

Béla Tarr's *The Turin Horse*: The (in)visible Animal

In 2013, two significant works of scholarship were published about the Hungarian auteur director Béla Tarr: Jacques Rancière's *Béla Tarr; The Time After* and András Bálint Kovács' *The Cinema of Béla Tarr: The Circle Closes*. Both exhaustive in their own right, the monographs attempt to theorise and understand a director whose work is notoriously difficult.¹ For Kovács, as his book's subtitle indicates, surveying Tarr's films brings about a "closing of the circle", providing the holistic final words as Tarr retires from filmmaking.² I argue alongside Rancière, however, that the circle remains open,³ no less because Tarr scholarship has yet to develop into a fully formed body of criticism. Consequently, the various complexities of Tarr's filmography, in particular his films' minor or marginal figures, have gone relatively unquestioned. The nonhuman animal is one such marginal figure, receiving negligible critical attention in spite of its significance in Tarr's later work: *Damnation* (1988) ends with its lonely protagonist dropping to his knees and barking at a dog; *Satántangó* (1994) opens with a tracking shot of a cow herd and, infamously, depicts a girl who tortures and poisons her cat; and pivotal to *Werckmeister Harmonies* (2000) is a putrid taxidermy whale that accompanies a travelling circus, captivating the population of a small town.

¹ Tarr himself perpetuates his films' ambiguities by refusing to answer questions about their meaning. Cf. Phil Ballard, 'In Search of Truth: Béla Tarr Interviewed', *Kinoeye* <<http://www.kinoeye.org/04/02/ballard02.php>> [Accessed: 22/04/2014].

² Nicolas Rapold, 'In Auteur's Swan Song, an Ode to Survival: Bela Tarr Says *The Turin Horse* Is His Last Movie', *New York Times*, 3 February 2012 < <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/02/05/movies/bela-tarr-says-the-turin-horse-is-his-last-movie.html>> [Accessed 22/04/2014].

³ Jacques Rancière, *Béla Tarr; The Time After*, trans. by Eric Beranek (Minneapolis: Univocal, 2013), p. 81.

For the purposes of this essay, however, I will focus solely on Tarr's self-proclaimed final film, *The Turin Horse* (2011). Set over six long days in the late nineteenth century, the film portrays a cabman and his daughter confined to their cabin when their workhorse refuses to move. By first conducting a close reading of the film I want to call into question the paradoxical status of the eponymous horse: its visibility is concomitant with its disappearance, its agency is concomitant with its apathy. In these senses it is an (in)visible animal, one that radically destabilises the film's representation of anthropocentrism. As I will also explore in the latter part of my essay, the horse's contradictory status is imbued with significant intersecting contexts. Its journey from movement to stillness, from life to death, offers an inversion of the technological development of cinema, moving backwards from kinetic cinema to static photography. Considered alongside Tarr's retirement, *The Turin Horse* suggests an end to – or a death of – cinema, and its animal is at the heart of this configuration.

An essay such as this, in which I tease out the complex status of the animal, is indebted to the developing field of animal studies. Exploring what Cary Wolfe calls 'the question of the animal', animal studies considers the representation of animals on their own terms, not as mere aesthetic symbols to be 'written onto' as 'blank paper'.⁴ Anat Pick argues that animal studies 'at its most ambitious could be thought of as a way of reshaping (contracting) the humanities and social sciences under the sign of

⁴ Cary Wolfe, ed., *Zoontologies: The Question of the Animal* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003); Marian Scholtmeijer, *Animal Victims in Modern Fiction: From Sanctity to Sacrifice* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1993), p. 4.

dehumanisation.⁵ This reclaimed dehumanisation calls for the dethroning of anthropocentrism and with it the radical questioning of the Enlightenment conception of human dominance. Pick's work, *Creaturely Poetics*, sets out to trace 'the logic of flesh [...] across image and text', paying particular attention to the radical vulnerability of animals in film. Adopting Pick's idea of radical vulnerability as well as the "creaturely", an aesthetic 'expression of something *inhuman*',⁶ I identify *The Turin Horse* as a creaturely text. Tarr's work locates the corporeality of its characters, human or otherwise, as an expression of radical vulnerability.

The (in)visible animal

Scripted by Tarr and the Hungarian novelist László Krasznahorkai, *The Turin Horse* begins by making its nonhuman animal visible. Opening with a black screen, a voice narrates an apocryphal flash-fiction account of Nietzsche's descent into madness. In January 1889, Nietzsche steps out onto the Turin streets to find a cabman struggling with his 'stubborn horse':

Despite all his urging, the horse refuses to move, whereupon the cabman – Guiseeppe? Carlo? Ettore? – loses his patience and takes his whip to it. [...] The solidly built and full-moustached Nietzsche suddenly jumps up to the cab and throw his arms around the horse's neck, sobbing. His neighbour takes him home, where he lies for two days, still and silent, on a divan, until at last he mutters the obligatory last words: '*Mutter, ich bin*

⁵ Anat Pick, *Creaturely Poetics: Animality and Vulnerability in Literature and Film* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), p. 6. Pick's emphasis.

⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 14, 5.

dumm.' He lives for another 10 years, gentle and demented, in the care of his mother and sisters. Of the horse, we know nothing.

The monologue's closing sentence is a speculative and erotetic narrative question,⁷ affording the imaginative space for a cinematic response: Tarr's answer is a 146-minute film, divided into six days, each repeating the same events several times, and all underpinned by a funereal leitmotif composed by Mihály Vig. Inside this high concept answer is the principal visibility of the horse, made prevalent at the very start of the film. Tarr achieves this firstly by shifting the perspective away from humanity and onto the animal, an act of aesthetic "dehumanisation": the identity of the anonymous cabman ('Giuseppe? Carlo? Ettore?') is considered inessential, and it is – of all the philosophers imaginable – Nietzsche who falls down 'gentle and demented'. We know enough about Nietzsche, Tarr implies, but 'of the horse, we know nothing.' Tarr dehumanises Nietzsche and the cabman while making narrative space for the horse.

The phenomenological visibility of the horse is central to the film's first image. It bursts out of the darkness and onto the screen: the camera sits low, angling slightly upwards towards it (Fig. 1). Occupying the foreground of the scene, the horse lunges forwards while its owner, the cabman, is pulled along in the wagon at the back. Pictured in a grainy monochrome, Fred Kelemen's camera performs a parallel tracking shot. The dolly captures the horse as it slogs along a dirt road, moving between horse and owner during a long-take that lasts over four minutes. The camera dances and bends round to the sides, capturing the horse's locomotive body as it elastically zooms in and out. The

⁷ Noël Carroll, *Theorising the Moving Image* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 89.

kinetic animal strides unabated towards the camera, with Kelemen's reverse shot retreating in turn.⁸ Ceaseless wind throws dust and leaves into the air, exposing cadaverous trees in its wake. Trapped in a liminal nowhere land, the film begins by positioning the horse as its pained protagonist, a character tied to its workhorse role. With memories of the whip still looming, the horse moves only because it has to, carrying the cabman's weight in a struggle worthy of Sisyphus. Combining with the prior narrative monologue, then, this opening long-take helps shift the perspective from a human (Nietzsche) to a "creaturely" (the horse) domain, positioning the spectator as a sympathetic recipient of the animal.

The horse itself is a complicated and multifaceted figure. Locating the horse as being uniquely integrated within humanity, Elaine Walker's cultural and historical study *Horse* asserts that it is an animal like no other, 'a familiar animal'.⁹ Although an optimistic work, Walker concedes that horses have been – and still are – regarded instrumentally as 'a resource to be shaped or disposed of at will'.¹⁰ Consequently, Walker writes, there is a historical tension between the horse's status as victim, property and as an ultimately expendable instrument. However, just as humanity has historically shaped the horse, the horse has equally been integral to 'shaping' human development.¹¹ Keeping in mind that *The Turin Horse* is set in the late 1800s, Philip Armstrong attests

⁸ Robert Koehler, 'The Thinking Image: Fred Kelemen on Béla Tarr and The Turin Horse', *Cinema Scope*, 46 (2001) <<http://cinema-scope.com/cinema-scope-magazine/interview-the-thinking-image-fred-kelemen-on-bela-tarr-and-the-turin-horse/>> [Accessed 23/04/2014].

⁹ Elaine Walker, *Horse* (London: Reaktion Books, 2008), p. 7.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 67.

¹¹ Susan McHugh, *Animal Stories: Narrating across Species Lines* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), p. 3.

that ‘prior to the nineteenth century no animal was more central to the commerce of everyday European life than the horse’. Armstrong catalogues its importance ‘as a mode of transport, agricultural machine, agent of communication, weapon of war and tool of colonisation.’¹² The horse has a unique and enduring two-way relationship with humans in which it is simultaneously relied upon and yet expendable.

The human characters in *The Turin Horse* are utterly reliant on the horse, as Rancière’s *Béla Tarr, The Time After* confirms: ‘it is the tool for work, the means of survival for old Ohlsdorfer and his daughter. It is also the beaten horse, the animal martyred by humans.’ Rancière concludes that it is ‘the symbol of the existence of the disabled coachman and his daughter, kin to the Nietzschean camel, the being made to be loaded with all possible burdens.’¹³ Framed by Rancière not as *a* but *the* beast of burden, the horse takes on a synecdochic role, carrying the weight of humanity on its back. After Tarr’s opening long take, a black screen reads ‘The First Day’. Arriving at the cabman’s home, the horse is stripped of its harness and led into a barn. With the wind still howling, the cabman and his daughter close the wooden doors and return to their cabin. Set purely inside a sparse one room cabin, 30 claustrophobic minutes go by without the horse. Tarr invites us to assume it has faded into the background of the film. We see the disabled cabman struggling to dress himself as well as the first of four meal scenes, in which the characters eat only boiled potatoes (Fig. II). If the horse is as synecdochic as Rancière claims then its presence might linger even in its absence, maintaining its

¹² Philip Armstrong, *What Animals Mean in the Fiction of Modernity* (Oxford: Routledge, 2008), p. 8.

¹³ Rancière, p. 78.

(in)visibility. Nature, for instance, appears to be working against the human characters: the gale ‘roars relentlessly round the house’ and the cabin’s woodworms have mysteriously fallen silent; furthermore, the well is drying up and the family are running out of food. In an interview conducted in conjunction with the film’s release, Tarr states that there is ‘a force above human at work – the gale blowing throughout the film – that is also destroying the world.’¹⁴ By pitting its humans against nature, reducing them to a form of bare life,¹⁵ *The Turin Horse* again recalls Pick’s notion of dehumanisation. As Kovács confirms, ‘this is an absolutely dehumanised world’.¹⁶ In this sense the horse may be read as a spectral presence, one that looms over and “shapes” the plot even when offstage.

Kovács has a keen eye for the role of the environment across Tarr’s films, arguing that nature often ‘makes it impossible’ for Tarr’s characters to move forward. Discussing *The Turin Horse* specifically, he writes that it is the story of ‘people who are totally lost and incapable of finding a way of coping with their environment’.¹⁷ In his study of Tarr’s narrative techniques, however, Kovács overlooks the horse’s agency. After contending that the ‘basic theme of all Tarr’s films is *entrapment*’,¹⁸ he classifies *The Turin Horse* as an anomaly because its characters are neither betrayed nor other people make their lives difficult. This is where Kovács’ theory unravels, though, because it is

¹⁴ Vladan Petkovic, ‘Béla Tarr, Director’, *Cineuropa* <<http://cineuropa.org/it.aspx?t=interview&lang=en&documentID=198131>> [Accessed 12/04/2014].

¹⁵ Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. by Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998).

¹⁶ András Bálint Kovács, *The Cinema of Béla Tarr: The Circle Closes* (London: Wallflower Press, 2013), p. 150.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 99–100.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 99. Author’s emphasis.

precisely the horse that betrays the human characters *and* makes their lives difficult. Ready to work on the second day, the horse is dragged out of the barn and fitted with the harness. When the cabman begins whipping the horse into action, it merely stands still. The horse's mouth opens as the whipping intensifies: its muscles twitch and it turns from side to side, bending down and looking to kick out. With its head turning away, the horse's eyes avert the camera's gaze. Letting out a scream, the horse struggles vocally against the cabman. After almost a minute of whipping, the daughter shouts over the wind: 'Can't you see she won't move?' (Fig. III). The camera stays focused on the horse as they lead it back to the barn. By refusing to move the horse effectively cuts off the family's existence, confining them to the cabin and bringing about the end of the day.

The horse's protestations, in particular the piercing and painful screams, are indicators of 'the uniquely unsettling qualities conveyed by the cinematographic animal'.¹⁹ In Paul Sheehan's recent essay on animals in the films of Werner Herzog, he theorises that animals are "anti-cinema", imbued with the 'otherness of the non-manipulable' and hence breaking through the 'falsely protective aura of the image'.²⁰ Sheehan's argument echoes the influential claims of Jonathan Burt's *Animals in Film*: that animals can 'rupture [...] the field of representation'.²¹ As Sheehan notes, filmmakers have long attempted to contain the animal through training and domestication, yet even so the

¹⁹ Paul Sheehan, 'Against the Image: Herzog and the Troubling Politics of the Screen Animal', *SubStance*, 117 (2008), 117–136 (p. 118).

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 122.

²¹ Jonathan Burt, *Animals in Film* (London: Reaktion Books, 2002), p. 11.

screen cannot suppress the actuality of animal life, the puncturing truth of the animal's livingness. *The Turin Horse's* cinematographer, Fred Kelemen, reveals that Tarr found the horse himself: 'she was poorly treated in her life before the film. She had this deep sadness in her eyes and she didn't like to move with a carriage.'²² Tarr specifically chose an animal that had never appeared on screen before; what's more, he chose a horse that would resist the cabman's whip. The horse's panicked neighs, therefore, are not trained simulations but real evocations of the living animal.

In the film's following days, the horse silently fights back against the cabman's whip by refusing to eat or drink. To adopt some of Kovács terms, we might want to think of the horse as a traitor, a conspirator or a protestor, a character that works against the humans.²³ The third day begins with the family entering and cleaning the stable. Approaching the horse, the daughter notices that it has not been eating. The horse looks away at the wall as she implores 'Do eat! You have to eat!' (Fig. IV). Although I am wary of the term "agency" and its potential anthropomorphism,²⁴ there is something to be said of the horse's efforts, or lack thereof. These are not positive or forward-looking moments of agency, like one finds in the anthropomorphic animations of Disney, but rather necessarily negative. The horse's hunger strike is a retreat into absence and invisibility, both metaphorically and corporeally; it uses what little agency it has to simply do nothing. Unable to get the horse to drink, the daughter again shuts the barn

²² Koehler, para. 38.

²³ With the word protest I hope to also evoke Nicole Shukin: 'Animal signs [are] capable of protesting' hegemonic discourses. *Animal Capital: Rendering Life in Biopolitical Times* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), p. 130.

²⁴ Cf. Armstrong's fascinating discussion of nonhuman agency in *What Animals Mean*, p. 3.

doors. As the camera lingers over the closed wooden hatches, the emaciated horse is directly behind them but nevertheless hidden. This shot forces the viewer to confront the animal even in its absence on the screen.

The horse's rejection of its role as a human instrument anchors the cabman and his daughter to the cabin and, presumably, signals their eventual deaths. Without the horse as transport, an economy-creating and life-sustaining vehicle, there appears to be no world beyond their framed existence; Tarr's direction never takes us further than their small plot of land and often uses the cabin's windows as interior frames within the cinematic ratio, hinting metaphorically towards their confinement. On the fourth day they find the well running dry and, again, the daughter implores the horse: 'Why don't you eat? [...] At least drink a little water. For my sake', she says, putting the bucket up to the horse's mouth (Fig. V). The fifth day sees their desperation grow stronger: inside the barn, the camera hovers next to the horse's head for a whole minute, getting closer to its eyes before backing away (Fig VI). Tarr uses the horse's slow death as a method for withholding the privileges that the camera affords the audience. The spectator is positioned alongside the cabman and his daughter as they concede that they might never get the horse to eat. The camera follows them as they leave and hangs over the closed doors: it is the last time we will see the horse.

Although Rancière merely touches on the role of nonhuman animals in Tarr's films, what he does say is particularly useful: 'the animal inhabits Béla Tarr's universe as the

figure in which the human experiences its *limit*'.²⁵ Prompted by a confrontation with the animal, *The Turin Horse* offers a rebuttal of Nietzsche's "Will to Power", showing humanity's limit rather than its potential. The horse's hunger strike, and hence its metaphorical and physical disappearance, simultaneously brings about the disappearance (death) of the cabman and his daughter. The horse's (in)visible presence, therefore, radically destabilises the film's presentation of anthropocentrism. I will conclude my essay with a meditation on the aesthetic and technological phenomenon of cinema, aligning this with the nonhuman animal and Tarr's role as a retiring filmmaker.

Kinetic/Static, Cinema/Photography, Filmmaking/Retirement

In André Bazin's *What is Cinema?*, the French film critic and theorist states that 'all the definitive stages of the invention of cinema had been reached before the requisite conditions had been fulfilled.' Bazin identifies Eadweard Muybridge as an early pioneer, making 'from the image of a galloping horse the first series of cinematographic pictures.'²⁶ Muybridge's iconic photo series *Sallie Gardner at a Gallop* (1878), consisting of 24 photographs taken in rapid succession and assembled in a zoopraxiscope, has the kinetic animal as its central figure. The birth of cinema, therefore, is intimately connected to the "protoanimations" of horses. As Akira Mizuta Lippit's *Electric Animal* concludes: 'The advent of cinema is [...] haunted by the animal

²⁵ Rancière, p. 77. My emphasis.

²⁶ André Bazin, *What is Cinema?*, Vol. 1, trans. by Hugh Gray (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), p. 17.

figure'.²⁷ Since Muybrdige, animals – and horses in particular – have remained enduring presences in film. Walker and Lippit both separately note, for instance, that the birth of cinematographic technology in the late nineteenth century coincided with the redundancy of the workhorse. With the rise of film, 'a completely new "role" emerged' for the horse, trained as cowboys' companions in Westerns, for example.²⁸

There is a second "role", though, which induces the question of (in)visibility once more, namely Nicole Shukin's notion of the double entendre of *rendering*: the 'the mimetic act of making a copy' which is concomitant with 'the industrial boiling down and recycling of animal remains'.²⁹ Shukin argues that the film industry creates a 'vanishing point' which sees the disassembly of animal bodies; gelatine, for instance, is required for the material development of celluloid, thus rendering animals as an invisible yet always present component in the manufacture of film.³⁰ Horses are rendered onto and into film, part of the complex 'cultural and physical marginalisation' of animals in the late nineteenth century.³¹ *The Turin Horse* maintains Shukin's double entendre: it was filmed using 35mm print, a conscious decision by Tarr who refuses to use digital technology.³²

²⁷ Akira Mizuta Lippit, *Electric Animal: Toward a Rhetoric of Wildlife* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), p. 22.

²⁸ Walker, pp. 171–181.

²⁹ Shukin, p. 20.

³⁰ Shukin, p. 91.

³¹ Cf. John Berger's famous essay on the radical disappearance of animals under capitalism: 'Why Look at Animals?', *About Looking* (London: Bloomsbury, 2009), pp. 3–28 (p. 13).

³² 'I prefer 35mm. Celluloid, for me, is the thing', in Eric Kohn, 'An Interview With Bela Tarr: Why He Says *The Turin Horse* Is His Final Film, *Indiewire* (2012) <<http://www.indiewire.com/article/bela-tarr-explains-why-the-turin-horse-is-his-final-film?>> [Accessed 25/04/2014].

Keeping Bazin, Lippit and Shukin in mind, we might ask what this means for *The Turin Horse*, particularly in light of it being Tarr's final film. Like cinema itself, the film begins with the movement of the horse. As I discuss above, the horse is placed directly in our vision. Its movement, ceaselessly lunging towards the camera, is as repetitive and locomotive as the spinning zoopraxiscope. Set around 1889, the film's presumed date also coincides with the decades that saw the birth of cinema. Moreover, Tarr and Kelemen's camera captures the interior shots with expressionistic lighting, indicative of early silent film. *The Turin Horse's* final shot, of a flickering gas light hanging over the table (Fig. VII), is the only time at which Tarr's long-takes do not zoom or move. This stillness, mirroring that of the stubborn emaciated horse standing alone in the barn, is a retreat to what Lippit calls the 'catatonic corpus of photography'.³³ I want to suggest that, in this respect, the film follows an inversion of the technological development of cinema, like a zoopraxiscope spinning slower and slower until it stops: all that is left is the static photographic image of the horse.

The static image, as Roland Barthes writes in *Camera Lucida*, is a 'hallucination' in which the viewer must confront the pity felt at seeing the image's *punctum*, that which pierces the subject. For Barthes, this pity is like 'taking into one's arms what is dead, what is going to die, as Nietzsche did when, [...] on January 3, 1889, he threw himself in tears on the neck of a beaten horse: gone mad for Pity's sake.'³⁴ We find ourselves returning to *The Turin Horse's* opening monologue, to Nietzsche and his madness. As

³³ Lippit, p. 185.

³⁴ Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. by Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981), pp. 115–117.

Lippit argues, photography allows the viewer to ‘commingle with the spectacle, to embrace, as it were, the spectral other or dying animal.’³⁵ Tarr’s final film, I posit, charts a journey from kinetic to static, from cinema to photography, in which the viewer must confront the pity felt at seeing the dying horse. After the initial scene, the horse’s refusal to move positions it as a static, photographic image. *The Turin Horse* and its eponymous animal thus slowly vanish from cinematic representation, offering as they do so a hallucinatory embrace with the nonhuman animal.

If, as Rancière argues, the animal is ‘the figure in which the human experiences its limit’,³⁶ then it is also the very same for Tarr’s filmmaking process. Tarr’s retirement comes not because of his age or an illness but because he does not want to repeat himself:³⁷ the animal is therefore the figure in which Tarr’s filmmaking, too, experiences its limit. Cinema is the electric act of repetition, the spinning of the reel and the driving forwards of the horse. By making the horse (in)visible, the film delineates Tarr’s own passage from filmmaking to retirement. Through portraying the horse’s hunger strike in such sequential detail, *The Turin Horse* also reverses the technical trajectory of cinema: Tarr vanishes with the horse.

³⁵ Lippit, p. 177.

³⁶ Rancière, p. 77.

³⁷ Rapold, para. 3.