

Nietzschean Themes in Béla Tarr's *The Turin Horse*

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Abstract:

Béla Tarr's last feature film *The Turin Horse* (2011) begins with a prologue that narrates Friedrich Nietzsche's mental breakdown in Turin in 1889, which was allegedly prompted by his witnessing a cab driver brutally whipping his horse. Nietzsche's name is not mentioned again in the film, and the viewer is left wondering what connection, if any, exists between the Nietzsche story and the film's narrative. Scholars often refer to one or another aspect of Nietzsche's philosophy when analysing Tarr's film. Yet, to date, no comprehensive study has been devoted to exploring the connection between *The Turin Horse* and Nietzsche's philosophy. This article seeks to fill this gap in the literature. The first section examines the connection between the prologue and the film. In the second section, attention is given to the most evident connection between Tarr's film and Nietzsche's philosophy, namely the use of circularity and repetition in *The Turin Horse* and Nietzsche's idea of the eternal recurrence of the same. The third section interprets the neighbour's monologue in light of Nietzsche's death of God. Finally, the fourth section is devoted to nihilism.

Keywords: Compassion; eternal recurrence; time; death of God; nihilism.

Béla Tarr's last feature film *The Turin Horse* (*A torinói ló*, 2011) famously begins with a narrator (Mihály Ráday) explaining the story of Friedrich Nietzsche's mental breakdown in Turin on 3 January 1889. Nietzsche, so the story goes, witnessed a cab driver whipping a horse that refused to move. Struck by the brutality of the scene, the philosopher decided to put

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an end to it: sobbing, he embraced the horse. He then collapsed to the ground and was taken home by his landlord. This was the beginning of his mental breakdown. He lived another 11 years, mentally ill and cared for by his mother Franziska and his sister Elisabeth until he died on 25 August 1900.

The prologue of the film ends by shifting our attention from Nietzsche to the beaten horse. As the narrator puts it, "Of the horse, we know nothing". What follows is a four-minute take of the horse pulling the cab against the wind – a cab on which the cabman (arguably, the one who whipped the horse in Turin) sits. There is no other explicit mention of Nietzsche in the remaining 130 minutes of the film, which focus on the supposedly last six days in the lives of the cabman and his daughter. Thus, the audience is left wondering about the connection – if there is one – between the two stories.

Following András Bálint Kovács (2013), one could ask what is added by including the German philosopher in the film (p. 146). On the occasion of a Berlinale press conference, Tarr was asked about Nietzsche's influence, not only in *The Turin Horse* but in his oeuvre as a whole. His reply was elusive but paradigmatic of his long-standing interest in Nietzsche's philosophy: "The question is really how much time we have. Because if I get started with Nietzsche, we'll be here until this evening" (Cine Foundation International [CFI], 2011). This interest was also confirmed by Fred Kelemen, Tarr's cinematographer, who recalled in an interview that, while working on *The Turin Horse*, "during one break we [Tarr and Kelemen] sat down and read one part of a text by Nietzsche" (Koehler, 2011). Although these quotes testify to Tarr's interest in Nietzsche's philosophy, unfortunately they do not clarify the meaning of the reference to Nietzsche and the Turin incident. Thus, the following questions are left unanswered: does the Nietzsche story provide the key to interpreting the film? If so, in what sense? Does Nietzsche's mental breakdown prefigure the end of time and of the world occurring in the narrative? And what is the connection between Nietzsche's philosophy and the film?

This article aims to provide a tentative answer to these questions. Although film critics and scholars often refer to one or another aspect of Nietzsche's philosophy when reviewing or analysing Tarr's film, to my knowledge there has yet to be an in-depth study devoted to scrutinising the connection between *The Turin Horse* and Nietzsche's philosophy. This article aims to fill this gap in the literature. The first section is devoted to the prologue and the Turin incident and explores the connection between the latter and the film. In the second section, attention is given to what is likely the most evident connection between Tarr's film and Nietzsche's

philosophy, namely the use of circularity and repetition in *The Turin Horse* and Nietzsche's idea of the eternal recurrence of the same. The third section interprets the neighbour's monologue in light of Nietzsche's death of God. Finally, the fourth section is devoted to nihilism.

The Prologue

In Turin, on January 3rd, 1889, Friedrich Nietzsche steps out of the door of number six, Via Carlo Alberto, perhaps to take a stroll, perhaps to go by the post office to collect his mail. Not far from him, or indeed very far removed from him, a cabman is having trouble with his stubborn horse. Despite all his urging, the horse refuses to move, whereupon the cabman – Giuseppe? Carlo? Ettore? – loses his patience and takes his whip to it. Nietzsche comes up to the throng and puts an end to the brutal scene of the cabman, who by this time is foaming with rage. The solidly built and full-moustached Nietzsche suddenly jumps up to the cab and throws his arms around the horse's neck, sobbing. His neighbour takes him home, where he lies still and silent for two days on a divan until he mutters the obligatory last words, “Mutter, ich bin dumm [Mother, I'm foolish]”, and lives for another ten years, gentle and demented, in the care of his mother and sisters. Of the horse, we know nothing.

The prologue to *The Turin Horse*, quoted above, is almost identical to the beginning of László Krasznahorkai's short essay “At the Latest, in Turin” (2013/2017, p. 21), first written in 1979 but only published after the Hungarian regime change, in the January 1990 issue of the journal *Alföld* (Selyem, 2015, p. 105). Tarr first became acquainted with the essay in the 1980s, when he and his wife and collaborator Ágnes Hranitzky attended a public reading by Krasznahorkai in Budapest. They found the Nietzsche story very moving, and some time later, they discussed with Krasznahorkai the possibility of making a film that took it as a starting point. However, they put the idea aside and instead made *Satantango* (*Sátántangó*, 1994). Years later, when the shooting of *The Man from London* (*A Londoni férfi*, 2007) had to be broken off because of several difficulties and obstacles, Krasznahorkai wrote a first version of the script of *The Turin Horse* for Tarr's spiritual recovery (Krasznahorkai, 2004). This first version served as the basis for the final script.¹

“At the Latest, in Turin” is a philosophical essay that *prima facie* seems to have little to do with the minimalist story narrated in *The Turin Horse* – apart from the obvious fact that they both have the same

¹ Information concerning the genesis of the script for *The Turin Horse* has been extracted from the Berlinale press conference (CFI, 2011).

beginning. Whereas the essay is mainly about the relation between life and morality, the film portrays a kind of apocalypse with no final revelation which takes place in six days. On closer scrutiny, however, the relation between the essay and the film is much closer than one might think. The former gives us the key to understanding the connection between the Nietzsche story and the remaining parts of the film. Before turning to the essay, however, a few words should be said about the Turin incident.

Of all the philosophers in the history of Western philosophy, few have given rise to as many false myths and anecdotes as Nietzsche – not to mention the many ideological and erroneous interpretations of his writings that have been put forward over the decades. Nietzsche's mental breakdown in Turin is a good example of this trend. As Anacleto Verrecchia's (1978) very detailed and well-documented study on Nietzsche's breakdown in Turin shows, not all direct sources are aligned in their description of the Turin incident.² Despite this, scholars continue to refer to the anecdote of the beaten horse as if it were the most certain fact in Nietzsche's life. The following, sarcastic passage from Verrecchia's study will suffice to give an idea of how the Turin incident has been embellished and amplified over time with more and more new, fabricated details:

The problem is that even nowadays people do not stop writing nonsense about Nietzsche's madness. In an article entitled *Nietzsche's Horse*, as if one were talking about Richard III or St Martin, we read: "In Turin, in Piazza Carlo Alberto, on the morning of 3 January 1889, Nietzsche came out of his guest house and saw a coachman intent on beating his horse. Screaming, he crosses the square and throws his arms around the animal's neck. Then he loses consciousness and slips to the ground, still clinging to the horse". It almost seems as if the author of the article had witnessed the episode himself [...] A small observation: how could the almost blind Nietzsche have seen the coachman's whip from the other end of the square? But the great mystery is another: "Then he loses consciousness and slips to the ground, still clinging to the horse". Are we meant to suppose that the horse and the carriage to which the horse was tied also slipped? To avoid this, it is worth

2 Whereas the Finos (the family who hosted Nietzsche in Turin) reported to the press many years after the incident that Nietzsche had embraced the horse, Franz Overbeck (one of Nietzsche's closest friends, who arrived in Turin a few days after Nietzsche's mental breakdown) and Nietzsche's sister, Elisabeth, wrote that Nietzsche had simply fallen in the street. As Verrecchia (1978, p. 208) points out, it may be that Overbeck and Elisabeth were trying to hide the most scandalous aspects of Nietzsche's breakdown. It is noteworthy, however, that there was no mention whatsoever of the alleged incident in the local newspapers of the time (p. 246).

sticking to another hypothesis: the horse may have been a pony. According to Gottfried Benn, Nietzsche embraced not one but two horses. But at least he has the excuse of being a poet. (pp. 214–215; my translation)

Like the author of the article quoted by Verrecchia, Krasznahorkai also seems to describe the incident as if he had witnessed the episode himself. To make his account more realistic, he even gives a name (“Giuseppe? Carlo? Ettore?”) to the cabman. Undoubtedly, one may excuse him for being a writer just as one may excuse Benn for being a poet. However, there is no need for this excuse given that, as “At the Latest, in Turin” (2013/2017) clearly shows, Krasznahorkai was well aware that the Nietzsche story was of “highly doubtful authenticity” (p. 21).

Despite its doubtful authenticity, Krasznahorkai (2013/2017) is willing to grant the Nietzsche story credibility “via the natural arbitrariness expected in such cases”, as he puts it, because for him the story serves as an exemplary model “of the drama of the intellect”, casting “an especially keen light upon the endgame of the spirit” (p. 21). Like other Nietzsche scholars, Krasznahorkai, rejecting Dr Möbius’s diagnosis of the incident as an “onset of *paralysis progressiva* caused by syphilis” (p. 22), interprets the horse anecdote as a tangible sign of Nietzsche’s acknowledgement of a grave error. According to Krasznahorkai, having spent much of his philosophical career fighting morality and concepts such as pity and compassion, the German philosopher was not supposed to be touched by the scene of the brutal whipping of the horse. The fact that he, on the contrary, supposedly threw his arms around the horse’s neck clearly shows that, in the last moment of his lucid life, Nietzsche recognised a tragic error, namely that life and morality are not antagonists but rather belong together, as Thomas Mann, quoted by Krasznahorkai, pointed out. From this, Krasznahorkai derives his conclusion: Nietzsche’s drama in Turin suggests that I can defy morality, but this does not mean that I am free of “its mysterious and truly unnamable power” (p. 23). Similarly, I can find my way in an unjust society, but I cannot find an answer to the dilemma concerning the meaning of my existence – for, according to Krasznahorkai, just as I am part of this human world, I am also part of a greater whole that has planted within me the moral law.

“At the Latest, in Turin” ends with a typically Nietzschean metaphor: we navigate our existence somewhat blindly, not knowing whether the greater whole reflects the higher meaning of the law.³ In this, however, we

3 Nietzsche uses the metaphor of navigation especially in *The Gay Science* (1882/2008). See particularly sections 283, 289, and 343.

are not alone: "from a thousand directions, our fellow humans are slowly nearing us" (Krasznahorkai, 2013/2017, p. 23). Given that we are all in the same existential situation of uncertainty, facing the same destiny, the only attitude that makes sense is compassion. As Krasznahorkai puts it,

We send no messages, only look on, and maintain a silence full of compassion. We believe that this compassion inside us is appropriate as such, and that it would be appropriate, too, in those who are approaching, even if it is not so today, it will be so tomorrow ... or in ten ... or in thirty years. At the latest, in Turin. (p. 23)

Although *The Turin Horse*'s conclusion is certainly less optimistic, the film aims to elicit this very feeling of compassion. Indeed, the beaten horse from the prologue deserves Nietzsche's compassion just as the three main characters of the film – Ohlsdorfer, the father (János Derzsi), the daughter (Erika Bók), and Ricsi (the horse) – deserve ours. As Kovács (2013, p. 152) rightly points out, they deserve our compassion not because of their noble qualities – the father in particular seems unable to sympathise with the horse and takes a typically patriarchal attitude towards his daughter – but rather because their lives are about to flicker out. Their existential horizon is therefore marked by an absolute certainty: the inescapability of death.⁴ But so is ours – for as Heidegger (1927/2001) puts it, "Death is a way to be, which Dasein takes over as soon as it is. 'As soon as a man comes to life, he is at once old enough to die'" (p. 289).

Seen from an existential perspective, *The Turin Horse* is a film about each and every human being. Tarr made this clear in the Berlinale press conference when he stated that "Nietzsche is of course part of the film just as much as the horse is part of the film and as we are part of the film" (CFI, 2011). There is no escaping the power of the biological law, which applies to all living beings (Maury & Zuchuat, 2016, p. 20). Seen from an even wider perspective, transience is the innermost character not only of the organic but also of the inorganic world. Thus, Tarr is right in claiming that "perhaps the world itself passes away" (CFI, 2011). Within this context, the father's and the daughter's stubborn clinging to their miserable life, reduced to basic and repetitive actions, seems even more meaningless and absurd – but no less worthy of our compassion. For as Krasznahorkai points out in his essay, compassion is the only appropriate attitude given the helplessness of the human condition.

4 In 2011, Tarr stated that *The Turin Horse* "is a film about the inescapable fact of death" (Rosenbaum, 2011, p. 48).

Besides compassion, there is another concept that can help to explain the link between the Nietzsche story and the film, namely revolt. As Ira Jaffe (2014, pp. 152–153) points out, several acts of revolt (or rebellion) occur in *The Turin Horse*: on two occasions (one in the prologue and one later in the film) the horse refuses to pull the cab, and it later stops eating and drinking; the father and the daughter rebel against their fate and try (unsuccessfully) to move out of their home; even Nietzsche's decision to embrace the horse can be seen as an act of revolt against the brutality of the cabman. Many more acts of revolt occur in Tarr's films (particularly, the attempt to improve one's living conditions – a typical theme in Tarr's works), but most inevitably fail. Thus, revolt is often followed by surrender. Nietzsche's act of revolt (his decision to embrace the horse) is followed by his mental breakdown in precisely the same way as the father and the daughter's attempt to leave is followed, at the end of the film, by the daughter's decision to stop eating.⁵ Nonetheless, revolt – desperate and useless as it may be – remains a powerful expression of human dignity. As Tarr puts it:

Each and every one of us gets up in the morning and starts the day, everyone starts the day anew over and over again. There's this pathological clinging to life, this pathological insistence. [What a] miserable life we live, but nonetheless we want to experience that day and the next day. Because we always think that something is going to happen on that day, things cannot go on like this, something has to happen. And if this sense of revolt awakens in people, then it's worthwhile after all. (CFI, 2011)

The Eternal Recurrence of the Same

In May 1987, the French newspaper *Libération* published a special issue edited by Louis Skorecki and Serge Daney, in which 700 filmmakers from all over the world gave more or less lengthy answers to the same question: *pourquoi filmez-vous?* (why do you make films?). Among other things, Béla Tarr replied to this question by stating:

I despise stories, as they mislead people into believing that something has happened. In fact, nothing really happens as we flee from one condition to another [...] All that remains is time. (Ebert, 2007)

5 An alternative interpretation of the daughter's decision is available. Facing an existence reduced to mere survival – one that is therefore no longer dignified – the daughter, far from surrendering, seeks to accomplish one last act of revolt, as a way of claiming her dignity: she stops eating and thus hastens her own death. As Tzvetan Todorov (1994/1996, pp. 61–65) points out in his analysis of moral life in the concentration camps, suicide, conceived of as an act of self-determination, can sometimes be the only way to preserve one's dignity in extreme situations.

Although this statement dates back to 1987, there is little doubt that it can also be applied to each of the feature films that Tarr made afterwards, from *Damnation* (*Kárhozat*, 1988) to *The Turin Horse*. In fact, in these films, all attempts by the main characters to improve their living conditions through either moral or immoral means are inevitably doomed to failure. To be more precise, something does happen in Tarr's films, and the characters' final condition is often worse than their initial state. However, it is precisely this complete lack of progress that shows that linearity and forward movement are mere illusions (Hanshe, 2012, p. 78). As Tarr puts it, what remains is time.

Time, however, can be conceived of in many ways. Therefore, the question that one should ask is: what kind of time do we find in Tarr's films? The most obvious way to answer this question is to refer to what is considered the most peculiar aspect of Tarr's cinema, namely the slowness of his long takes. Tarr is in fact regarded as one of the most prominent directors of so-called slow cinema (see Jaffe 2014; Rancière 2016; Orban 2021). His long takes emphasise continuity and Bergsonian duration, understood as *temps vécu* (lived time) – which in Tarr often becomes *temps mort* (empty time) (Kovács, 2013, p. 150) or *temps de l'attente* (the time spent in waiting). As Jacques Rancière (2011/2013, p. 9) points out, one of the consequences of Tarr's realism is that lived time is confronted with its immanent limit, namely pure repetition – and it is precisely in this regard that there is a strong connection with Nietzsche, the philosopher of the eternal recurrence of the same.

Like slowness, repetition and circularity are typical features of Tarr's cinema. The narrative structure is often circular, for instance in *The Prefab People* (*Panelkapcsolat*, 1982), which begins with a flashback. The same scene (in which the husband packs up and leaves the family) is repeated both at the beginning and the end of the film – although, as Marco Grosoli (2014, p. 39) points out, in this case, the circle is imperfect, as the two scenes are slightly different, consisting of two different takes of the same scene. In both *Almanac of Fall* (*Őszi almanach*, 1985) and *The Man from London* there is, essentially, a return to the initial situation, whereas *Satantango* ends precisely the same way it begins (except for the eight-minute prologue tracking shot of the cattle wandering around): a black screen and a voice that narrates how one October morning Futaki was woken by the sound of the bells. Even in this case, however, the circle is imperfect: the first time the voice is that of the narrator, and the black screen is a neutral background, whereas the second time the voiceovers are that of the doctor, and the screen is dark because the doctor has barricaded himself in the house, boarding up the window.

At a lower narrative level, the effect of circularity is created by the repetition of the same scene within the film, either from the same point of view (as in the case of Maloin watching the disembarking passengers in *The Man from London*) or from a different point of view (as in the case of Estike watching, through a window, the villagers dancing in the *kocsma* in *Satantango* – a scene that recurs three times in the film, each time filmed from a different perspective). The effect of circularity is also strengthened by the circular movement of the camera: in *Satantango*, the villagers sleeping in the abandoned villa are shown through a circular tracking shot that is repeated three times. The sense of repetition that this circular tracking shot conveys is intensified by the contrast in which it stands to the slow forward tracking shot towards the owl that precedes the scene.

Circularity in Tarr's film is not limited to the narrative level, however, but is also conveyed through other means. Symbolic references to circularity abound, for instance in *Damnation* – from the well-known opening shot (industrial coal buckets slowly and endlessly travel back and forth along a suspended wire) to its closing shot (Karrer and a dog growl at each other while turning in circles). Even Mihály Víg's minimalist music is usually repetitive, involving a few simple chords and notes repeated in a loop with small variations.

The Turin Horse contains most of the aspects mentioned above, and it is no coincidence that this film is often regarded as mirroring Nietzsche's idea of the eternal recurrence of the same. In reality, as Grosoli (2014) points out, many of Tarr's films are never merely circular, for "time always drifts away and continues beyond circularity" (p. 18). Although in *The Turin Horse* time does not continue beyond circularity – for the world is supposed to end on the seventh day – as in Tarr's other films there is a collision between linearity and circularity. The narrative structure of *The Turin Horse* is in fact linear – at least, if by "linear" we do not mean a narrative that extends along a straight line but rather a sequential narrative that progresses from point *a* to point *z* (where *z* is different from *a*). This linear narrative is, however, composed of a very small number of repetitive actions such as sitting in front of the window and staring outside (repeated six times), eating potatoes, or the father changing his clothes with the help of his daughter (both actions are repeated five times) (Kovács, 2013, p. 146).

It is precisely in relation to these recurring actions that Nietzsche's concept of eternal recurrence is often referred to. Given the fact that Nietzsche's name is explicitly mentioned in the prologue to the film, the reference to Nietzsche's "abysmal thought" (1883–1885/2006a, p. 125) is certainly appropriate. However, what is often overlooked is that Nietzsche's eternal recurrence is a recurrence neither of the similar nor,

pace Deleuze, of the different (see Deleuze, 1962/2006, pp. 46–49; 1968/1994, pp. 125–126, 241–243), but rather of the *same*.⁶ Nietzsche makes this clear in section 341 of *The Gay Science* (1882/2008) – the section in which he presents the thought of the eternal recurrence for the first time in his published writings:

The heaviest weight. – What if some day or night a demon were to steal into your loneliest loneliness and say to you: “This life as you now live it and have lived it you will have to live once again and innumerable times again; and there will be nothing new in it, but every pain and every joy and every thought and sigh and everything unspeakably small or great in your life must return to you, all in the same succession and sequence – even this spider and this moonlight between the trees, and even this moment and I myself. The eternal hourglass of existence is turned over again and again, and you with it, speck of dust!”⁷ (p. 194)

As this passage makes clear, the thought of the eternal recurrence as Nietzsche conceives it implies that everything will return innumerable times, again and again, in exactly the same succession and sequence. Thus, strictly speaking, there is a disanalogy between the repetition of the *similar* that one finds in *The Turin Horse* and the repetition of the *same* that is implied in Nietzsche's eternal recurrence. In the latter case, repetition takes the form of a perfect circle, whereas in *The Turin Horse* circularity is imperfect. This disanalogy could perhaps be dismissed as an irrelevant detail had Béla Tarr himself not drawn attention to it in a 2014 interview. When asked about the meaning of the loops in his films, Tarr replied as follows:

They are spirals; it is never the same thing. The spiral is in motion, unlike the circle; that's where the difference lies. It may look like a loop, but it's different because it doesn't return to itself. The whole film *The Turin Horse*

6 On the difference between “similar” (*ähnlich*) and “same” (*gleich*) in Nietzsche, see particularly the posthumous fragment 11[166], spring–autumn 1881: “The similar is not a degree of the same but rather something completely different from the same” (1988, p. 505; my translation). On Deleuze's misleading interpretation of the eternal recurrence, see D'Iorio (2014).

7 Damien Marguet (2016, pp. 76–78) defends the hypothesis that there is a close connection between Nietzsche's eternal recurrence and Krasznahorkai's *Satantango*. In referring to Nietzsche's demon as a devil (French: *diable*), he seems to emphasise the proximity of this figure to Satan, the Devil, to whom the title of Krasznahorkai's novel alludes. Nietzsche's demon (German: *Dämon*), however, is a reference not to the Christian devil but rather to the Socratic *daimon*. It is no coincidence that section 340 of *The Gay Science* – the one preceding section 341 – is dedicated to the dying Socrates.

is about that. Maybe on the surface, we do the same thing every day, but it's not the same thing. Every day we are different; we are weaker because we are older by one day, and we can't do what we used to do. It's not cyclical, because that would imply permanence, whereas things are always changing, and we also change biologically. (Maury & Zuchuat, 2016, p. 17; my translation)

To visualise the difference between a circle and a spiral, a brief comparison with Michael Haneke's *Funny Games* (1997) may be helpful. The narrative structure of Haneke's film is circular, as the ending scene (Paul asking for eggs) precisely mirrors the scene in which the violence begins (Peter asking for eggs). That this latter scene occurs only 10 minutes into the film does not mean that the narrative structure of the film is not circular. On the contrary, if we consider that Paul and Peter are first introduced, right after the opening credits, in the company of the neighbours, it is safe to suppose that the violence perpetrated against Georg, Anna, and their son has already been carried out against their neighbours and will again be carried out against other neighbours – in an endless and cyclical perpetuation of violence for which the audience bears its share of responsibility (see Haneke, 2010).

As mentioned above, unlike *Funny Games*, the narrative structure of *The Turin Horse* is sequentially linear and progressive. Although the narrative ends on the sixth day, it is reasonable to suppose that the seventh day will be the day of the apocalypse – or at least the day of the end of time and of the world. Thus, considered from the point of view of narrative structure, there is no circularity in *The Turin Horse*, but rather a downward spiral of events leading to the drying up of life itself. The only way to introduce circularity into the film would be to take a cosmic perspective and to view *The Turin Horse* as an anti-Genesis, in which the creation is uncreated (Kovács, 2013, p. 148). It must be noted, however, that even so, we would obtain a perfect circle but not yet a Nietzschean eternal recurrence of the same – for the latter implies an exact and endless repetition of the same circle, and there is no mention in the film of whether, after the seventh day, creation will start, not only anew but in the same succession and sequence.

The comparison with *Funny Games* helps to clarify another important aspect of *The Turin Horse* related to repetition, namely the coincidence of time and space. Both films depict one or more failed attempts at escape. In *Funny Games*, both the son and Anna, the mother, manage to escape. However, their attempts to break the cycle of violence unavoidably fail and they are recaptured, as typically occurs in the Marquis de Sade's *Justine, or the Misfortunes of Virtue*, in which the main character of the novel, Justine,

frees herself from her torturers only to constantly fall into the hands of other torturers. A similar attempt to break the downward spiral of death is made by Ohlsdorfer and his daughter in *The Turin Horse*. Even in this case, however, the attempt is unsuccessful. The reason for this remains unexplained, but a possible explanation is that they see something beyond the hill that convinces them that salvation is no longer possible. However, the fact that the camera does not follow them but rather remains near the house seems to indicate that the escape attempt was doomed to fail from the beginning. It is as if the camera already knew that every escape attempt is useless – for there is simply nowhere to escape to (see Koehler, 2011; Grosoli, 2014, p. 216; Cruz García, 2016, p. 229). Be that as it may, in both films the characters are trapped in their respective situations. What is more, in both cases the entrapment is not only temporal (the cycle in *Funny Games* and the spiral in *The Turin Horse*) but also physical, such that it is possible to say that, in both films, time and space coincide (Orban, 2021, p. 103).

To conclude, despite the differences between Nietzsche's perfect circle and Tarr's spiral, both give rise to the same feeling of entrapment that may be prompted by the thought of the eternal recurrence of the same. This is precisely why, in section 341 of *The Gay Science* (1882/2008), Nietzsche compares the thought of the eternal recurrence to the heaviest weight:

If this thought gained power over you, as you are it would transform and possibly crush you; the question in each and every thing, "Do you want this again and innumerable times again?" would lie on your actions as the heaviest weight! (p. 194)

The Death of God

Another aspect of Nietzsche's philosophy that has often been evoked in relation to *The Turin Horse* is the death of God – mainly, but not only, because of the similarity between the neighbour Bernhard (Mihály Kormos), who pays a visit to Ohlsdorfer and his daughter on the second day asking for a bottle of *pálinka*, and the madman who announces that God is dead in section 125 of *The Gay Science*. Tarr himself confirmed this interpretation in an interview from 2011, in which he explained that Bernhard "is a sort of Nietzschean shadow" and that the starting point for his monologue "was Nietzsche's sentence, 'God is dead'" (Petković, 2011).

The analogy between Bernhard and Nietzsche's madman is evident on several levels. First, like the madman, Bernhard announces something, namely that the wind has blown the town away and that everything is in ruin. Second, his monologue is obscure, if not wholly nonsensical ("That's rubbish!", Ohlsdorfer remarks), leaving the viewer wondering

whether Bernhard is in complete possession of his mental faculties, that is, whether he is a madman. Third, Ohlsdorfer's dismissive reaction to a certain extent mirrors that of the people gathered in the marketplace, who laugh and mock the madman. Fourth and finally, some parts of Bernhard's monologue clearly seem to allude to specific aspects of Nietzsche's philosophy, as will be shown below. However, before entering into the details, some parts of Bernhard's monologue are worth quoting.

Bernhard begins by claiming that "Everything's in ruins. Everything's been degraded", indicting an unspecified "they" for this degradation carried out in a base and tricky way: "they've acquired everything in a sneaky, underhanded fight, they've debased everything [...] it has been going on and on. Yet only in one way, like a rat attacks from ambush". This happened with the co-responsibility of both God (who "has a big hand in, or, dare I say, takes part in") and an equally unspecified "other side, that is, everything that's excellent, great in some way and noble" that just stood there and did not engage in any kind of fight. As a result,

there isn't a single tiny nook where one can hide something from them because everything they can lay their hands on is theirs. Even things they can't reach but they do reach are also theirs. The heavens are already theirs, and theirs are all our dreams. Theirs is the moment, nature, infinite silence. Even immortality is theirs, you understand? Everything, everything is lost forever.

The monologue ends with Bernhard explaining how the many nobles, the great, and the excellent had to realise and accept all at once that "there is neither God nor gods [...] there is neither good nor bad". Bernhard himself was also enlightened, realizing that he was profoundly mistaken in thinking that there could never be any change on earth: "Because, believe me, I know now that this change has indeed taken place".

Several aspects of Bernhard's monologue remain obscure. The entire monologue revolves around a fight between two sides that has been going on for centuries: "they", on the one side, and the nobles, the great, and the excellent on the other side. Bernhard never explains either who "they" are or who the nobles, the great, and the excellent are. He only mentions that "they" fought in a sneaky way, like rats, whereas the other side did not engage in the fight. As a result, "they" won the fight and now rule the earth, having laid their hands on everything - even on unreachable things like the heavens and immortality.

From a Nietzschean perspective, this could be seen as an allusion to the first essay of the *Genealogy of Morality* (1887/2006b), where Nietzsche describes the "terrible battle" that two opposing moralities (the master

morality and the slave morality) have fought “for thousands of years on earth” (p. 31). The similarities between this text and Bernhard's monologue are many: the masters are described as the nobles, the great, and the excellent, whereas the slaves are the weak, the envious, and the resented. Like Bernhard's “they”, the slaves achieve victory over their masters in a sneaky way, as it were, by transvaluating the masters' values and thereby turning them into the wicked and the evil (this is what Nietzsche calls “*the slaves' revolt in morality*”; p. 18; original emphasis). Although, unlike Bernhard's “they”, the slaves have not yet won the final victory, they and their morality have nonetheless been dominant for a long time. As a result, in Nietzsche's opinion, humanity has been poisoned, intoxicated, and debased.

The fact that the nobles, the great, and the excellent from Bernhard's monologue realised that there is neither a God nor gods, neither good nor bad, can be seen as a further allusion to Nietzsche, the philosopher who announced the death of God and urged other philosophers to place themselves “*beyond good and evil*” (Nietzsche, 1888/1998, p. 34). Even the fact that the nobles, the great, and the excellent from Bernhard's monologue believed and accepted that there is neither a God nor gods but were unable to understand it can be read analogously to section 125 of *The Gay Science*. Indeed, in this section, the madman announces the death of God to those who do not believe in God but are not yet able to realise and understand the tragic consequences of His death, as their mocking attitude towards the madman clearly shows.

Bernhard concludes his monologue by acknowledging that he was mistaken in believing that there never has been and never could be change on earth since a change has indeed already taken place. It is not clear exactly what change has taken place, although it is reasonable to suppose that Bernhard is referring to the imminent end of time and the world. Considering that Bernhard can plausibly be interpreted as a kind of “Nietzschean prophet”, as Rancière suggests (2011/2013, p. 80), it is significant – and probably also highly ironic – that Tarr and Krasznahorkai give him precisely the task of denying one of the main tenets of Nietzsche's philosophy, namely the eternal recurrence of the same, which implies a circular, non-linear and non-teleological conception of time. It is also noteworthy that there is a connection between Bernhard's acknowledgement of his error and the Turin incident. In fact, just as linearity (which is the time of Christian eschatology) appears where circularity was expected, so Christian and Schopenhauerian compassion (Nietzsche's alleged embracing of the horse) unexpectedly appears where indifference and lack of pity were to be expected.

Grosoli (2014, pp. 205–206) suggests another possible interpretation of the ending of the monologue. He interprets Ohlsdorfer's dismissal of Bernhard's monologue as rubbish, meaning that the viewer should not take Bernhard's words too seriously, as they are a confused jumble of Nietzschean thoughts. The only function of the monologue is thus to make clear that by taking Nietzsche's philosophy literally, one ends up in the same impasse as he did. This is the mistake that Bernhard commits, and it is also why he concludes his monologue by acknowledging that he was mistaken. His mistake was that of taking literally Nietzsche's doctrine of the eternal recurrence of the same, thinking that this doctrine is incompatible with change.

In support of Grosoli's interpretation, it can be recalled that Nietzsche himself warned his readers against a literal and above all superficial reading of his doctrine. In *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (1883–1885/2006a), Zarathustra blames his animals for having made “a hurdy-gurdy song” of the eternal recurrence and reprimands the spirit of gravity, who murmurs contemptuously, “All that is straight lies [...] All truth is crooked, time itself is a circle” (pp. 176, 125), banalising his doctrine. It is also true that change is not incompatible with eternal recurrence, as Grosoli points out – provided that change happens within the same circle and returns innumerable times, again and again, in previous or subsequent circles in the exact same succession and sequence. However, if one interprets Bernhard's claim that a change has taken place as an allusion to the impending end of time and the world, then this change cannot be reconciled with the idea of eternal recurrence – for this idea obviously implies that time and the world continue to exist eternally.

That the end is impending is also confirmed by the holy book that the old man gives Ohlsdorfer's daughter as thanks for the water taken from the well. As Tarr made clear in an interview, this book is

an anti-Bible. It's about how priests close churches because people are sinning. We have to close the churches. We have to tear them down. In the text the daughter reads there are some references to Nietzsche, but the text is original, by Krasznahorkai. (Petković, 2011)

Although Tarr does not clarify which Nietzsche passage(s) Krasznahorkai had in mind, it is reasonable to think that this is yet another reference to section 125 of *The Gay Science*, more specifically, to its ending:

It is still recounted how on the same day the madman forced his way into several churches and there started singing his *requiem aeternam deo* [grant God eternal rest]. Led out and called to account, he is said always to have replied nothing but, “What then are these churches now if not the tombs and sepulchres of God?” (Nietzsche, 1882/2008, p. 120)

The text the daughter reads ends as follows: "Morning will turn to night. Night will end". The book prophesies the imminent end of the world and anticipates the ending of the film, that is, the sudden darkness that occurs on the fifth day. No explanation is given for this sudden darkness, and the viewer is left wondering why morning has turned to night. Given the several references to the death of God that one finds in the film, should one suppose that this is a wholly natural phenomenon and that "there is neither God nor gods", as the nobles, the great, and the excellent from Bernhard's monologue realised? Is Tarr inverting the proposition "*Deus est lux* [God is light]" and instead maintaining "*Nulla lux, nullus deus* [No light, no God]", as Jean-Marie Samocki (2016, p. 61) suggests? On the other hand, if God is not dead, is He punishing man for his sins? Or is the destruction of the world also His fault, as Bernhard suggests? An answer to these questions would probably have been given on the seventh day. As we know, however, Tarr decided not to film the last day of the world.

Nihilism

On 10 June 1887, while in Lenzerheide (Switzerland), Nietzsche wrote the text *European Nihilism*. Although never published, the text, which consists of 16 numbered paragraphs, played an important role in the history of Nietzsche's reception – reasonably so, for in this text Nietzsche presents his thoughts on nihilism in an especially concise and clear way. Within the context of this article, the beginning of paragraph 6 is particularly interesting. Nietzsche (2003) wrote:

Let us think this thought in its most terrible form: existence as it is, without meaning or goal, but inevitably recurring, without any finale into nothingness: "eternal recurrence". That is the most extreme form of nihilism: nothingness ("meaninglessness") eternally! (p. 118)

The thought expressed by Nietzsche in this passage finds a perfect cinematic representation in *The Turin Horse*. Ohlsdorfer's and his daughter's lives are completely devoid of meaning (beyond the goal of mere survival), reduced to the endless repetition of mechanical actions such as getting dressed, eating potatoes, fetching water from the well, and undressing, among others. Even the recurrent action of looking out the window (typical of Tarr's cinema) contributes to emphasising the nihilistic character of Ohlsdorfer's and his daughter's existence. Indeed, most of the time there is simply nothing to look at, other than a barren desert landscape continuously lashed by the wind. It is significant that Nietzsche (1883–1885/2006a, p. 248) chose the desert precisely as a

metaphor for nihilism. In both Tarr and Nietzsche, the outer landscape thus becomes a mirror of the inner one.

On a general note, it must be emphasised that although cinematic representations of nihilism abound in contemporary cinema (Marmysz, 2017), Tarr's film has the peculiarity of representing nihilism in its most extreme form, as Nietzsche puts it in the Lenzerheide fragment. In *The Turin Horse*, life becomes static, and the repetition of mechanical tasks conveys a feeling of lack of progress and teleology, conveying a sense of complete meaninglessness (White, 2018). Furthermore, as Rainer J. Hanshe (2012, pp. 78–79) points out, repetition also renders eschatological time inoperative, obliterating any promise of transcendence.⁸ The death of God to which Bernhard refers, or at least His absence in the narrative, strengthens the impression of the meaninglessness of human existence. Human beings are thus condemned to live the life of Sisyphus – with the exception that the struggle for survival itself seems far from being “enough to fill a man's heart”, as Albert Camus (1942/1975, p. 111) famously puts it.

During the Berlinale press conference, Tarr alluded to Milan Kundera's well-known 1984 novel *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, explaining that he was trying to narrate the unbearable heaviness of life (CFI, 2011). The allusion to Kundera's novel is ironic, but it is also much more than that. It is in fact no coincidence that Kundera begins his novel by discussing the meaning of Nietzsche's idea of eternal recurrence. Kundera also refers to the Turin incident towards the end of the novel, interpreting it, as Krasznahorkai does, as having a profound meaning: in putting his arms around the horse's neck and bursting into tears, Nietzsche, Kundera explains, wanted to apologise to the horse for the uncompassionate way in which humanity relates to animals (Kundera, 1984/1984, p. 290).

Tarr's play of words with Kundera's title is revealing of the former's view of human existence and the world, which is replete with pain and suffering (CFI, 2011). It is thus legitimate to ask whether this view – at least, the one presented in *The Turin Horse* – is nihilistic and/or pessimistic (two words that, although different, often go hand in hand in Nietzsche's late *Nachlass*). It cannot be denied that Tarr's worldview is more akin to that found in Schopenhauer's writings than the joyous and

8 According to Thorsten Botz-Bornstein (2017), “Tarr leads us to the contemplation of the ‘recurrence of the same’ in the world of everyday life. The metaphysical is discovered *there*, in this recurrence of the same, and not through an act of transcendence” (p. 134; original emphasis).

life-affirming view found in Nietzsche's philosophy. Although Tarr does not preach the negation of the will to life, as Schopenhauer does, he nonetheless shares with the latter a bleak view of existence, dominated by boredom, unsatisfied desires, treachery, and "the unavoidable suffering grounded in the essence of life" (Schopenhauer, 1819/2010, p. 350). As Jaffe (2014) points out,

When he [Tarr] began making films he "wanted to change the world", but found his fellow citizens incapable of solving social problems [...] human attempts to improve existence, to change the world, to evolve or rebel, were in Tarr's view proving futile. Yet he concluded that people alone were not to blame. As Fergus Daly has noted, the director grew convinced that the universe itself, not just humanity, was "wayward" and "out of joint". In Tarr's words, "a whole pile of shit [was] coming from the cosmos" [...] Without entirely abandoning the realism of his early work [...] his films took on what Tarr, who had briefly aspired to become a philosopher, called a more "cosmic perspective". (pp. 164–165)

There is little doubt that "cosmic nihilism" may be a fitting label for this perspective. However, another interpretation is possible. Far from being a nihilist or a pessimist, Tarr may simply be a *realist*. In fact, he has emphasised this aspect of his cinematography on several occasions. During the Berlinale press conference, he explained that his and his collaborators' aim was not to convey hope but to "simply report, simply depict, simply narrate, simply show the way in which we see the world, what happens" (CFI, 2011). Similarly, in a 2011 interview, Tarr declared:

I don't want to give the audience a message, I want to show viewers my image of the world. The camera has an objective point of view, I can only show you reality. Cinema is not like literature: it shows you only what is in front of the lens. You can't fake it. (Kuzma, 2011)

To the interviewer's remark that the director always chooses what to show, Tarr replied, "Yes, because we are not making documentaries. We create a type of fiction. But it is still only a mirror of life" (Kuzma, 2011).

Tarr's claim that the camera has an objective point of view, which recalls Bazin's (1945/2005) definition of cinema as "[photographic] objectivity in time" (p. 14), might be dismissed as naïve. Even his reply to the interviewer seems unsatisfactory: as Nietzsche (1887/2006b, p. 87) pointed out, every representation of the world is always and inevitably perspectival. Tarr may think that his feature films are a mirror of life, but

there is little doubt that they mirror life as he (Tarr) understands and perceives it. We are thus back to the initial question, only formulated in a different way: is the way in which Tarr understands and perceives life nihilistic and/or pessimistic? Or, put differently, is Tarr a nihilist and/or a pessimist?

Providing a satisfactory answer to this question would take us beyond the scope of this article. However, a few concluding considerations can be put forward. It is difficult to deny that Tarr's cinema is characterised by a view of the world and humanity that seems hopeless. What Karrer points out in *Damnation* can no doubt be applied to most of Tarr's films: "Stories are all stories of disintegration". It is difficult to imagine a more pessimistic and nihilistic view. Yet, as the singer's husband remarks later in the same film, "There's always a chance to escape. There may be cracks in the fabric of things" – and, we might add, as long as there is even a tiny chance of escape, it is legitimate to have hope. Thus, if on the one hand the professor from *Almanac of Fall* tells his students that "we are going step by step, constantly, towards a catastrophe", on the other hand he also knows that "They must live!" – an imperative that recalls the last sentence of *The Turin Horse* uttered by Ohlsdorfer, a sentence which represents a last whisper of hope: "We must eat".

Hope is also to be found in those rare ethical virtues that some of the characters in Tarr's films display, virtues like honour, dignity, and compassion. These virtues represent a crack in the fabric of things and, at least to a certain extent, counterbalance the pervasiveness of immorality. As Rancière (2011/2013) points out, Tarr's oeuvre is animated by a belief in

the capacity of the most mediocre beings to affirm their dignity. Bela Tarr is not a "formalist" filmmaker, fashioning well-polished sequence shots for pessimistic stories. Form, in Tarr's films, is never anything but the deployment of the space-time in which the very tension between the law of rain and misery, and the weak but indestructible capacity to affirm "honor and dignity" against this law, operates – ethical virtues to which a cinematographic virtue corresponds: that of putting bodies in motion, of changing the effect the environment has upon them, of launching them into trajectories that disrupt the circular movements. (p. 46)

Few directors have filmed outsiders of all kinds (such as the forgotten, the homeless, the vulnerable, the poor, and the drunk) with such a compassionate and loving attitude. And if a label has to be put on Tarr or his cinema, it is neither "realist", nor "nihilist", nor "pessimist" but rather "humanist" (see Levine & Meckler, 2012).

Concluding Remarks: Tarr and Film-Philosophy

In an interview, Tarr carefully stressed that, despite its connection to Nietzsche's thought, *The Turin Horse* is not a work of philosophy:

I think film and philosophy [are] two different languages [...] With film, you are working with real situations, alive, with people. If you're doing philosophy, you have words. Words, words, words. Each has a totally different material. Words, words, words! (Levine & Meckler, 2012)

This passage conveys two insights. First, whereas philosophers are often stuck in the world of ideas, filmmakers are directly connected with what Dostoevsky's (1864/2004) *Underground Man* calls "real 'living life'" (p. 112) because they work with "real situations, alive, with people", as Tarr puts it. With some exceptions on both sides, this seems to be true. Second, philosophers and filmmakers employ two different languages to express themselves: whereas the language of philosophy is verbal, the language of film is essentially visual. This is precisely why one of the recurrent questions in film-philosophy is: how is it possible to convey philosophical content through a medium that is essentially non-verbal?

Few films are as minimalist as *The Turin Horse*. With the sole exception of the prologue and Bernhard's monologue, words – the material of philosophy, as Tarr puts it – are almost absent in it. Yet, *The Turin Horse* is perhaps the most philosophical film among Tarr's filmography. It may not be a proper work of philosophy (provided we agree with Tarr that a work of philosophy is necessarily a verbal work), but there is little doubt that philosophy, especially Nietzsche's philosophy, plays a pivotal role in it. Indeed, as I have tried to show in this article, rarely has a director been able to provide such a powerful visual representation of the human condition, trapped, after the death of God announced by Nietzsche's madman, in a seemingly nihilistic existence made up of eternally repeated actions. Thus, the story about Nietzsche narrated at the beginning of the film is far from being merely anecdotal. On the contrary, as we have seen, *The Turin Horse* can only be properly understood if we take into account its Nietzschean context, from the analogy between Bernhard's monologue and section 125 of *The Gay Science* or the first treatise of the *Genealogy of Morality* to the main tenets of Nietzsche's philosophy (eternal recurrence, the death of God, and nihilism), all of which can be found in Tarr's last feature film.

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