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The Turin Horse

Abstract

This is a film review of *The Turin Horse* (2011), directed by Bela Tarr.

Darkly intelligent and solemn throughout, Béla Tarr's exquisite film tells a heart-breaking story of the 'Turin Horse'. The film follows on from the tale of the Turin Horse featuring the German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche; it is said that whilst in Turin in 1889, he saw a horse being mercilessly beaten by its master. The tale says that the philosopher threw himself between the whip and the horse, clutching its neck before collapsing. After this he suffered a mental breakdown, a state that would affect him until his death in 1900. The story of *The Turin Horse* follows a cabman named Ohlsdorfer (János Derzsi) and his horse over a five day period in which the cabman and his daughter (Erika Bók) must witness the deterioration of the health of their horse and confront the nature and purpose of their own existence. Filmed entirely without colour and in a very simplistic yet subtle way, the film is quietly magnificent.

The film itself is based somewhat on Nietzsche's encounter with the cabman and his horse in Turin. As such the initial interpretation of the film is that it is an expression of Nietzsche's active and passive nihilism. The foundation of this interpretation is the setting of the film; a very arid, barren landscape with just a plain cottage standing alone. The house is continually harassed by harsh winds which never cease. There is also a small stone well and ruined barn in which the horse lives its miserable life. What the house, the object surrounded by the forces of nature, represents is the human form. The house is a pointless object for it stands without purpose. The house is particularly pointless in this setting because it is the shelter of the two people inside, who also seem to serve no purpose by their existence. The film shows the father and daughter living utterly unpleasant and pleasureless lives. Their backbreaking, dull schedule, which is exactly the same every day, includes waking

and going to sleep at the same time every day, not speaking with each other or barely with anyone else, sitting in the exact same places and staring out into the same wilderness in which they live, eating the exact same meal (one boiled potato) everyday without speech or any other emotion and not even smiling or looking at each other throughout the entire film.

What Nietzsche's nihilism states is that one can either confront the meaningless of existence and accept it, yet try to find hope in humanity's creative potential; or, one can remain in passive ignorance of this condition. Tarr's film is primarily concerned with the latter form of nihilism for, as illustrated, the father and daughter seem to hold little regard for the potential of their existence. It is plain and painfully drab and lacks any form of hope. They exist simply to exist without any contemplation upon the way they exist. However, towards the end of the film, the cottage's well dries up, cutting off the family's main source of sustenance. Add to this the increasing storms which blind them and prevent them from escaping (in other words, metaphorically speaking, their lives become more difficult), and of course finally the death of their horse, which is their only way of securing a living. This forces them to confront the nature of their own existence and to what end they continue to struggle to exist. Finally, the film ends when the outside world becomes dark and their attempts to light their lamps fail. The father commands his daughter to eat her potato, but she ignores him. Eventually he effortlessly sighs and ceases to eat himself. This is a playing out of passive nihilism which forces the characters to face the idea of nihilistic existence. In the film, however, there appears to be no hope or redemption for the father and daughter; as their world slowly shrinks they can find no reason in their lives to continue and choose instead to simply stop.

At this point it seems difficult to imagine what religious theme could be found amongst the overwhelming strength of such nihilistic ideas. Nietzsche after all denied the existence of God, infamously stating ‘God is dead’. The film takes on the ideas of Nietzsche by challenging the value of our existence, and also continues on to challenge in the same manner the existence of God. The film is Tarr’s bleak condemnation of attitudes that many people hold; he views humanity in this film as a monstrous creation that has the chance to create, yet with ignorance destroys. In the film they destroy not only their own potential in life, but also the potential of nature; the horse, which is a beautiful creature with the potential to be free, is captive and slave to the will of human beings; human beings who manipulate and work this creature to death to continue an existence devoid of meaning and joy. For Tarr, the creation reflects the creator; if our existence is pointless in that all it causes is damage, then so too does God’s. After all, we are as we are because we are made so. This critique is enforced throughout the film; firstly, through the words of a man from the town who comes to the house to borrow palinka from Ohlsdorfer. This man speaks of ruin and degradation of the towns; he speaks of man judging himself and also of God’s part in this judgement. His words condemn this creation as ‘ghastly’ precisely because its source is God. Tarr associates the destructive nature of human existence, and its utter lack of hope, with God. God is the root cause of the nature of existence; it is without meaning because he too is without meaning. This is a fascinating twist on the original theory of Nietzsche and can be seen to be immensely more aggressive; for if God’s existence is too nihilistic, then perhaps Tarr is denying active nihilism: that neither God nor humanity has any potential for creation of beauty and that both hold only the ability to destroy.

The film is particularly bleak and critical. Its nihilistic theme makes it a fascinating piece of art for those who have some knowledge of such philosophy. However, though I feel it is an important film to be viewed by the general public, its lack of dialogue and repetitive motions make it seem very long and hard to interpret, almost to the extent that if you have no familiarity with the philosophical messages it conveys, it may appear a film without any meaning. However, despite this issue, to select audiences it is truly a work of art and well worth the time to absorb.