

COMPLETELY IN RUINS: BÉLA TARR'S *WERCKMEISTER HARMONIES*

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"One must still have chaos within, in order to give birth to a dancing star."

Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (2008: 15).

It is possible that the first map in human history was not a geography but a cosmography, a tentative description or drawing of that strange, star-speckled vault that our ancestors lifted their eyes to with a sense of dread, of *vanitas*, of the fleeting nature of life. In the early twentieth century, the art historian and theorist Wilhelm Worringer attributed humankind's first artistic impulse to that "immense spiritual fear of space", an inner feeling of anxiety provoked by the vagaries of the outside world and the unshakeable sensation "of being lost in the universe" (Worringer, 1997: 15-16). It is a cosmic angst, a dissonant cosmo(a)gony or lack of harmony with the music of the stars that has plagued us ever since the Enlightenment, which the Romantics sought to alleviate with their impossible desire to return to a primordial nature and live in harmony with the cosmos once more:¹

If, *ex hypothesi*, the universe is in movement and not at rest, [...] if it is a constant wave (as Friedrich

Schlegel says), how can we possibly even try to describe it? What are we to do when we wish to describe a wave? [...] For these Romantics, to live is to do something, to do is to express your nature. To express your nature is to express your relation to the universe. Your relation to the universe is inexpressible, but you must nevertheless express it. This is the agony; this is the problem. This is the unending *Sehnsucht*, this is the yearning [...], this is why we indulge in all manner of fantasies. This is the typical Romantic nostalgia. (Berlin, 2001: 105)

What are we to do, then, to describe this constant cosmic wave? In contemporary cinema, the best attempt—and perhaps the best expression of Romantic *Sehnsucht* as well—is the 9-minute, 40-second sequence shot that opens *Werckmeister Harmonies* (*Werckmeister harmóniák*, 2000) directed by Béla Tarr.² The first image in the film is of a wood-burning stove (a common object in Tarr's imagery) into which a hand empties a half-finished pint of beer to put out the flames.

The camera pulls back to reveal the owner of the hand, the barkeeper in a shabby little tavern, who is telling the assorted drunks gathered there to go home as it is closing time. One of the drunks asks him to wait a little so that János Valuska (Lars Rudolph) can show them something. Valuska leads the man into the centre of the empty room and says to him: "You are the Sun." He goes to another man who he says will be the Earth, and a third who will be the Moon:

"And now, we'll have an explanation that simple folks like us can even understand about immortality. All that I ask is that you step with me into the boundlessness where constancy, quietude and peace reign in an infinite emptiness."

They then begin to act out a mythical tale with a clumsy choreography in which the Earth and the Moon dance together while they revolve around the Sun. In this way, under the instructions of their shaman, three human bodies become three heavenly bodies to give life to a lyrical, drunken cosmogony, the closest these men will ever be able to get to the harmony of the stars. But then something happens: the Earth, the Sun, and the Moon between them form a line and Valuska stops the three dancing bodies because an unexpected astronomical event has occurred (Fig. 1). The air turns cold, the sky darkens, "and then, complete silence. Everything that lives is still."

The music of Vig Mihály, a regular contributor to Tarr's films, rises out of the silence to provide accompaniment to his words. "Will Heaven fall upon us? Will the Earth open under us?" muses the *Sidereus Nuncius*, this makeshift Sidereal Messenger: "We don't know, for a total eclipse has come upon us." The camera stops orbiting around the bodies and at this moment Valuska stops his



Figure 1. The eclipse of human bodies converted into celestial bodies in *Werckmeister Harmonies*

story and falls still. It is the end. Or at least, his words conform to the discourse of the various "fictions of the End", as Frank Kermode (2000: 35) describes them in *The Sense of an Ending*, echoes of the profuse imagery of the Biblical apocalypse that has punctuated history with all manner of imagined ends for the world. And they also describes that timeless fear of primeval humans of the earthly, meteorological and cosmic phenomena that were beyond their understanding; an ancestral terror of the unknown which, of course, is still engraved in our collective unconscious.

The inspiration for *The Eclipse* (L'éclisse, 1962) was a solar eclipse that Michelangelo Antonioni had filmed in Florence a few months earlier. In the preface to his book *Sei film*, the filmmaker recalls the powerful impression that the phenomenon made on him: "Sudden cold. A silence different from all other silences. Earthly light, different from all other lights. And then darkness. Complete stillness." The alienating effect provoked by an eclipse is a universal sensation, as demonstrated by the similarity of the words chosen by Antonioni and those spoken by Valuska. "All I can think is that during the eclipse all feelings probably stop as well," concludes Antonioni (quoted in Font, 2003: 155).

The eclipse is thus like a paralysis of all living things, like a rehearsal for the end of time. But Tarr's camera begins moving again in a tracking shot that pulls back slowly until one of the overhead lamps in the tavern appears in the foreground at the top of the frame (Fig. 2): the sun has come out again and the dance—the world—can begin once more. Valuska then decides to rescue his inebriated companions from an eclipse of the emotions: "But no need to fear; it's not over," he reassures them, and he invites everyone present to join the dancing constellation. And so they do. The *End of Time* that had arrived with the eclipse seems to have ultimately been avoided, although perhaps it has only been postponed, because the order that the young postman yearns for—and which, like the philosopher, the musician or the mathematician, he looks for in the stars—will drift further away from his world with every step and every hour that brings him closer to day-break. The first crack will appear when the tired barkeeper breaks up the planetary dance and tells everyone to leave. "But Mr. Hagelmayer, it's still not over," replies Valuska, before walking out into the cold and solitary streets of the town. Out on those streets he will be confronted with the next sign of instability or imbalance when an engine

Figure 2. One of the lamps in the tavern appears in the foreground: the sun has come out again and the dance—the world—can begin again in *Werckmeister Harmonies*



breaks the silence of the sleeping town. A tractor is hauling a gigantic metal trailer and Valuska stops to watch it, his small silhouette outlined against its huge, blank, impenetrable surface, until it disappears at the end of the street. When he turns around, the mystery of this sight seems to have filled his eyes: What is inside that monstrous structure being hauled across town? He casts one last look towards the source of the noise as it moves further away, before straining to move on, as if having to wrench his feet out of their lethargy. Valuska walks out of the frame without noticing a poster announcing the arrival in town of a circus: "Fantastic! The world's largest giant whale! And other wonders of nature! Guest star: The Prince."

THE HARMONY OF THE STARS

"The whole of the West is suffering from a loss of destiny. [...] We wander aimlessly. We set destinies for ourselves to alleviate our lack of destiny. That is why we lead empty lives. [...] [O]nly the stars have a destiny. A tragic destiny."

Jean-Pierre Léaud in *The Birth of Love* (La naissance de l'amour, 1993) by Philippe Garrel.

Valuska watches. And walks. These are his basic activities. His steps are portrayed as wandering as much as visionary, because "János is essentially a sensible surface" (Rancière, 2013: 58) marked by things that for others might go unnoticed. Open shutter, long exposure, perpetual motion: the images captured by Valuska come out blurry because everything around him is changing. He walks around this unnamed town seemingly anchored in some indeterminate moment of the late twentieth century and comes to the headquarters of the local newspaper. "How are things in the cosmos?" a woman working there asks him. "Everything is fine" is his distracted answer, but a sense of impending doom seems to hover over this pre-apocalyptic town, both in *Werckmeister Harmonies* and

in the novel on which it is based, *The Melancholy of Resistance* by László Krasznahorkai (who also co-wrote the screenplay with Tarr). Thus, the woman begins describing the “coming catastrophe” (Krasznahorkai, 2000: 5) while Valuska listens from another room: a shortage of coal and medicines, extreme cold and piles

of garbage everywhere, the school and the town hall closed, the telephone service and street-lights not working... The people bolt their doors and tremble, dreading the future, because, as the woman suggests, “it’s certain that something is to come” to this unruly and discordant town.

And the ultimate sign of this “process of disintegration” (Krasznahorkai, 2000: 4) is the circus that has just arrived in town, with a whale of Biblical proportions as its main attraction, along with a mysterious character, “The Prince”, an apocalyptic preacher who spouts blasphemous and godless sermons that inspire rioting, looting and killing. Because, they say, some men have arrived in town, men who follow the circus wherever it goes, fascinated with the whale (says one), or maybe with the mysterious prince (says another), a character who is believed to possess “magnetic” powers. Or at least, that’s what the receptionist at the hotel claims when Valuska brings him the daily newspaper. Valuska says goodbye and his steps lead him to the town square, where the huge trailer holding the whale has now been parked. Around it are gathered hordes of men, silent and inscrutable. They smoke, watch, and wait. But what are they waiting for?

In 2004, Béla Tarr was one of the twenty-five directors who contributed an episode to the col-



Figure 3. Valuska looks into the great dead, empty eye of the Leviathan in *Werckmeister Harmonies*

lective film *Visions of Europe*. The barely five minutes of “Prologue” begins with a tracking shot moving along a line of people to music by Vig Mihály. When we finally reach the start of the queue we discover that they are lined up at a window where a woman is passing out food and drink. Tarr filmed a queue of im-

poverished Hungarians to offer his gloomy vision of his country in the lead-up—the prologue?—to its entry into the European Union.² His camera captured each and every one of the faces of these individuals, singling them out of the anonymous mass of bodies. With a duration similar to that of the tracking shot and with exactly the same significance, the second part of this short film contains the final credits in which Tarr includes the names of every person we have seen, thereby affirming their individuality and their *entity*, i.e., the fact of their existence. They are the ones who are, the ones who exist.

But in *Werckmeister Harmonies* the crowds of men who occupy the square cannot be read as individuals. They are simply there, in silence: they are horde, a mass, a crowd. They await the watchwords of the princely prophet who travels with the circus. When the huge door of the trailer opens, Valuska buys a ticket and reverently enters the mausoleum of the Leviathan, passing in front of the great dead eye and gazing at it in the dim light (Fig. 3). Vig Mihály’s music, the same tune we heard in the cosmic dance that opened the film, underscores the *wondrous* significance of the moment. Because for the *trusting* Valuska, the one who has faith, the great cetacean is but one more example of the order of creation, the

same order he sees every day in the map of the night sky that hangs over his bed. This is what he expresses to a neighbour he meets on the way out: “How mysterious is the Lord that He amuses Himself with such strange creatures.” As Rancière suggests, for the viewer the whale evokes references to Jean-Pierre Melville and to a whole symbolic repertoire of evil, but Valuska “sees no more than the wonder that stands as testimony to the power of a divinity capable of creating such amazing creatures” (Rancière, 2013: 59).

Valuska, the *Dostoevskian* idiot, a simple man of the street, is an unwitting victim of Romantic *Sehnsucht*, that unattainable desire for communion with the universe; and he shares his longing with Eszter, a learned musicologist who lives shut up in his house, obsessed with the idea of recovering the “pure” pre-modern chords that were destroyed by the “equal temperament” developed by Andreas Werckmeister, among others. This old man, estranged from his wife and cared for with dedication by Valuska, wants to return to the days of Pythagoras and Aristoxenus, when “our forefathers were satisfied with the fact that our purely tuned instruments were played in only some tones, [...] for they knew that heavenly harmonies were the province of the gods.” However, as the musicologist continues, in a long monologue that he records on tape while Valuska listens, Man in his infinite *rational* arrogance “wished to take possession of all the harmonies of the gods [...] charging] technicians with the solution: a Praetorians, a Salinas, and finally an Andreas Werckmeister, who resolved the difficulty by dividing the octave of the harmony of the gods, the twelve half-tones into twelve equal parts.”

Eszter’s words reveal his disappointment with “constant-tempered” modern music, which in the seventeenth century became definitively severed from the sacred, from the pulses of the universe and the gods that had created it, to become a slave of Reason, one of the scientific disciples of the *Quadrivium* of the Renaissance, along with

arithmetic, astronomy and geometry. Just like the *tetractys*⁴ or the right angle, the modern harmonic system allowed mankind to inhabit a comfortable *Harmonices Mundi*, as Johannes Kepler named it in his landmark work (see Calderón Urreiztieta, 2013). Because of all this, Eszter believes we need to turn our backs on the so-called “equal temperament” and bring back naturally tuned instruments: “We have to correct Werckmeister’s mistakes. We have to concern ourselves with these seven notes of the scale [...] as] seven distinct and independent qualities, like seven fraternal stars in the heavens.”

In other words, what Eszter wants is to recover “the harmony of the stars” in which seven notes shone like stars in their pure and mutually different intervals. Valuska, in the cosmic dance of the opening scene, was dethroning the Werckmeister harmonies and reinstating—albeit briefly—the primordial purity of the harmony of the stars.

COMPLETELY IN RUINS

“‘From on high’ the stars and the gracious spittle trickle down; toward on high each and every starless bosom yearns. The moon has its own court, and the court has its mooncalves; but to all that comes from the court the beggar folk and all skilful beggar virtue pray. ‘I serve, you serve, we serve’—thus all skilful virtue prays to the prince on high [...]”

Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (2008: 153)

But chaos, in its most mundane form, spreads through the streets of this town where confusion and discord have taken over. The night has returned, bonfires light up the square and the expectant faces in the crowd gathered there to hear “the word” of the prince of chaos hidden in the whale’s trailer. This Prince is a foreign man of whom we will see only a shadow, never the body

that casts it; a disembodied voice, a Dionysian spokesman calling for the destruction of society, first of all, and finally of the world. He is a sovereign of chaos who fuses qualities of Irimias (Vig Mihály), the false prophet and policeman in *Sátántangó* (Béla Tarr, 2007) and Bernhard (Kormos Mihály), the prophet of doom in *The Turin Horse* (A torinói ló, Béla Tarr, 2011).

The messianic aspect of the Prince is hinted at in the rumours that spread from the moment of his arrival: "They say that when they were bringing the Prince around, the clock of the church began to go, just like that. The clock that had stopped years ago, and there it started all over again. And the poplar tree fell. A great crack and out came its roots." All of these are apocalyptic signs, as the end pursued by this prince and his court of servants is just that: the End. And the stories surrounding him are told in the symbolic narration of the *eschaton*, the discourse of doomsday and the eschatological signs of the end of the world. In opposition to the apocalyptic Prince, Krasznahorkai and Tarr place Valuska, the man-child, the poet without verses, who has returned to the square with the intention of seeing the whale once more. He wanders among the bonfires and the huge battalion of men now occupying the entirety of this urban space and slips unseen inside the trailer. There inside he hears a conversation between the circus director and the Prince, with the intermediation of a translator (played by Kormos Mihály, the apocalyptic prophet of doom in *The Turin Horse*). The director is trying to convince the Prince to calm the crowd down, and then we hear the shadow for the first and last time, explaining through his translator the destructive ambition of his apocalyptic plan:

The Prince alone sees the whole. And the whole is nothing. Completely in ruins. What they do and what they will do is illusion and lies. Under construction, everything is only half complete. In ruins, everything is complete. The Director doesn't understand that his followers are not afraid and do

understand him. His followers are going to make ruins of everything! His followers will do what he tells them. There is disillusion in everything and they don't understand why. But the Prince knows full well that it is because the whole is nothing. It is finished. We will crush them with our fury! We will punish them! We will be pitiless! The day has come! There will be nothing left! Fury will overcome all! Their silver and gold cannot protect them! We'll take possession of their houses! Terror is here! Massacre! Show no mercy! Slaughter! Arson! Slaughter!

The Prince's words of course evoke the feverish nihilism of Mikhail Bakunin and Russian revolutionaries, especially Bakunin's famous maxim that the passion for destruction is a creative passion; or Nietzsche's philosophy of the hammer and *hybris* (1996: 131), that sacrilegious excess and violence that inflame the modern subject when he accepts his will to power; or Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph von Schelling's notion of evil as a positive power for change and alteration that arises out of the human will (Carrasco Conde, 2013). But for Valuska, all that he hears is sound and fury. In that moment he understands that the whale is not the cause of what is happening in the town

Figure 4. Valuska sees the true *imago* of the chaos, the Nosferatian shadow of the prince of shadows in Werckmeister Harmonies



but merely a gigantic, dead veil that conceals the real *image* of the chaos, the *Nosferatian* shadow of the prince of darkness and his symphony of horror (Fig. 4). Valuska runs on and on without looking back, only turning when he hears an explosion. He stops and looks back at the town from its outskirts, his body cloaked in black, barely distinguishable in the darkness. The sound of explosions repeats like a terminal heartbeat and the light from them crowns the facades of two white buildings in the distance. The revolt has begun. Recalling the words of the Prince—"Arson! Slaughter!"—Valuska, the humble philanthropist, turns around and runs back towards the town. Tarr keeps the shot empty for nearly a full minute, and the explosions continue until we cut directly to the agents of the chaos: an army of men advancing down a street of the town. They walk resolutely, but in total silence, their eyes cast downwards, the clouds of their breath in synch with the martial sound of their footsteps. The camera passes back over them in a four-minute tracking shot, offering an overview of the long line of men; but it also moves down among them, allowing us a glimpse of their empty faces, from which any trace of individuality has, once again, been erased.

The Prince's subjects march on to some unspecified location, and just as they were in the square, they continue to be an anonymous horde. An illuminated door opens before them and a second sequence-shot begins, this one eight minutes in length, showing the gang of rioters charging into a hospital, where they begin smashing everything and beating the patients. They are like an army of empty, unfeeling automatons, with neither a scream of fury nor a battle cry, "no feeling of rage



Figure 5. Upon tearing back the veil of the horror, the violent, anonymous horde comes to the borderline of humanity, of empathy and perhaps of pity in *Werckmeister Harmonies*

against their victims or of pleasure in what they are doing appears on their faces, which remain in the shadows while their arms do their work" (Rancière, 2013: 64). The carefully choreographed camera movements and the bodies moving in and out of the frame turn this shot into a violent dance that stops as abruptly as it began: the only two men whose faces we recognise among the crowd (because of a brief conversation they had earlier with Valuska) tear down a shower curtain, the veil of the real horror, to discover an old man so naked that he even seems almost to have lost the flesh that covered his bones and tendons; a helpless old man, clothed only in the signs that time has left on his emaciated body (Fig. 5). The futility of violence—the borderline of humanity, of empathy and perhaps of pity—is thus embodied, made flesh in front of these two *individua*—the minimum, indivisible unit within the crowd—who at that moment regain their individuality. The two men look at one another briefly, turn around and begin to leave, accompanied by the rest of the attackers and by the music of Vig Mihály. It is the same music that accompanied Valuska's cosmic

dance at the beginning of the film, perhaps signalling that a certain order has been restored. This at least seems to have been Béla Tarr's idea when he filmed this sequence:

In my country there are people who are hungry and cold, who have come to the end of their strength, and who own nothing. These people are bitter towards the whole world, towards everyone who sleeps in a warm bed and eats when they're hungry. Someone comes along and talks to them about destroying the world. It doesn't matter whether this voice takes the form of fascism, communism or anything else. These people want to take action because they've got nothing to lose. Their condition is as terrible as it gets. In the film, they back off after smashing up the hospital because they're human; they weren't born to be criminals or killers. Everybody is innocent; I don't want to judge anyone. And in any case, these people couldn't destroy the whole world. They're no more than a part. (Grugeau, 2002: 24-25)

After this, a third sequence-shot begins, this one lasting three minutes, following the woe-begone withdrawal of this defeated army of shadows, emptied even of the might of the herd that had driven them up to that moment. In this fifteen-minute sequence made up of three sequence-shots, the Prince's program of destruction has been briefly implemented, although the revolt has been nothing more than an abrupt eruption and its violent dissipation. Faced with the withered body of the old man,⁴ they rediscover their humanity and lose their resolve. But their short-lived revolution has managed to destroy something of significance—some-

thing that is also the very heart of the fictional universe of *Werckmeister Harmonies*. As they withdraw, the camera pans around to reveal Valuska, huddled in a corner and cloaked in shadows. He has seen everything (Fig. 6); his vacant stare with horrified eyes, have been flooded with images that have been engraved upon them, and that have exiled him from a world that has revealed itself to him in all its irretrievable discord: "After what for him had naturally been a terrible night, he had completely sobered up [like a man who] has lived his entire life with his eyes closed, and when [he] opened them, those millions of stars and planets, that universe of delight, simply disappeared" (Krasznahorkai, 2000: 226). The veil has been stripped, blinding him and casting him into darkness: the world has been forever eclipsed for this Adam who has lost his harmonious Eden once and for all.

Now it really does seem to be the end, but the end of *Werckmeister Harmonies* is still a little way off. Reappearing at this point will be an important character that I have not mentioned above: Eszter's ex-wife, Tünde (Hanna Schygulla, one of Rainer Werner Fassbinder's favourite actresses), who had forced Valuska to convince her ex-husband to join the "Cleansed City", a law enforcement movement that seeks to *restore order* to the town.⁵

Figure 6. Valuska's vacant, horrified stare upon the chaos of a discordant world in *Werckmeister Harmonies*



The morning after the attack on the hospital, the streets are taken over by the army, and Tünde speaks with a senior officer just before the troops begin to march. The revolt was the excuse they were waiting for⁶ and from a hiding place Valuska watches the repressive military machinery move into gear. His gaze can ex-

press nothing now, but Tarr offers a visual symbol of his devastated innocence with the poster announcing the circus that we saw at the beginning of the film—when everything, even the momentary alignment of the men embodying the Sun, Earth and Moon, was possible—but which is now torn and barely legible.

And then, once again, the only option is to flee: warned by his landlady that they will come searching for him for having taken part in the revolt, Valuska tries to leave the town behind, following the train tracks, but he will be pursued by a systemic, all-seeing power represented by a helicopter that hunts him from above.⁷ The second-last shot of the film shows Valuska sitting in silence, his gaze clouded, in a mental institution, as if since physical escape has been rendered impossible his only option is a psychological escape, a catatonic introspection that removes him from this unruly reality. At his side, Eszter speaks to him gently and promises that when he gets out they will live together at his home, despite the fact that his ex-wife Tünde has now occupied it (much like the forces of the *new order* have occupied the town). Pragmatic in defeat, the musicologist tells him that he has returned his piano to standard tuning. Nothing matters, he says; nothing matters at all. Eszter, unlike Valuska, has found a way to control himself and adapt to the times.

After saying goodbye, Eszter heads for the square to keep the promise he had made to Valuska earlier in the film. He had to see the giant whale, Valuska had told him, for him to understand “how great is the Lord’s creative impulse and power, and how omnipotence is reflected in that animal.” But when Eszter gets to the square, now emptied of people and with visible signs of the battle, he finds the trailer torn apart and the whale forgotten, left exposed to the elements. Eszter approaches it slowly, and after contemplating the whale’s great dead eye, he turns and walks out of the frame. The camera remains there, while Vig Mihály’s music fills our ears and the fog—perhaps

the smoke from the bonfires—envelops the massive corpse (which is doubly dead: physically and symbolically) until the whole scene fades to black. It is a final image that simply defies interpretation as it does not signal or represent anything but is merely presented with the unbearable allegorical nakedness of the wasteland. And it is a final image that concludes nothing, because decline and ruin do not and cannot have an end. Valuska, the unwitting visionary, had already foretold it to his drunken companions in the tavern: “*No need to fear; it’s not over.*”

CODA: ENDING WITHOUT END

“No sooner do we come into this world,’ said Flaubert, ‘than bits of us start to fall off.’ The masterpiece, once completed, does not stop: it continues in motion, downhill. Our leading expert on Géricault confirms that the painting is ‘now in part a ruin’. And no doubt if they examine the frame they will discover woodworm living there.”

Julian Barnes, *A History of the World in Ten 1/2 Chapters* (1990: 139).

Béla Tarr has stated many times that there are no metaphors, symbols or allegories in his films and his intention is always to “film reality” (Grugeau, 2002: 24). But his fondness for ruins (political or moral, personal or social) and for ends (of time or of history, of the individual or of the community) take him close to allegory as Walter Benjamin understood it, as Tarr’s work also “holds fast to the ruins, offering an image of petrified unrest” (2008: 273). Just as authors of German Baroque drama drew on allegory to show the ruins of a decadent society—and Benjamin made use of allegory to show the outdated nature of the notion of history itself⁸—Tarr also offers images of the petrified unrest of our age, of its relentless decline. This is exactly what the whale is: fossilised unrest, the inert factor of chaos, an allegory which, unlike metaphor, does not represent but shows,

is shown, *gives to see*. For this reason, Benjamin views allegory as an optical device⁹ that allows us to see the world through the prism of desolation and ruins, present or yet to come, because decline is of course a process that is unstoppable, but also unending.

Unending? Yes, because the victory of decline would necessarily be the victory of its *cadere*, the success of its fall, the perfection of its ruin. But could a ruin be completed and attain its *perfectio*? Could it ever be “completely over and done” when its very nature is pure undoing? The culmination of decline, which seems always to be impending, is ultimately unattainable because *the ending has no end*; in decline the peak is reached in the abyss, the zenith at the nadir, and the primordial *arché* with the final *eschaton*. The eternal return, the apocatastasis in which everything returns to its starting point, an endless circularity that could also be expressed this way: decline is a process without end, an *unmaking of*, an undoing that could only ever culminate in nothingness. And nothingness cannot exist, because if the law of conservation of matter asserts that what exists cannot have arisen out of nothingness, then it follows that nothingness cannot arise out of what exists. Everything changes, but nothing disappears. Because in the universe, plenitude (that which has a limit, and therefore can be completed) does not exist; only transition and transformation, that “constant wave” that Schlegel spoke of. In the same moment of the Big Bang, the Big End also began, because all splendour carries within it its own decay, every construction includes the germ of its ruin, and every apotheosis is merely the first step in its future and unattainable apocalypse.

Unattainable? Yes, because if all the above is true, there is no end of time but only an end *in time*: the world ending forever without ever reaching or completing that end (this may be the reason for Tarr’s fondness for the sequence-shot, for a take which, ideally, would never end). The

apocalypse could therefore not be a moment, a fragment of time, but the fall (*cadere*) in time itself, its decay and decline, like a ruin collapsing and falling (*ruere*) forever and ever. Perhaps it is precisely this ending without end that is foreshadowed and encapsulated in the mysterious epigraph chosen by László Krasznahorkai for *The Melancholy of Resistance*: “It passes, but it does not pass away” (Krasznahorkai, 2000: 1). ■

NOTES

1. This desire for a cosmic, loving connection is something that Lars Von Trier, a Romantic in spite of himself, hints at in *Melancholia* (2011) when Justine (Kirsten Dunst) strips naked so that the light radiating from the planet Melancholia, which is about to collide with the Earth, can be absorbed by her body.
2. Certainly a pessimistic vision, which Tarr also applied to Hungary before the collapse of communism. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, he made his first films with stories focusing on the working class of his country and of Eastern Europe in general, from *Family Nest* (Családi tűzfészek, 1977) to *The Outsider* (Szabadgyalog, 1981).
3. The *tetractys* is a triangular formation with ten points which for the Pythagoreans represented the order of the universe, ordered into four rows of one, two, three and four, respectively.
4. The old man’s body has been interpreted as an echo of the Shoah—see, for example, Rodríguez Serrano (2016) or Rosen (2016)—although if we are to consider Tarr’s own point of view, this was not his intention (Kudlac, 2016).
5. Even the name of this civic organisation evokes the numerous far-right groups that seize on the idea of *cleansing* (ethnic, social, familial, moral...).
6. My analysis of *Werckmeister Harmonies* is not political, but it is clear that its apocalyptic dread arises from the clash between a dominant class and a rebelling dominated class. And as Jonathan Romney (2003) suggests, it is tempting to compare the film with the final days of communism in Hungary (Krasznahorkai’s

novel was published in 1989), although its scope is certainly universal: the cyclical narrative of an old, decaying order, the violent eruption of the energies of a people subjugated for too long, and the equally violent repression imposed by the old order. But neither of the two groups come out well, neither the reactionaries nor the libertarians; the two are opposite extremes of a tightrope that must be walked by *the individual*, embodied by both Valuska and Eszter, two acrobats who try but fail to withstand the violent tugs on the cord.

7. An *omnipresent* and *inescapable* representation of power that can also be found in other films where a helicopter hunts for fugitives: Joseph Losey's *Figures in a Landscape* (1970); Ted Kotcheff's *First Blood* (1982); Tom Tykwer's *Heaven* (2002); and Jerzy Skolimowski's *Essential Killing* (2010).
8. In particular, see *Origin of the German Trauerspiel* (Benjamin, 2019), *Trauerspiel y tragedia* (Benjamin, 2007) and *Parque central* (Benjamin, 2008).
9. "The original interest in the allegory is not linguistic but optical" (Benjamin, 2008: 296).

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COMPLETELY IN RUINS: BÉLA TARR'S WERCKMEISTER HARMONIES

Abstract

Werckmeister Harmonies (Weckmeister Harmoniák, Béla Tarr, 2000) offers an emblematic exploration of the Romantic concept of *Sehnsucht*, the modern subject's melancholic longing to recover the primeval harmony with Nature and the cosmos that the Enlightenment deprived us of. Obsessively following the wandering figure of Valuska (Lars Rudolph), Tarr portrays an eclipsed world in a downward spiral where even resistance is plagued by terminal melancholia. The signs of the "coming catastrophe" can be seen everywhere, especially after the arrival in town of a travelling circus featuring a giant preserved whale and an apocalyptic prophet named "the Prince", who adopts the symbolic narration of the *eschaton*, the discourse of doomsday and the eschatological signs of the end of the world. "Completely in ruins. Under construction, everything is only half complete. In ruins, everything is complete", we hear him proclaim. And few words better describe this process of endless decline, the perpetual ruin wrought by Modernity in which the contemporary—post-modern—subject is still immersed.

Key words

Béla Tarr; Cosmogony; Harmony; Apocalypse; Decline; Ruin; History; End.

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TODO ES RUINA: LAS ARMONÍAS WERCKMEISTER DE BÉLA TARR

Resumen

Las armonías Werckmeister (Werckmeister harmóniák, 2000) de Béla Tarr propone un acercamiento ejemplar al *Sehnsucht* romántico, aquel anhelo melancólico del sujeto moderno por recuperar la primitiva armonía con la naturaleza y el cosmos que la Ilustración había proscrito. Siguiendo obsesivamente la figura deambulante de Valuska (Lars Rudolph), Tarr muestra un mundo eclipsado y en incipiente ruina en el que hasta la resistencia está aquejada de una melancolía terminal. Las señales de la «inminente catástrofe» se reproducen por doquier, acompañadas por la llegada a la ciudad de un circo en el que viajan una gigantesca ballena disecada y «el Príncipe», un profeta apocalíptico que hace suya la simbólica narración del *éschaton*, el discurso de las últimas cosas y sus señales escatológicas del fin del mundo. «Todo es ruina. Y todo lo que se construye solo está acabado a medias. En ruinas, todo está completo», se le escucha decir. Y pocas palabras describen mejor ese proceso de decadencia sin final, de ruina perpetua de la Modernidad en el que el sujeto contemporáneo —posmoderno— está todavía inmerso.

Palabras clave

Béla Tarr; cosmogonía; armonía; apocalipsis; decadencia; ruina; historia; final.

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