
The Cinema of Béla Tarr: The Circle Closes

By András Bálint Kovács, Wallflower Press, 2013

Reviewed by Phil Mann

Expanding on his 2008 essay, “The World According to Béla Tarr”^[1], András Bálint Kovács’ *The Cinema of Béla Tarr: The Circle Closes* charts the thematic and stylistic evolution of the films of Béla Tarr, from his documentary realist period to the distinctive, mature style now synonymous with the Hungarian maestro.

Published in 2013 by Wallflower Press as part of the *Director’s Cut* series, Kovács develops what he calls the “*permutation principle*”^[2], author’s italics. Kovács claims that key thematic and stylistic elements have been present throughout Tarr’s oeuvre and over the course of his career Tarr has meticulously experimented with and reorganisation these elements to form what we now recognise as the “Tarr style”.^[3] Throughout his analysis Kovács highlights circularity as a central theme that encompasses Tarr’s feature films both individually and as a collective body of work.

While numerous articles have been written on Béla Tarr, *The Cinema of Béla Tarr: The Circle Closes* is the first English language book to be published on the Hungarian auteur. Kovács’ study has since been followed by Erik Beranek’s English translation of Jacques Rancière’s 2011 book *Béla Tarr, le temps d’après*, published as *Béla Tarr: The Time After* by Univocal Publishing in late 2013.

Kovács begins with a condensed biography of Tarr, which offers an abundance of fascinating background material, and functions as a perfect starting point for those unfamiliar with Hungary’s most prominent living filmmaker. Through private conversations and unpublished interviews with Tarr, Kovács provides the reader with unprecedented access to the Hungarian auteur, his co-director and editor Ágnes Hranitzky and other members of his intimate circle. This degree of access is made possible by Kovács’ personal and professional relationship with the director, which has spanned over twenty-five years. It is through this intimate knowledge that we are introduced to the persona of Béla Tarr and the context within which he entered the Hungarian film industry.

Kovács then divides Tarr’s filmography into three chapters, establishing three periods of stylistic evolution. A chapter is dedicated to Tarr’s debut feature *Családi tűzfészek/Family Nest* (1977) and his subsequent work until the 1984 film, *Őszi almanach/Almanac of Fall*. Here, Kovács draws

attention to the cinéma vérité style of Tarr's early films, observing a number of traits that would continue through the director's work, despite Tarr's departure from "superficial indicators of realism"^[4] in *Almanac of Fall*. This chapter provides enlightening insight into Tarr's earlier work; films that have had a somewhat limited distribution, especially outside Hungary. Whilst being available on DVD in the USA and in France (distributed by Facets Multi-Media and Clavis Films respectively) Tarr's first four features are not currently available in the UK.

The second period marks the beginning of Tarr's collaboration with writer László Krasznahorkai and the introduction of what can be considered the "Tarr style". A chapter is dedicated to an analysis of the formal developments exhibited in *Damnation/Kárhozat* (1988). One such development being the extended use of the long take, which sees the average shot length in *Damnation* leap 108 per cent from that of *Almanac of Fall*. Kovács also emphasises the alteration of the landscape and departure from social reality, stating that Tarr "brought back the environment of his earlier films – a run down Hungarian provincial small-town environment, *and* kept the main principles of the stylization of *Almanac of Fall* – the 'pseudo-style' – using black and white film stock again"^[5]. Kovács compares the manner in which Tarr employs the long take and stylised environments with some of the masters of modernist cinema, including: Jean-Luc Godard, Michelangelo Antonioni, Andrei Tarkovsky and, fellow Hungarian, Miklós Jancsó.

Kovács proceeds to explore the evolution of the "Tarr style" from *Sátántangó/Satantango* (1994) to Tarr's final film, *A Torinói ló/The Turin Horse* (2011). The use of quantitative research in this chapter I found to be an interesting visual aid in charting Tarr's experimentation with form. Kovács effectively demonstrates that *Damnation*, whilst establishing a number of formal elements that would continue to be present in the "Tarr style", was only a springboard for further developments in an ongoing process of stylistic evolution. These developments include a continuing experimentation with the length of take, the prevalence of deep-focus photography and the introduction of more elaborate, carefully choreographed camera movements.

Kovács questions whether *The Turin Horse* can be seen as a conclusion to Tarr's formal experimentation by suggesting that the film exhibits a sense of circularity, returning to a number formal elements first seen in Tarr's earlier work. By drawing parallels to these earlier works through quantitative research Kovács contends: "Tarr lost faith in what he could achieve within the confines of the form he created, believing it could not ever be more striking and radical"^[6].

Those familiar with Kovács' earlier publication, *Screening Modernism:*

European Art Cinema 1950-1980 (2008) will not be surprised that Kovács applies a modernist perspective to his study and, as a result, a great deal of attention is given to formal analysis. Such an approach is in keeping with much of the existing writing on Tarr that tends to examine his work through modernist/art cinema discourse.^[7] The majority of western academic writing on Tarr has employed in-depth textual analysis predominantly, I believe, due to a lack of Hungarian context within which to situate a cultural or historical analysis.

Hungarian native Kovács, however, has the benefit of national insight, which he periodically applies to his examination. Kovács is a professor and founding chair of the Department of Film Studies at *Eötvös Loránd University* in Budapest. Between 2003-2009 he founded and directed the *Nemzeti Audiovizuális Archívum* (National Audiovisual Archive of Hungary) and is even credited as Consultant in Tarr's *Damnation*. He is the son of Hungarian film director András Kovács, whose work includes: *Hidek napok/Cold Days* (1968) and *Ideiglenes paradicsom/Temporary Paradise* (1981). Kovács' Hungarian heritage furnishes his study with national cognizance, offering insight into indigenous film history and industrial context which enriches his analysis and I personally found these sporadic areas of research the most illuminating.

Take for example, Kovács' examination of Tarr's use of unnatural dialogue in *Satantango*. Kovács' comprehension of the Hungarian language allows him to recognise and highlight Mihály Víg's (playing Irimiás) speech impediment; an impairment that the majority of non-Hungarians would be oblivious to. Kovács then compares Víg's speech defect with that of Hungarian avant-garde filmmaker, Gábor Bódy who played the central role in his final film, *Kutya éji dala/Dog's Night Song* (1983). Such specific national context offers new possibilities for innovative comprehension of the work of Béla Tarr, highlighting potential influences through little known but absorbing parallels. Unfortunately, such culturally specific analysis is all too infrequent due to Kovács belief "that there is nothing Hungarian in Tarr's films of the second period".^[8]

While this comprehensive study of the filmography of Béla Tarr offers a detailed and all-inclusive analysis, Kovács' notion of circularity seems like more of a convenient way of framing his study than a meaningful discourse from which to approach Tarr's work, which left me asking "so what?" Kovács never convincingly justifies the significance of circularity as a method of approaching the body of Béla Tarr's work. As a result, links between stylistic periods can often appear tenuous, as if solely designed to suit Kovács' arguments and the lyricism of Tarr's work is often lost within the quantitative methodology, reducing stylistic elements to a collection of facts and figures used to draw comparisons.

Those familiar with the existing academic writing on Tarr may also find that *The Cinema of Béla Tarr: The Circle Closes* rarely treads new ground, mainly through its emphasis on cinematic modernism. As mentioned above, much of the existing literature of Béla Tarr, including Kovács' much cited "The World According to Béla Tarr", has focused exclusively upon the formal qualities of his work. Kovács' updated analysis continues in this same vein, which, is beginning to feel somewhat timeworn and banal, even.

Despite these limitations, András Bálint Kovács has, nonetheless, produced a detailed and thought provoking study of Hungary's most internationally renowned filmmaker. In particular, the scope of the study must be applauded; Kovács' work covers the whole gamut of Tarr's filmic output including analysis of the director's seldom seen short films and his version of *Macbeth* (1982), made for Hungarian television, which famously comprised just two shots. As such, those searching for an introductory text on Tarr will find Kovács' study both enlightening and comprehensive. However, those looking for a more original and probing approach to the study of Béla Tarr's work may wish to look elsewhere.

[1] Originally published in *KinoKultra* Issue 7, 2008.

[2] Kovács, *The Cinema of Béla Tarr: The Circle Closes*, 2013, p.1

[3] *Ibid.*, p.1

[4] *Ibid.*, p.38

[5] *Ibid.*, p.60

[6] *Ibid.*, p.2

[7] See Jonathan Rosenbaum's "A Bluffer's Guide to Béla Tarr" (1990) and

"A Place in the Pantheon: The Films of Béla Tarr" (1996), Peter Hames' "The Melancholy of Resistance: The Films of Béla Tarr" (2001), David Bordwell's "The Sarcastic Laments of Béla Tarr" (2007), Jonathan Romney's "Béla Tarr" (2008), and Gillian Hunter's "Red is dead: The lessons of post-Soviet cinema" (2010) to name but a few.

[8] Kovács, 2013, p.175

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