Here emerges the essential need for the staging of the sequence-shot, to associate the desolation of the scenarios with the degradation of human beings. Their faces are filmed as landscapes, merging with the spaces they inhabit, perpetuating their miserable existence and the villagers respond by manipulating and deceiving others, as they themselves are being exploited by the State and by Irimiás; it is a behavioural circu-

lar repetition that perpetuates their condition of life. The contemplative and omnipotent images in *Sátántangó* contribute to our understanding of the social problems present in the broken community landscape. The narrative presents a negative portrayal of irresponsible political exploitation and behaviour and its consequences. Through the actions of the characters, we see how people motivated by greed can seriously harm others around them, thus contributing to reinforcing political exploitation and social irresponsibility.

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### **TARR NEVER OFFERS THE POINT OF VIEW OF ANY CHARACTER, ON THE CONTRARY, THE SHOTS APPEAR AS INDEPENDENT SECTIONS THAT FORCE US TO SEE THE NARRATIVE ACTION IN A TRIANGULAR RELATIONSHIP—CHARACTERS, SPECTATOR AND CAMERA**

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Tarr never offers the point of view of any character, on the contrary, the shots appear as independent sections that force us to see the narrative action in a triangular relationship—characters, spectator and camera. The spectator has access to diegetic and non-diegetic information, and can be said to have an omnipresent perspective through the camera's aerial view of the community—this is where the film's great power lies. The camera assists to isolated episodes of the characters' lives, interspersed, but it doesn't particularly identify with any of them. This mismatch is due to the fact that Tarr does not portray them with great psychological depth, showing that the relationships they establish are based on manipulation and power games, and not on the exchange of ideas or the expression of feelings. For this reason, their real personality remains hidden. Tarr's omnipresent camera conveys the unjust and oppressive order of *Sátántangó*'s universe by provoking an emotional experience rather than telling a story. The

long duration of the shots amplifies the repetition of the characters' pointless actions, condemning them to resign themselves to their condition. The sequence-shot serves as a resource for temporal exploration, in a delimited space, capturing the choreography of the characters and converting the national space into the allegorical of a national prison. No matter what they do or how far they walk, they get nowhere.

Deprivation of basic human needs and material and spiritual poverty have socio-historical significance; the most striking signs of this poverty are the passivity, inertia and lack of goals of the villagers when they are abandoned to their fate. They do not live, they survive, and this fact, combined with the harsh living conditions and extreme poverty, makes them indifferent to their surroundings. Tarr makes an integral and realistic follow-up of this disarticulation of their lives, showing the spectre of the process of oppression (police) as a way of silencing their misery. The end of the totalitarian, communist regime left them orphans, without teaching them, or leaving them ingrained, any values of solidarity, despite living in community.

In a world where communism fails, as an ideal model of community life and political utopia, Tarr and Krasznahorkai choose to show us the end of the post-communist identity itself, through the vision of those who suffer, the true workers, and not of those who created this oppressive society. This is where the film's great humanist power lies by showing us how human beings are capable of succumbing to their own misery, but then Tarr rescues them by filming their faces as if they were landscapes. This aesthetic approach to human dignity translates into a profound equality, in the same type of movement and taking a similar time to what it would take to represent a landscape. The long time we spent in front of the characters, with no other subject in the image, evokes feelings of compassion for those represented. And this is where the director gives them

dignity. It is through the representation of people, in their historical, political and social contexts, that Tarr shows us human fragility and dignity. In Krasznahorkai's novel, there is a circular narrative structure, as in the film: the narrative begins in the community, with the villagers leaving it. At the end of the novel, the villagers return exactly to the starting point of the story (the community), and in the film, the villagers are scattered and left to their fate; however, in the latter, the narrative ends in that place (the community), in the scene in which the doctor shuts himself up, closing the window, which symbolizes the end of the story in the novel, as well as in the film. ■

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## HUMANISM, LANDSCAPE AND THE SEQUENCE-SHOT IN BÉLA TARR'S SÁTÁNTANGÓ

### Abstract

Béla Tarr's *Sátántangó* (1994) has been studied from an aesthetic, political and philosophical perspective, but not from what Tarr and Krasznahorkai consider to be the most important element of their work: the representation of the human condition and dignity. This paper explores how Tarr uses the sequence-shot to represent the dignity of his characters in *Sátántangó*. Is it possible to identify a specific stylistic pattern in his representation of the human condition? How does Tarr approach the staging of the long take to represent a point of view of humanity? What kind of relationships Tarr establishes between scenarios and characters through camera movement and composition? How do these conceptual relationships contribute to presenting a point of view of the human condition?

### Key words

Sequence-shot; Béla Tarr; Slow cinema; Hungarian cinema; Film narrative; Film analysis.

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## HUMANISMO, PAISAJE Y EL PLANO SECUENCIA EN SÁTÁNTANGÓ DE BÉLA TARR

### Resumen

*Sátántangó* (1994) de Béla Tarr ha sido estudiado desde una perspectiva estética, política y filosófica, pero no desde lo que Tarr y Krasznahorkai consideran el elemento más importante de su obra: la representación de la condición humana y su dignidad. Este artículo explora cómo Tarr utiliza el plano secuencia para representar la dignidad de sus personajes en *Sátántangó*. ¿Es posible identificar un patrón estilístico específico en su representación de la condición humana? ¿Cómo aborda Tarr la puesta en escena del plano secuencia para representar el punto de vista de la humanidad? ¿Qué tipo de relaciones establece Tarr entre escenarios y personajes a través del movimiento de cámara y la composición? ¿Cómo contribuyen estas relaciones conceptuales a presentar el punto de vista de la condición humana?

### Palabras clave

Plano secuencia; Béla Tarr; cine lento; cine húngaro; narrativa cinematográfica; análisis fílmico.

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