

Despite originally wanting to study philosophy, Hungarian film-maker Béla Tarr has always denied the use of symbols, allegories or metaphysics in his filmmaking, stating that cinema is something definite and that the lens only records real things that are there. He is also quick to refute critical wisdom that he made a formal u-turn, à la Lars Von Trier, midway through his career, denying any radical change in his practice. Ultimately however, the *mise-en-scene* of *Damnation* (1988), *Satantango* (1994) and works beyond does nonetheless transcend the samizdat vérité of his early 'Budapest School' trilogy, while his choreographed tracking shots and languorous takes cannot help but suggest intimations of the divine, or perhaps of a celestial nightmare, one's hunched shoulders shuffling endlessly between a Godless heaven and an earthly hell. His latest work, an adaptation of the novel by Georges Simenon, and his first to be made outside Hungary, takes this vision of things further perhaps than before.



**“THE MORE DESPERATE WE ARE,  
THE MORE HOPE THERE IS”**

**Robert Chilcott:** You say that *The Man From London* (2007) is a less romantic film than *Werckmeister Harmonies* (2000), that it was simpler, harder and wiser and “still likes people”.

**Béla Tarr:** We still like people. It perhaps is a more bitter film. Perhaps a film in a worse mood. But nevertheless we still have a lot to do with people, with human beings, and we will never lose it to the extent of hating people. We will never become misanthropists. But it is still a true depiction of ourselves.

**RC:** After your first three films you shifted in style, quite drastically, from the social realist aesthetic to a much more studied and composed form. Do you see this as a conscious change or transition?

**BT:** This is the theory of Jonathan Rosenbaum (leading US critic. Ed.)! I must say it's not true. If you watch the first movie, which I made 30 years ago, you can see very clearly long monologues, long psychological processes... This is a process. Every movie has its different expression, different artistic problems. That's why I don't feel this is the right theory. Jonathan has a list – I am two, one is there, and afterwards I am born again! Which is definitely not true. I am the same person and I am doing things my way. You have to watch two important movies – one is my *Macbeth* (1982), which was a 62 minute long take for Hungarian TV, and afterwards came *Almanac of the Fall* (1985). If you do not speak of these two movies, then you can believe there is a change. But otherwise you can see very clearly the one continuity.

**RC:** Therefore would you draw parallels between the hero of *The Man From London* and the characters in *Family Nest* (1979) or *The Outsider* (1981). Are they on the same journey?

**BT:** When I say that I make the same movie all the time, what I am really talking about is that it's the very same thing I find exciting and stimulating from the beginning, which is the question of the situation of human dignity. It's a fragile thing, which is permanently exposed to great danger. And what has always concerned me is the fact that the majority of people don't actually realise their potential in their life. Every person always takes something to the grave with them, something which they haven't realised or been able to carry out. This is such an injustice in life, apart from the injustice of ending up in the grave. Not only do we have to get there but if we get there with the full baggage, a baggage full of unrealised potential, that is something that has always bothered me.

This is always how I experience drama, there is a tension between the human being and the world. And somehow in all of my films this comes to the surface somewhere. And the other question which is always in my films is the loneliness and solitude of human beings. This doesn't get sorted out in people's lives either. Obviously this is the same problem we are talking about that comes up in my films – it takes a different shape, a different form, it is acted out through different characters, but it is essentially what I'm talking about.

**RC:** And does the interest in outsiders stem from being in the position of a filmmaker as an outsider – filmmaking is often quite a lonely place...

**BT:** It is very true that the kind of films we make are different from the mainstream, and we don't really have very much to do with the film industry as such. I couldn't say I feel particularly lonely, as there are lots of filmmakers in the world with whom I feel a commonality. But we are all outsiders as filmmakers if we don't accept the artistic order.

**RC:** *The Man From London* has several genre devices – mysterious strangers walking through shadows, a case full of stolen money - yet the eventual execution of the film defies and/or transcends any notions of genre, becoming something more indescribable. Are you interested in being faithful to an idea of the film noir genre, or is it merely incidental, and do you feel you have to 'ruin' a novel to make an interesting film out of it?

**BT:** The film noir actually is very close to this situation – shooting in a port, everything lends itself very well to that kind of style. It's not the film noir style we use – it looks like that. It is film noir à la Tarr! If you like, you could even brand Fassbinder as a film noir director, even though he works with colours. Another important ingredient of film noir is of course sin, it's there in the stratosphere. It's the same if I have various vegetables at home and I mix them up: I call it a ratatouille.

**RC:** You have said that film is not about telling a story. This is antithetical to the dominant industrial film development process, particularly with its reverence to Robert McKee. How do you deal with this, when faced with a film industry and finance obsessed with story?

**BT:** If you want to look at it this way, everything has a story. But what is important is what you concentrate on. It's the circumstances that have excitement. What's exciting is what compels or inspires someone to do something, and how their own personality reacts to that. So if we take this film as an example, okay this film is about a suitcase with £60,000 in it on the table, but this is not what concerns us, what is on the table, but what is under the table – Maloin, his wife, his daughter, Brown – it's the human relationships

By Robert Chilcott



# BÉLA TARR AND *THE MAN FROM LONDON*

that concern the film, and the moment where Maloin realises it's his big chance in life, that his daughter's life can change, and his own.... That is really the stuff, what's under the table, not what's on top. We don't see this money more than twice in the film anyway.

**RC:** Do you work with a final script, or with an outline and notes. How structured is it?

**BT:** It is extremely structured, because everything costs money. I don't have much chance for improvisation anymore. What we have decided on is really what we have to go out and shoot. But normally I would like to work in such a way as I have done for 30 years. I create little cards for each scene, then I place these cards on the wall for myself, and I see the structure of the film straight away. And I also see the proportions. And I inform the crew, based on what I see. The shooting plan is prepared from that, so we don't actually work from a script as such.

**RC:** What about your working relationship with Fred Kelemen (who shot the film)?

**BT:** We've known each other since 1990. He was a pupil of mine in Berlin. We made a 30 minute film together for Hungarian television. So this wasn't our first adventure together. He's a good friend who understands what I have to do. And can do it. It's very important that we speak the same language. He doesn't speak Hungarian but we converse in German and English. Even though his mother was Hungarian, he is too lazy to learn! But it works.

**RC:** You choose actors because of their personalities first, and don't treat them as actors. You want them to become your friends and give

their personalities to the film. Does this always work?

**BT:** It's the only thing that works. I'm simply unable to use an autocracy, it's not in me. It is like, if I put a rope between two houses and I tell my actor to walk that rope, and I say to him, "do not fear, if you fall I will be there to catch you myself." "This is what a director's and an actor's relationship should be like. The actor must believe the director when he says, "I'm going to be there to catch you." Because what I am asking him to do is even more hairy than walking a tightrope, I'm asking him to bare his soul and open up his personality. And what he must know in return is that I'm never going to abuse that. And he must know that I am never going to do anything immoral, and I'm never going to subordinate that. This is what I mean by the relationship of confidence, and if it works then everything else works.

**RC:** You once said that "the more desperate we are, the more hope there is."

**BT:** That's the truth. I can't say any more than that.

*The Man From London* is released in the UK by Artificial Eye in early 2008. The company also releases Tarr's *Werckmeister Harmonies* + *Damnation* and *Satantango* on dvd.

Robert Chilcott is a London-based writer and filmmaker. He currently edits *Vertigo's* online monthly magazine.

All images from *The Man From London*, 2007.



## WERCKMEISTER HARMONIES/DAMNATION DVD

In conjunction with Artificial Eye, Vertigo is pleased to offer two copies of Bela Tarr's *Werckmeister Harmonies/Damnation* DVD to readers who can answer the following question:

**How old was Bela Tarr when he made his first film?**

Please email your answer, with full contact details, to [vertigo@vertigomagazine.co.uk](mailto:vertigo@vertigomagazine.co.uk) by December 15<sup>th</sup> quoting 'Damnation' in the subject line.