



The Damnation of the Sight. The Point of View in Three Movies by Béla Tarr

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Abstract. The paper focuses on *Satantango* (*Sátántangó*, 1994), *Werckmeister Harmonies* (*Werckmeister Harmóniák*, 2000) and *The Man From London* (*A londoni férfi*, 2007), particularly on the manner in which the key notion at the core of Tarr's universe finds a development within those films: the relation between the narrative and its ("entropic," so to speak) excess. Notably, the Point Of View proves to be the ultimate device through which something like a spatial form structuring the aforementioned relation can be shaped.

Introduction

One of the earliest chapters of *Satantango* (*Sátántangó*, 1994), after some 1 hour and 20 minutes, starts with a sequence which probably best sums up the poetics of Béla Tarr from the 90s on. This sequence (showing Futaki trying to enter Schmidt's house, both spied by the doctor from inside his house, who also writes down what he has been seeing) is virtually dividable into two segments. In the first, we have the visual deployment of a spatial situation both the doctor and the camera are staring at, in a sort of a semi-subjective shot. This situation is of course narrative as well, in the simple sense that something happens and is temporally articulated as such: the doctor (along with the camera, sharing more or less his point of view) looks at Futaki spying Schmidt in order to enter his house unseen. [Fig. 1.] In the second, immediately thereafter (which in Tarr's case means of course that no cuts divide the two segments), the camera stays on the yard after Futaki has entered Schmidt's (i.e. after the action has been consumed) from inside the doctor's house, while the doctor, sitting nearby, writes down what he has been seeing. [Fig. 2.] We then have the fixing of the narrative in the form of a

trace (which means the doctor writing down what he has seen, and also repeating it vocally) facing another kind of very passive, automatic and ultra-naturalistic registration (in this case: the everyday life on the yard beyond the window, with the pig and the rain and so on, captiously caught by the camera eye). So, we don't merely have "visual vs. narrative," rather we have conflicting ways of intertwining the visual and the narrative.¹ Two different kinds of narrative registrations, so to speak, one more spatial, the other entangled in the vicious circle between writing (i.e. trace) and its excess. In the first case, narration (i.e. simply what the camera shows) and narrative kind of go together, in the second a split occurs somehow. Tarr's long takes can be the spatial deployment of a complex action, for instance Valuska in *Werckmeister Harmonies* (*Werckmeister Harmóniák*, 1999) preparing and having supper, or rather they can be an excessive remnant of narrative, as in digressions such as the long tracking shot towards the night owl on the window, in *Satantango*, while a difficult discussion is being held somewhere else, or when in the same movie another tracking shot slowly focuses on Mrs Schmidt, in the pub, while the core of action is in the opposite side of the room. So what we really have is different ways of coming to terms between narrative and its excess in, so to speak, "reality," which can be "integrated" in a spatial and visual shape (rejoining thus narration) or rather left as such (leaving a sort of split opened), as a remnant diverting from the action. This is the decisive polarity in Tarr's universe. And what is even more important in this revealing scene is that the key of that relation between the narrative and its excess is the point of view. In this case: the doctor keeping his eyes in front of him consonantly with the camera eye, or rather keeping them on his paper, discordantly from the camera eye.

Essentially, an "excess" is an unbalance. And in his impressive study on point of view, Edward Branigan (1979) builds up a solid and sharp theoretical system on the basis of a radical, structural unbalance. That is, the scission from which any subjectivity is formed (be it merely textual or psychoanalytical or whatever). "A fundamental assumption of psychoanalysis is that the human being is irretrievably split and not an autonomous whole. The split is that of self/other of various inflections, such as conscious/unconscious, I/ego, ego/id, etc. As psychoanalysis draws closer to language that split is also seen mirrored in the irretrievable split (distance) between the subject of the enunciation and the subject of the enounced. [...] The author/viewer then is only a version of the split

1 It is worth noticing that the viewer is made able to see quite comfortably that the notebook, which the doctor is using to write his report, has got some pencil-drawn sketches of the yard on it. Again (and in yet another way): the visual is inextricable from the writing.

subject which exists in every utterance and in the human subject as self/other.” (Branigan 1979, 25).

The point of view in cinema is just another form for the split originating the subject as such. The point of view is just the actual core of that “excess” coming from this structural unbalance. That is why Branigan himself makes some very simple, “Descartes-like” examples that are quite near from our doctor scene – such as forming a memory image of seeing a film: while imaging/remembering himself viewing, the subject *also views*, being somehow inside and outside of himself at the same time. And the way our aforementioned *Satantango* scene is shot indicates a perceptual continuity between the moment we see what the doctor sees (narration tends to coincide with the narrative, and so do I/spectator with my other, i.e. the doctor) and the moment the doctor is busy writing, leaving us staring at the rainy yard (narration – the doctor’s voice over repeating what he has seen – and narrative split apart, and so do I and the doctor, now becoming more a teller than a viewer). Such an example “illustrates that the subject is not a fixed entity like a person but is a role or position in a discourse which is constantly changing so that one can easily frame oneself as an object. It is a question of the movement of discourse, not of opposing subject in the sense of a person, mind or delusion to object in the sense of an external, concrete reality which cannot be false because it can only ‘exist’” (Branigan 1979, 43). We do not have simply the doctor behind the window, and the yard outside of it – because the moment the doctor takes his eyes off the scene and starts to write, we are separated from him (not watching anymore with us) by way more than a window. It is even possible to say that we feel closer to the scene unraveling outside the window (and that we are still looking at) than to the doctor who was sharing our eyes right some moments before, and whom we now hear mumbling next to us while writing. It is a matter of *gradualness*. “Narration/narrative as well as the resulting distinction subject/object are methodological distinctions. Each term implicates its opposite in a mutual simultaneity of telling/told, seeing/seen, etc., and is positionally relative; that is, the subject of one narration may become the object of another higher narration whose subject, in turn, may become the object of a third, still higher level of narration.” (Branigan 1979, 43–44). Although we are not going to follow the careful and elaborated system and taxonomy made up by Branigan in his book, this paper shares these very premises, and tries to analyse the point of view (in Béla Tarr’s films) as the key precisely to this complex relationship of continuity/discontinuity informing the inveterate schizophrenia of the subject. In other words, this paper is an attempt to trace back via the shifting point of

view in those films the “movement of discourse” Branigan was talking about: the paradoxical continuity (given in our cases quite ostensibly by flowing *time*, and therefore movement) organising the discontinuities of an intricate interlacement of scissions (subject, narrative and so on).

***Satantango* (1994)**

The core of *Satantango* lies all in the parable of Estike, committing suicide after having tormented and killed her once beloved cat for nothing in particular, and after having wandered lengthily without getting any attention from anyone. So she experiences the coincidence between the victim (in this case: the cat) and the torturer (herself), since, as she herself thinks while dying, everything and everyone is connected to each other. Not by chance, Irimias exploits her death to build up his messianic parable, trying to connect everyone to each other in a collective utopia towards a bright future, towards then a linearisation of time. During his funeral speech, he actually repeats several times that “we have to reconstruct things as they happened:” his effort concerns shaping the time into a teleology, imposing his illuminated and Christ-like gaze on things. But Irimias’s teleology is sternly contrasted by the form of film itself, carefully intertwining three basic elements. Element one: point of view. Many times in *Satantango*, the one who is watching is eventually being watched. These reversions concern for instance Futaki, whose initial spying on Schmidt is [Fig. 3.] later in the movie revealed as spied itself by the Doctor. The first ball sequence is seen behind Estike’s shoulders, in a sort of a semi-subjective shot [Fig. 4.], whereas during the second ball sequence we see Estike from inside the pub. [Fig. 5.] The bartender from the point of view of which we saw the first farewell sequence [Fig. 6.], is eventually seen far in the bottom of the frame in the second sequence showing that same moment. [Fig. 7.] The observer reverses systematically into the observed (as Estike has learnt at her own expenses), so there can be no such thing as imposing one’s view, as Irimias tried to do. For the same reason, there can be no such thing as a teleology, which leads us to element two: repetition. No linear time, as Irimias would have liked, or pretended to like, to impose: instead, we have the repetitions of the same moments, AND a cyclical time. In the last chapter, itself called “the circle closes,” the film ends with words on black screen, just like it began, and the doctor writes about the very first event of the movie: Futaki’s hide-and-seek. Time does not progress: we have instead the repetition of always the same moment. And please notice: also, and above all, the reversion of points of view, observer/observed, is obtained through repetition. So

the two elements are inextricably linked – as clearly proved by the fact that the arrival in the utopian mansion is marked by a very long subjective shot: the illusion of a singular and monadic point of view is connected with the illusion of messianic salvation. Third element: registration. Since there is no linear time but a sort of an eternal present (hence also the long takes), any attempt of making time into a linear teleology are doomed to fail, to have no real consequence for the better, to be at last nothing more than simple information to be impersonally registered and filed, as the long almost-final sequence in which the bureaucrats write down Irímias's summary, which is all that is left of the villagers. Which is why the Doctor, in the last shot, registers his village chronicles without even needing to see anything anymore. Having undergone throughout the movie the radical dismissal of the single point of view on the events, he can rightly obscure his own window, his own singular point of view – and let us not forget that he's been described as a voyeur from the very beginning: the first shot concerning him is a subjective shot from his point of view staring with a binocular. [Fig. 8.] All in all, there is nothing to be really seen, since time does not really progress but only repeats itself, so there is no "news" at all to be experienced – obviously, the Turks, so anxiously announced by the mysterious old man ringing the bells, are never to be coming. So that's why Irímias's teleology is denied by *Satantango's* form, by the close interaction between point of view, repetition, registration. In other words, the point of view is the essential core around which revolves the whole *Satantango's* stylistic machine, illustrating Estíke's thought that "everything and everyone is connected to each other" in a totally different way from Irímias's attempt to connect everyone to each other by organising a temporal teleology. Namely, *Satantango's* long takes (also thanks to repetition but not limited to it) are a careful registration of how the multiple points of view inside the filmic reality interact with each other from within the spatial texture – hence the tendentious absence of cuts. We have no eye gazing safely from an external distance (which is why the doctor renounces to be a voyeur), but the fluid connection of points within the same virtual cobweb, lengthily explored by the camera in all its continuity. The camera eye reproduces the passive flow of the slipping of the various viewpoints on each other, a slipping which is intrinsic in the plies of real space in all its roughness, in the deployment of the most ordinary and everyday micro-actions, following their own biologic rhythm. The camera eye sort of "melts" with reality, with all its tiny vibrations, sensed from the inside, according to the rhythm of the spatial concrete elements themselves, rather than to the rhythm of dramaturgic and narrative needs. "Registration" much more than "direction." This of course goes for all the films in question, but it is in *Satantango*

that we can find a sharper definition – also because Irimias himself, while waiting in the corridor for the captain the first time we see him, gives us a precise account on it all. He says: “The two clocks show different times. Both wrong of course. This one here is too slow. Instead of telling the time, the other one seems to point at our hopeless condition.” The one too slow is of course the camera work we have tried to describe. The other one, “pointing at our hopeless condition,” is simply the narrative. The two are disconnected, as I previously said. And the key point of this disjunction is, as we saw, the point of view.

***Werckmeister Harmonies* (2000)**

If then all these polarities (self/other, narration/narrative and so on) are structurally unbalanced and thus lead to a structural excess, no wonder that in Tarr’s latest movies such an importance is given to the concept of entropy. In fact, we can see as a possible definition for entropy “the form itself of what exceeds the form,” left free to unravel catastrophically beyond any form. In both *Satantango* and *Werckmeister Harmonies* we have a messianic attempt (namely Irimias’s and the Prince’s, and also Mrs Eszter’s), which means an attempt to make the time into a teleology, to fit it into a path going towards a messianic accomplishment – finding ironically only the total Diaspora of the villagers in *Satantango* or the total destruction in the following movie. This narrative form, based both on a messianic linear perspective AND on its denial in the form of uncontrollable entropy, belongs evidently to the category of Modernity. Whereas in *The Man From London* (*A londoni férfi*, 2007), although the modern elements are by no means secondary, from its novelistic origin to the importance of money to the making of time as an independent force (as basically anybody, from Roland Barthes to Fredric Jameson (2002) to Jacques Rancière (2000) recognise it is a crucial element of modernity), we have a strong torsion of this modern element towards the classic, i.e. towards none other than Greek tragedy. In fact, as in classical tragedy’s perspective, Maloin’s guilt proceeds precisely from his innocence, from his good and loving intentions of “saving” his daughter from misery. As the standard tragic hero, he acts from a decisive lack of knowledge (for instance about the money he takes), he cannot escape destiny, i.e. the consequence of taking the suitcase, and is a reluctant murderer, killing Brown for self-defense. And first of all, like in the standard classical tragedy, we are not permitted to see with our eyes the tragic violent climax, happening inside the cabin on the beach, while all we can see is just the closed door of it.

But, for the moment, let us stick to entropy. *Werckmeister Harmonies* begins with Valuska as a metteur-en-scène of none other than the Cosmos. His solid point of view on it all is going to be dismantled throughout the rest of the movie. Whereas he represented in the incipit the systematical alternation between the order and the exception, the movie shows this same dichotomy falling apart; the perversely similar illusions to dominate from above, and through rigid and scientific schemes, social harmony (Mrs Eszter) and music harmony (Mr Eszter) are destined to fade into pure entropy. Chaos and order are intrinsically linked, so the chaos can bear the well-tempered harpsichord while the social intransigence easily brings upon total chaos. As Walter Benjamin famously said, any document of civilisation is also a document of barbarity: for instance here the two versions of Radetzky's March we hear one after another, the "correct" one and the "roughed" one. So, we stick to Valuska's point of view while he assists impotently to the gradual triumph of the Prince's fatal elegy of destruction as creation *per se*, or better: destruction as the only form of creation left, the triumph of ultimate chaos destroying the illusion, so wonderfully illustrated in the first scene, of an ordered interaction between the order, the cosmic order, and its own temporary suspension. The symbol of this unstoppable destruction is of course the gigantic dead whale, sort of a static and purely symbolic form of destruction. In the whale, destruction is somehow suspended as its purely aesthetic manifestation. Valuska repeatedly contemplates this sort of harmless monument to cosmic infinite destruction of earthly beings. Valuska is too busy minding and contemplating the animal to be really grasping what is going on around him meanwhile; up to when his detached point of view on it all is caught within that infernal destructive vortex all around. Valuska himself, the seer, the one through which we see during the movie, is caught in the end by someone who can see him wherever he goes, and without being seen: the helicopter – not to mention that we do not see the Prince either, apart from his shadow. We start with a solid point of view disposing spatially the elements for a nice cosmic show, and, as in *Satantango*, as the film goes further this point of view gets stuck into what he believed to be only contemplated from the outside: the suspension of the cosmic order, suspension which during the film has become the rule itself, and not only the simple mystery of solar eclipse. At one point in the movie, there is a little, very revealing passage. Valuska walks down the street, right after dawning. The early sun shines timidly in the higher part of the frame. While walking, Valuska's head covers for some seconds the sun, only to unveiling it again after some instants. [Figs. 10–11.] As this witty visual trick underlines, Valuska is not anymore the metteur-en-scène of

the solar eclipse like in the beginning, *he himself* temporarily obscures the sun. In other words, he's passed *into* the scheme he was earlier just illustrating from the outside. But the static compendium of entropy as the only rule regulating the universe, i.e. the dead whale, is in the end seen by Mr. Eszter. Which means: the chaotic struggle for order, only producing destruction and chaos, may forever rule the universe, but still we have the paradoxical hope of suspending that chaos through the static, monumental, aesthetic representation of it all. We cannot fall like Valuska into the illusion of merely contemplating it from the outside, since we are anyhow inevitably to fall under the almighty forces of chaos – but that static, monumental image circulates, as a big, enigmatic hope, from eye to eye, from Valuska's to Mr. Eszter's. That whale is probably the daughter of the whale at the end of Fellini's *La Dolce Vita* (1960), also signalling some sort of enigmatic hope within despair, like the old naked man in the hospital, sudden, symbolic and condensed visualisation of all the destructive mess going on around him – but again this static representation of entropy is Tarr's style itself. Its choreography, miraculously immanent to the physical elements in front of the camera and following their own rhythm in a splendid symbiosis, rather than imposing on them, manages to find the order “inside” the chaotic physical world, instead of imposing a rigid scheme from above like the Eszters. The order lies inside entropy, inside the liquid and dispersive deployment of time, instead of simply being opposed to it: that's Béla Tarr's style. Like the whale from Valuska to Eszter, Tarr's style is the static image of time, i.e. the destructive force par excellence, shown and cinematically frozen at the microscopic level of its everyday action, circulating from point of view to point of view – missing no occasion to underline how any singular point of view, in this case Valuska's, is partial, lacking, and also compromised within what he sees – as in the great hospital scene, in which only in the end we come to know that the internal point of view we were sharing was Valuska's, among the irrupting crowd – not to mention that, even unwillingly, he himself helped Mrs. Eszter starting all the mess. Again, we have the initial bifurcation: we have Tarr's camera following scrupulously the visual micro-dimension of Valuska's everyday routine, and we have a plot concerning social order and disorder, confusedly left on the background and mixed up with its own entropic and chaotic excess. And again, the two levels are conflicting thanks to the limits of the very partial, yet accomplice, point of view of Valuska's. The limits of point of view are again the core of it all.

***The Man from London* (2007)**

We have already seen how *The Man From London* recuperates the Greek tragedy's limit to the spectator's point of view on the violent climax. The limits of the gaze are introduced from the very first scene, in which the camera eye, moving a lot, oscillates without any cut, in a single long take, between a hypothetical coincidence with Maloin's curious sight on the outside [Fig. 11.], and other moments in which Maloin regularly appears within the frame, so that he can't be coinciding with the camera eye [Fig. 12.] This astonishing "melting" two different configurations into the same long take, sounds almost as a condemnation, for the gaze of the subject, to be somehow inevitably re-introduced into the concrete spatial filmic texture it presumed to stay away from. It is a crucial impossibility for the gaze. It is clear from the beginning that in *The Man From London* the gaze has a lot to do with desire, and above all with its limit.² The spectator wants to see the tragic climax, but he is not allowed to, because that is beyond his "human" limit. Similarly, the spectator is also denied the moment Maloin seems to fulfil his desire, i.e. when he finds and gets the suitcase from the sea. Desire is inherently impeded: when Maloin's desire is fulfilled, the spectator's desire is frustrated. This is the starting point of all the narrative of the movie, which will later be solved when, in the cabin, the highest deception of Maloin corresponds to the spectator's frustration in viewing the murder, accomplishing this way the tragic parable of the impasse of desire. Maloin's desire itself is born from the gaze, from spying all the mess around the harbour. So all the movie is about the structural impasse of desire, as the tragedy path prescribes, following a similar impasse of the point of view. The illusive transparency of the gaze of the momentarily happy and rich father and daughter looking at themselves in front of the mirror of the furs' shop [Fig. 13.], is to be followed up, of course without any cuts, by the usual reversion: the two are watched from the shop's window [Fig. 14.], and no more watching their own gaze (their own desire), by an anonymous gaze, namely the camera eye, once they have left the shop and are walking away on the street. A similar reversion takes place all the time when Maloin, clearly structuring the film space through his trajectories and movements, is watched insistently and even stalked by Mr. Brown. [Fig. 15.] The observer, the man who used to watch the trains as Simenon originally put it, becomes the observed. When Maloin hears someone talking about the suitcase-affair, the camera eye builds up a filmic space in continuity (obviously without any cuts) in which Maloin's gaze does

2 On the link between gaze and desire the way it is posited here, a look on Žižek 1992.

not coincide with the camera, yet it is inscribed into the filmic texture. While the camera moves and frames without cutting, we incidentally see him (mostly in the bottom of the frame) watching the people speaking indirectly about him. [Fig. 16.] Because, as we said before, the gaze is shown as part of the filmic texture, incapable to escape from it as Maloin is incapable to escape his own destiny. His destiny, i.e. the guilt he has indirectly committed, rises up on the surface of the filmic texture – and as we have seen, the key point of all these symptomatic resurgences is the gaze. If the tragic as such is based on an ineludible necessity, here it is the necessity of the inscription of the gaze into the filmic space, again sustained as usual by the long takes. Once again, we have on one side a rigid concatenation of events, as rigid as never in Tarr's movies, bearing its own excess, which are those "forbidden" points the spectator cannot reach, and on the other one an ambiguous spatial deployment in which the point of view finds itself entangled.

All this shows us that Tarr's cinema, which is arguably a modernist one, can easily digress towards classical tragedy (*The Man From London*). And this is possible because in his cinema, narrative is not the most important level, being it rather the relation itself between the narrative and its constitutive visual excess. So the type of the narration can consistently vary, keeping as fixed this core, this relation between narrative and its excess. A relation whose crucial element, as I tried to demonstrate, is the point of view.

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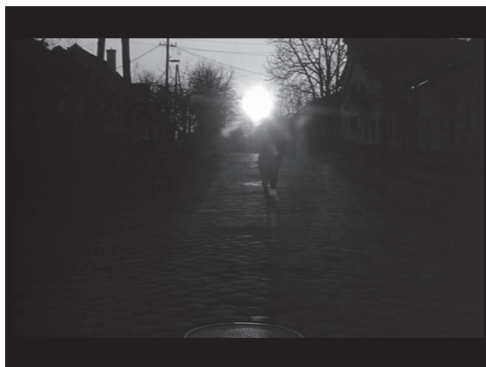
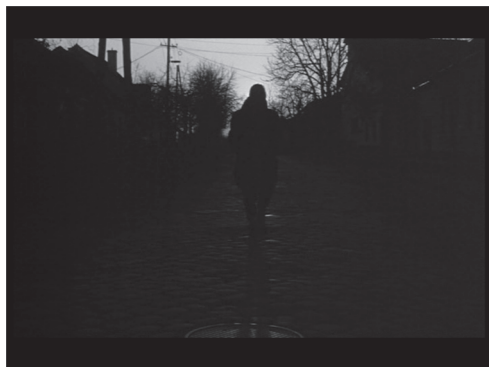
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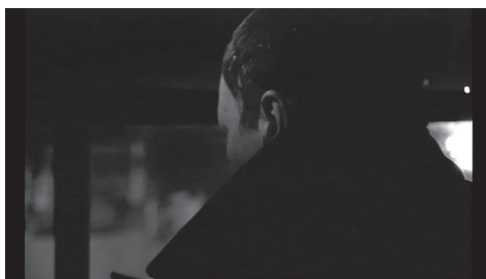
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