



WILL HEAVEN FALL UPON US? A BÉLA TARR RETROSPECTIVE

Sátántangó

Satantango (Sátántangó)

Director: Béla Tarr

Production Companies: MIT,
Von Vietinghoff Filmproduktion, Vega Film,
Magyar Televízió, Télévision Suisse
Romande

Producers: György Fehér,
Joachim von Vietinghoff, Ruth Waldburger
Screenplay: László Krasznahorkai,
Béla Tarr

Based on the Novel by:

László Krasznahorkai

Director of Photography: Gábor Medvigy

Editor: Ágnes Hranitzky

Costumes: Gyula Pauer, János Breckl

Sound: György Kovács

Narrator: Mihály Ráday

Cast:

Mihály Vig (Irimiás)

Dr Putyi Horváth (Petrina)

Erika Bók (Estike)

Peter Berling (doctor)

Miklós B. Székely (Futaki)

László feLugossy (Schmidt)

Éva Almási Albert (Mrs Schmidt)

Alfréd Járay (Halics)

Erzsébet Gaál (Mrs Halics)

János Derzsi (Kráner)

Irén Szajki (Mrs Kráner)

Barna Mihók (Kelemen)

István Juhász (Kerekes)

Zoltán Kamondi (innkeeper)

Péter Dobai (captain)

András Bodnár (Horgos Sanyi)

Ferenc Kállai

(Hungarian dubbed voice of Peter Berling)

Ica Bojár

Gyula Pauer

Ernö Mihályi

Mihály Kormos

András Fekete

Andor Simai

Katalin Krizsánné Kovács

Hungary/Germany/Switzerland 1994

439 mins + intervals

Digital 4K (restoration)

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SIGHT AND SOUND

Béla Tarr is not a man for small talk. When our Zoom call connects, I begin by thanking him for his time and telling him I was pleased to have this opportunity – to which he replies that I shouldn't be too polite, but simply tell him what I want. The smile on his face betrays a cheerful mood, even as his words suggest we get straight down to business. So we do.

The occasion of our conversation is the 30th anniversary of his magnum opus *Sátántangó*. Famed for its extended duration, languorous pacing and the richly textured world it creates, the seven-hour film is often seen as the holy grail of the dedicated cinephile. It was voted the (joint) 78th Greatest Film of All Time in the 2022 Sight and Sound poll – surely too low a placing – and Susan Sontag captured the feelings of many when she declared: 'I'd be glad to see it every year for the rest of my life.'

Sátántangó centres on the inhabitants of a forsaken Hungarian village who, after the collapse of their collective farm, make plans for a new life. Their intentions, however, are thrown into disarray by the arrival of the enigmatic, charismatic Irimiás (played by the film's composer Mihály Vig), who seems to have ideas of his own – both for the inhabitants and for their money.

Though the story has led to it often being described as a film about the decline of communism, in Tarr's complex universe the plot is just one element among many. Indeed, it opens with a seven-minute shot showing cattle walking through a muddy field. Filmed in stark black and white, its long, roaming takes and labyrinthine, non-linear structure make it a formidable film, directed by an uncompromising artist.

Given that we're here talking because 30 years have passed since Sátántangó was released, I thought it might be interesting to start with a discussion of time. You've said in the past that time is a protagonist in your films, and I was hoping that you could expand on that, or explain it in more detail.

I think it is a key issue for the motion picture, for all our life. Our life is happening in two dimensions: one is space, and the other is time. And that's why I don't like to go to the cinema, because filmmakers, or let's say this capitalist film business, ignore time and space. They are just listening for the storytelling. What does this mean, the 'storytelling'? When you live your life, you are doing the same things every day, almost.

When I started to make movies, my goal became more and more to show a kind of totality, something which shows our life in a simple way. I don't think our life is too exceptional. It's just going.

Some critics, when speaking about films which approach time in the way yours do, use phrases like 'temps mort', or dead time, and talk about scenes which are 'extraneous' to the narrative. But in your films these moments feel just as integral to the film as the narrative ones. Do you see a distinction between narrative and non-narrative moments within your work, or are people missing the point when they speak in this way?

All the time, we have a kind of strange narrative. When you go to the shop tomorrow morning, when you buy milk, coffee or something, it's a kind of narration. What does it mean, 'narrative'? You know what Andy Warhol said? Everybody can be a star for 15 minutes. David Bowie was a little bit more generous, because he said 'We can be heroes for one day.' Just one day. And that's what people want. They want to be heroes. Of course, we all would like to be heroes, and we all want to be free, wonderful, loved, admired, devoted, but how could we? Life is just life. And you have to go tomorrow to the shop to buy milk and coffee.

As well as focusing on time, your work also has a focus on texture – whether that's the rain hitting the mud or the character's clothes. And because of these textures, it feels like there's a solid, concrete reality to the work you create. But there's a tendency among critics to look for symbols in your films. Do you think, in the 30 years since Sátántangó came out, there's been a tendency to over-intellectualise it, and to read it in ways that you weren't intending?

First of all, this film was based on the novel by László Krasznahorkai. This was his first novel. We became friends. He was there, not during the shooting, but in the post-production. This book was written by him because he was living and working as a young man in the Hungarian lowland, in a very ugly yard. When we started, I went with him to the same places where he wrote it, because I wanted to see the same reality.

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Sátántangó

Sat 17 Aug 13:30; Sat 24 Aug 23:00 BFI IMAX

The Man from London A Londoni férfi
Sun 18 Aug 18:00; Wed 21 Aug 20:15

Damnation Kárhozat

Sat Thu 22 Aug 20:40

The Outsider Szabadgyalog

Fri 23 Aug 20:35

The Turin Horse A torinói ló

Sat 24 Aug 19:50; Sat 31 Aug 17:20

Autumn Almanac (aka Almanac of Fall)

Őszi almanac

25 Aug 15:45

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And when I went, I understood the people in his novel in a totally different way from what I read. That meant I had to go back to the same reality. I had to develop a new film language, or find a way to film this reality. We had the novel as a kind of walking stick, but the main issue was to find our way in film language, for the transformation. One-to-one, [a straightforward adaptation] would be very stupid, primitive and ugly.

Talking about exploring these landscapes, would you say that the film is very rooted in that particular time and place? Because it feels very timeless. And yet, in the UK at least, it's often described as being a film about the decline of communism in eastern Europe, which also gives it a political slant. Do you see it as being about that specific political time and space?

We never, ever touched anything which is talking about the current time, the daily events. No. My goal was to talk about a kind of eternity, or a kind of deeper issue. That's why you never see any cars or anything in my movies, which is showing you the date. You never see any newspaper with the cover page and the date. We make the street totally empty, and take away all publicity or signs which show you the date, because I think it's all eternal. I understand you have to pay your bills today, but your life – it has to be a little bit cosmic, not this kind of bang bang bang.

How would you respond to people who say there is a spiritual dimension to your work?

It's not spiritual. It's happening. I don't like the word 'symbol'. I swear to God, everything is concrete and happening right now. It's you. And that's the reason why I say no symbols, no allegories. It doesn't fit the motion picture, because you cannot shoot anything which is not existing in reality. A table is a table. But, of course, we know thousands of different tables.

To return to the notion of time – you once said in an interview that Sátántangó was originally planned as being six hours, but it swelled during filming. I'm interested in why it was always planned to be that long – why you felt that the duration was necessary. What did you gain by having that duration that a shorter duration wouldn't have given you?

In the novel there is a chapter when Irimiás gives a speech – the seventh chapter, if I remember well, but surely it's in the second part. The structure of the whole novel is the structure of the tango: six steps forward, six steps back. When we were on the set, we shot the speech the way it is in the novel, as it would not be clear if we don't see how Irimiás is picking up the money of the people. You have to show it very clearly, what could happen and what is really happening physically. I don't like so many filmmakers, but this is the lesson you can get from Hitchcock. To shoot what is really happening.

The length of a movie all depends on what you want to say. Maybe you saw my short, let's say haiku, called *Prologue* (2004). It was only five minutes. I don't care what is acceptable. We are just doing what we feel. You feel the length, and you feel the rhythm, because this is the form of what you are doing. And it comes from the style, and from what you want to say and share with people.

Sátántangó is one of those films that really moved the dial on the way that films are made and consumed. You said earlier that when you were travelling around Hungary during pre-production you were trying to find a new form to capture what you saw there. How consciously were you trying to create a new style of cinema that was different from what had come before?

The style is coming up step-by-step. You're not born with this style. You are just going from the first film, second film, third... When you finish a movie you will – because you are not a stupid person, I hope – have some new questions. And for the new questions, you cannot use your former answer, your former style is not working. You have to go ahead. The next project provokes you to take one more step.

We knew that making *Sátántangó* would be a hard job. It was, absolutely, but we loved doing it. Unfortunately, many people died [since], many actors, cinematographers. We lost a lot of good guys, and now when you say 30 years, what can I say? We've lost those 30 years, but it was emotionally, intellectually, physically a big challenge, a real adventure. Everybody who was part of this project, we were together for 120 shooting days plus two years before for pre-production. It wasn't a film shoot... we were flying.

Béla Tarr talking to Alex Barrett, bfi.org.uk, 19 July 2024