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Late Modernist Noirs: Béla Tarr's *Damnation/ Kárhozat* and György Fehér's *Passion/ Szenvedély*

Abstract: Since the 80s, a large number of films, manifestly indebted to the classic American *noir* films of the 40s and 50s, have been appropriately labeled neo-*noirs*. An interesting, but less well documented version of this phenomenon, mostly American in its nature, is the case of some of the films belonging to the so-called Hungarian “Black Series”. Made at the end of the 80s and during the 90s, these films are modernist, stylized versions of the classic *noir* films. This essay tries to give an outline of this East European reappraisal of the *noir* film, by insisting on the narrative and aesthetical strategies used by directors such as Béla Tarr or György Fehér in order to deconstruct the classical genre.

Keywords: “Black Series”; Modernist Noir; Hungarian Cinema; Béla Tarr; György Fehér.

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In a seminal study published in 1998¹, András Bálint Kovács analyzed a peculiar development of the (back then) recent post-communist Hungarian cinema and identified a number of similar films, which he labeled “the post-communist Black Series” (in original, “*la ‘Série Noire’ post-communiste*”, since Kovács’s article was based on a lecture he had given in Paris, in January 1996). Under the “Black Series” moniker, Kovács grouped films made by Hungarian directors such as Béla Tarr, György Fehér, Attila Janisch, Ildikó Szabó and János Szász and compared them to similar films made in the post-communist Soviet Union and Poland. Most of these films were shot in black-and-white, most were bleak in tone and mood and most had decentered narrative structures. Their look and their amoral characters made them, according to Kovács, a late reincarnation of the classic, American *noir* films of the 40s and 50s. It is generally acknowledged that the morally ambiguous classic *noirs* embodied a certain malaise, characteristic for the post-war years in the United States. What kind of malaise did the films of the “Black Series” embody, then? According to

Kovács, one can glimpse into their desolate landscapes and their ambiguous plots a sort of general loss of faith in social cohesion, characteristic for the first years after the fall of communism in Eastern Europe.

In a later reassessment of Kovács's historical analysis, Mario Adobati points out a couple of inconsistencies to be found in Kovács's study. On the one hand, it is true that many of the Hungarian films assigned to the "Black Series" category were released in the first years after the fall of communism. After the release of Béla Tarr's *Kárhozat/ Damnation* in 1987, in less than a decade followed a couple of films that were similar – in terms of visuals, style and mood – to Tarr's film: György Fehér's *Twilight/ Szürkület* (1990), Attila Janisch's *Shadow on the Snow/ Árnyék a havon* (1992), Ildikó Szabó's *Child Murders/ Gyerekgyilkosságok* (1993), János Szász's *Woyzeck* (1994), Béla Tarr's *Satantango/ Sátántangó* (1994) and György Fehér's *Szenvedély/ Passion* (1998). However, assigning to these films a post-communist reflexive stance is slightly misleading. *Damnation* is, in this respect, an obvious example, since it was released before the fall of communism. *Satantango* was released in 1994, but it had already been planned by Tarr and the scriptwriter and novelist László Krasznahorkai before the shooting for *Damnation* began, and it was delayed due to the magnitude of the project. *Shadow on the Snow* was released in 1992, but director Attila Janisch stated that its style was indebted to György Fehér, since Janisch managed to see a working copy of Fehér's *Twilight* and was impressed by its look prior to start working on his own debut feature film². Therefore, some of the films of the "Black Series" have to be seen

in the context of the late 80s communist Hungary. As Adobati also points out, of great importance for the eventual development of this trend was the larger institutional context: in 1985 and 1987, two major reorganizations of the Hungarian film industry took place, due to which the four film studios responsible for making feature films were made more financially and artistically independent³. The new sense of creative freedom certainly had a significant effect on the works of many Hungarian directors of that era. Some of them, such as Béla Tarr, were able to embrace a more abstract and modernist approach in their films. This shift is easily recognizable in his work from the 80s – from the early, realist and quasi-documentarian style of his first three feature films – *Family Nest/ Családi tűzfészek* (1979), *The Outsider/ Szabadgyalog* (1981) and *The Prefab People/ Panelkapcsolat* (1982) – to the abstract and gloomy *Almanac of Fall/ Őszi almanach* (1984), which has Tarr's characteristic laconic dialogue, but not the style he will be later known for, and to *Damnation* and *Satantango*, which contain his later directorial trademarks (the use of black-and-white, long takes, ambiguous plot and characters). Retrospectively, the films from the "Black Series" can be understood as a distinct and regional phenomenon, a late reappropriation of modernist cinematic language in Eastern Europe at a time of major social discontent. This phenomenon is typical of Hungarian cinema, although films similar in style and mood were being made at the same time in post-communist Russia by directors such as Aleksey Balabanov (*Happy Days/ Schastlivyye dni*, 1991) and Aleksandr Sokurov (*Kamen/ The Stone*, 1992). Unknown to Kovács, who had theorized the

“Black Series” in 1996, it was a relatively short-lived artistic trend. With the exception of the two directors who largely inspired this informal aesthetic movement, Tarr and Fehér, by the late 90s and early 2000s all the other directors were making films that had little in common with their earlier, black-and-white, modernist phase. Fehér made one last film, *Passion*, in 1998, before his death, in 2002, and this film marks to some extent the unofficial ending of this particular aesthetic movement in Hungarian cinema. As for Tarr, he continued making films in the same vein until 2011, but his iconoclastic style was no longer – at least in Hungary – a reference point for the younger filmmakers. Therefore, chronologically, the “Black Series”, as an informal movement, lasts for about a decade, before being replaced by different aesthetic approaches. The aim of this article is to define the major characteristics of this informal movement by taking a closer look at the two films that mark its beginning and its end, *Damnation* and *Passion*.

What sort of modernism were the directors of the “Black Series” trying to emulate? One can start answering this question by comparing the films of the “Black Series” with some other films made in socialist Hungary in the 80s. Tarr’s and Fehér’s films were not the only ones shot in black-and-white. Márta Mészáros’s *Diary for My Children/ Napló gyermekeimnek* (1984) and Ildikó Enyedi’s *My Twentieth Century/ Az én XX. századom* (1989) are two preeminent examples of brilliantly used black-and-white cinematography in 80s Hungarian cinema. The latter, nevertheless, was rather lyrical in tone in its approach to early 20th century Hungarian

history. Mészáros’s film, on the other hand, was a personal and bold evaluation of the first years of socialism in Hungary, a retelling of the national history as reflected in the autobiographical story of a single family. By comparison, Tarr’s and Fehér’s films seem less personal (if at all), are more abstract than lyrical and seem to be, at a first glance, vaguely apolitical. As far as Tarr is concerned, this shift towards a more apolitical cinema is somewhat surprising, since, as his early work shows, he believed that cinema was very political in nature⁴. To some extent, at least in Tarr’s case, things are more complicated than they appear – when searching for locations for *Damnation*, Tarr and his crew selected specifically run-down places, isolated small towns that used to prosper back in the heyday of the Hungarian mining industry⁵. As such, *Damnation* and the subsequent films made by Tarr are not entirely lacking in social commentary, but their critical aim is somewhat abstract, since they do not seem to picture a present, geographically specific reality, but indistinct, timeless Eastern European landscapes and people. It appears, therefore, that the shift initiated by Tarr and emulated by other directors before and after the fall of communism in Hungary is a shift towards abstraction and, what is equally important, towards the reality of perception, of perceptual time. Indeed, most of the films from the “Black Series” can be retrospectively seen as preeminent examples of a kind of cinema that would be labeled “slow cinema” more than a decade later⁶. Tarr and his followers relied on long takes, but also on a sense of repetition, of circularity in their structure and visuals. In this respect, one can trace their influences back to abstract, avant-garde, experimental

cinema of the late 60s and 70s. Indeed, these feature films seem to approach familiar genres (in some cases, as we shall see below, crime films or *noirs*) with the visual sensibility of the avant-garde filmmaker.

There is, however, another important element in this shift: a retrieval of modern literary themes and structures. Probably the best example for this interest in the modernist literary tradition is György Fehér's *Twilight/ Szürkület*, released in 1990. At surface, *Twilight* is an arthouse version of a detective film. It loosely follows a police investigation occasioned by the gruesome murdering of a young girl. After an innocent peddler is accused of the crime and commits suicide after being coerced into confessing, one of the main characters, a detective, slowly develops an obsession for the case and sets up a trap for catching the real culprit, still on the loose. While rebuked by his superiors for his stubbornness, the detective turns out to be right, but, despite his efforts, in the end the murderer still manages to get away. At first glance, this plot seems to differ little – except as far as the ending is concerned – from a generic crime film. Nevertheless, Fehér manages to slow down the tempo of a generic crime movie considerably, putting together dramatic sequences (the interrogation of the peddler, the confrontation between the obsessed detective and his superior) and sequences that are of less importance for the plot, but contribute to the gloomy mood of the film – a deliberate and modernist attempt at dedramatizing the basic structure of the genre. As a result, part of the plot may seem difficult to grasp at first view. It is probably as difficult to guess from the filmed version that *Twilight* is in fact an adaptation of a well-known text written by

the modernist Swiss writer Friedrich Dürrenmatt. Fehér's choice of literary source for his film is nevertheless symptomatic. *Twilight's* source material is a crime novella published by Dürrenmatt in 1958, entitled *The Pledge/ Das Versprechen*. The story, conceived as a first-person narrative, is deliberately set up in order to illustrate the artificial nature of the conventional crime novel. Indeed, the novella was penned after Dürrenmatt wrote the script for the Ladislao Vajda's film *It Happened in Broad Daylight/ Es geschah am hellichten Tag* (1958) and felt unsatisfied with the resulting film. Echoes of this displeasure with the conventional plot structure of the crime genre are to be found in several passages of the book. Mainly, the narrator in *The Pledge* takes aim at the supposed rationality of the police procedures, or rather at the rational and mechanical manner in which they are depicted in the crime novel: "No, what really annoys me is the plot in your novels. Here the fraud gets to be too raw and shameless. You build your plots up logically, like a chess game; here the criminal, here the victim, here the accomplice, here the mastermind. The detective need only know the rules and play the game, and he has the criminal trapped, has won a victory for justice. This fiction infuriates me. Reality can only partially be attacked by logic. Granted, we police officials are forced to proceed logically, scientifically, but the factors that muck up the works for us are so common that all too frequently only pure professional luck and chance decide the issue for us. Or against us. But in your novels chance plays no part, and if something looks like chance it's represented as some kind of destiny or divine dispensation"⁷. As a result of this auctorial emphasis on

irrationality and chance, unlike in Fehér's subsequent adaptation of the novel, in *The Pledge* the actual murderer does not simply manage to escape, but is fortuitously killed in a car accident while the police forces are hopelessly waiting for him to fall into the trap prepared for him. Dürrenmatt, thus, accomplishes an outright deconstruction of the logic of the crime novel. Fehér, in his turn, tries a further deconstruction of an all too familiar plot that has already been radically altered. Besides proposing a different ending for the story, *Twilight* barely touches on the motivation of the characters and, by its emphasis on sequences that seem to add very little information to the main plot, decenters the narration, while leaving the viewer with a sense of moral disorientation.

This radical and abstract deconstruction of already abstract modernist narratives is typical for most of the films of the "Black Series". János Szász's *Woyzeck* is an abstract and stylized rendition of Georg Büchner's canonical stage play. György Fehér's *Passion* is a stripped-down version of James M. Cain's novel, *The Postman Always Rings Twice* (1934), which by 1998 had already been adapted several times – most famously, by Tay Garnett in 1946 and by Bob Rafelson in 1981. Cain's novel is hardly a canonical modernist text, but, by 1998, it already had achieved the status of a seminal *noir* narrative. As far as Tarr is concerned, he found in his frequent collaborator, László Krasznahorkai, the modernist writer that matched his aesthetic and formal aspirations. The texts the films of the "Black Series" were based on were, to some extent, bound up not by their similarities, but by their diffuse status as canonical alternatives to the kind of

narratives predominant in the Hungarian cinema of the 80s and early 90s. With the exception of Krasznahorkai's writings, none of them were Hungarian, and none of them belonged to a list of canonical works officially sanctioned by the communist regime. Rather, they belonged to an alternative canon of modernist or undervalued texts that addressed problems such as moral guilt, social disintegration and urban alienation.

It might seem peculiar that directors such as Tarr and Fehér chose to emulate the narrative structure and the visual aesthetics of film *noir*. However, this is not as surprising if one takes into account the fact that American cinema saw a revival of the genre during the 80s, reincarnated as the even more morally ambiguous (when compared to the classic noir of the 40s and 50s) neo-noir⁸. It is unlikely that Tarr, Fehér or other directors of the "Black Series" would have seen themselves as imitators of Hollywood cinema; rather, their films are distinctly European, as far as their style and narration are concerned, if not distinctly Eastern European. However, they were surely aware of the rise in preeminence of the American neo-noir, while their films can be seen to some extent as arthouse responses to this generic transformation. On the other hand, as James Naremore has argued, the classic *noir* films were in themselves a particular embodiment of modernist American sensibilities⁹. *Noir* films can be seen as a reaction against the sentimentality and artificiality of the American cinema of the 30s, a cynical reevaluation of the "American dream" and "the American way of life", as they were embodied in many films made during that era. It has

been noted on many occasions that this re-evaluation was at least partially European in spirit, since many directors responsible for the *noir* films of the 40s were European émigrés, used to different stylistic and narrative conventions. Naremore aptly uses the label “blood melodramas” for the films made by these European émigrés, since, even if these films followed until a certain point the conventions of the American melodrama, their obsession with repressed sexuality, societal violence and, ultimately, the vacuity of the American dream (a major underlying theme in many of them) radically deconstructed the familiar genre. Something similar, although taking into account the altogether different context of the Hungarian cinema of the 80s, can be argued about Tarr's and Fehér emulation of classic *noir* visual style and tropes. To some extent, the pessimism and apocalyptic mood of their films can be seen as a response to the more conventional kind of cinema made in Hungary in those years. In Tarr's case, of equal significance is the abandonment of his realistic, socially conscious approach towards filmmaking and his personal status as an outsider in the Hungarian film industry. What is, however, striking about many of the films of the “Black Series” is that their stories hardly try to advance, in an allegorical manner, as it was the case in many other Eastern European cinemas of the late 80s, a diffuse and oblique statement about the state of the socialist society. An exception is Ildikó Szabó's *Child Murders*, which is partially an indictment of post-socialist local racist and misogynistic attitudes – and is probably the film least similar to the classical *noir* in the “Black Series”. As it would be discussed further on, Tarr's approach is supposed to

subtly instill in the viewer a mood and an implicit view about society, but Tarr's aim is not that of advancing an explicit political statement. Rather, as is the case with many classic *noir* films, Tarr's and Fehér's films take aim primarily at the aesthetic and narrative conventions of a kind of conventional cinema they don't identify with, and only implicitly advance a pessimistic and somewhat political worldview.

Damnation is, in many respects, a prime example of the subordination of indexical reality to the purpose of creating a certain mood and a particular type of narrative cohesion, so characteristic for several films belonging to the “Black Series”. For Tarr, the actual narrative is dependent on location and the particular types of non-professional actors he uses in his films, rather than the other way around. As stated earlier, Tarr and his frequent collaborators – his life partner and editor Ágnes Hranitzky, the writer László Krasznahorkai, the film composer Mihály Víg – selected as extras for the film actual inhabitants of derelict small towns from the formerly prosperous mining regions of the country. In a carefully choreographed tracking shot in the film, their expressive, passive stance is integrated into the narrative, adding to the film a sense of hopelessness and ambiguous failure. However, in *Damnation* Tarr goes beyond creating a sort of collective unease by means of using actual people as background characters for the story. The landscape so preeminent in the film is actually assembled from various, but carefully selected locations in order to give a sense of universal desolation – in the words of Gyula Pauer, the film's set designer: “We wandered through all the miners' villages

and towns in the country. We were looking for an industrial environment that bore the clear and irrefutable imprint of slow destruction and decomposition. What was once meant for dynamic growth and multiplication, what still bore the sign of a nicer and richer future, but was now in an infinitely run-down state, showed only the death of such old illusions"¹⁰. As Anna Batori notes, the emphasis of the film on locations that are quasi-urban or belong to the countryside is in itself a subtle reversal of a fundamental characteristic of socialist Hungarian cinema in the earlier decades; while Hungarian films from the 60s or 70s tended to view life lived outside major cities as being more authentic and more in line with a certain national spirit, *Damnation* equates the decomposition of the small towns with the larger social tendency towards societal disintegration and loss on national identity¹¹. As for Tarr's indebtedness to film *noir* (which he, in fact, admits in an interview shot for the Criterion release of *Damnation*), it is clearly visible in his recreation of *noir* visual tropes: characters waiting in the rain outside a bar signaled by neon light, smoky rooms in which the indispensable female crooner sings a song, protagonists dressed in trench coats that would have seem out of fashion at the time of the shooting. However, *Damnation* has the look of a *noir*, but an altogether different rhythm, compared to the average American *noir* or neo-*noir*, it is a slowed-down version of a typical *noir*. The crucial ingredients of a *noir* are present – the *femme fatale*, the amoral, doomed love relation, the criminal underworld –, but Tarr and Krasznahorkai insert them in a narrative that puts less emphasis on cause-effect coherence and more on the

static, museum-like aspects of the world which the characters inhabit. The shots in *Damnation* are lengthy, the camera tracks slowly, at times almost imperceptibly, in most scenes; in certain moments, the camera ceases to follow the main characters in order to focus on details or landscapes that are almost insignificant for the plot. Such directorial strategies may suggest to the viewer that the plot is only marginally important and that the fate of the characters is less important than the more substantial tragedy symbolized by the ever-present decay and social stagnation. The film is permeated, as most *noirs* are, by a sense of moral disorientation, most notably present towards its ending, when one of the main characters decides to alert the police about the illegal activities of his lover and subsequently, in the last sequence, seems to regress to a state of quasi-animalistic aggression. However, as striking as this betrayal is, the director's emphasis on the mundane and almost mechanical aspects of mundane life – symbolized by choreographed sequences of joyless dance or by the intermittent sounds of the mining machinery – is more effective in conveying a sense of apocalyptic stasis that is even more morally disorientating than the implications of the plot. Tarr and Krasznahorkai use the formulaic aspects of film *noir* in order to create a radically different narrative, in which characters and landscapes the camera only takes a glimpse at are at least as important for the overall meaning of the film as are the moral choices of its protagonists. This, in itself, might not seem a radical reappraisal of the meaning of film *noir*; in fact, film historians have generally pointed out the importance of the settings and the locations for the overall mood created by

noir directors. Tarr, on the other hand, insists that each of his lengthy shots is filmed in such a manner as to be able to stand on its own, as a block of time, of lived experience. This fragmentation of the narration into quasi-independent, episodic instances decenters the formulaic structure of *noir* and, aided by the de-dramatization of the plot, manages to recreate the genre in a late modernist vein.

Passion/ *Szenvedély*, Fehér's 1998 film, adds another twist to Tarr's recreation of the genre. Although the film is hardly different in terms of style and look from *Damnation* and although Tarr is credited for co-writing the script, Fehér ends his film in a deliberately mystical fashion, inserting before the closing credits a quote from the *Book of Revelation*. The passage underlines the moral implications of the plot, putting them in a Christian ethical framework: "And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Another book was opened, which is the book of life. The dead were judged according to what they had done as recorded in the books". Such clear-cut moralizing is hardly found in any of Tarr's films. Even if the general mood in many of Tarr's films is one universal decay and imminent apocalypse, he usually abstains from drawing any unambiguous moral conclusions. Nonetheless, even if Fehér's reference to Christian morality certainly constitutes in itself a personal interpretation of James M. Cain's classical novel, *Passion* is hardly a moralizing version of Cain's text. Rather, as in *Twilight*, Fehér seems to put more emphasis – through repetitions of key scenes and similar camera moves – on the quasi-mechanical aspects of the generic *noir*

plot. Most notably, the opening scene of the film is restaged towards the middle of the film, but with a different ending, making the viewer unsure about the otherwise linear chronology of the plot. Another shot which is repeated in *Passion*, with minor variations of the camera angle, is the one in which the protagonist furiously bashes the tools in the repair shop – a futile physical act of aggression which evidences his sexual frustration and his lack of control over events. This carefully staged emphasis on repetition and circularity – a manner of narration that shows Fehér's indebtedness to the modernist cinema of the 60s and 70s – suggests an auctorial vision permeated, at least in part, by a rational and disenchanted appraisal of the physical and social reality. *Passion* is, by comparison with other adaptations of Cain's novel, such as Bob Rafelson's 1981 version, an austere, stripped-down variation. At a running time of approximately 120 minutes, the film is composed of only 44 shots and includes, compared to the generic *noir*, very little dialogue. As such, its lengthy and slow-paced shots can function, as in Tarr's case, as separate blocks of time, unified by a simplified plot. What some of the shots capture in the background is a sense of economic decay (signified by working industrial furnaces) and social isolation. However, this late, modernist adaptation of Cain's novel presents itself as an interesting case of cultural appropriation, beyond its integration of Eastern European industrial scenery and regional cultural nuances. The male protagonist in *Passion* is defined by his total lack of social connections; he doesn't seem to have any family or friends, while the couple he begins to work for seems to be similarly isolated. Typically for a film

noir, social institutions are working against the interests of the protagonists, are absent or corrupt; in post-communist Hungary, in the late 90s, the emphasis on such themes was decidedly meant to allude to the disintegration of the social order due to the fall of communism. In a world in which the individual is hopelessly isolated and lacks any power when faced with abusive or corrupt institutions, his moral guilt and sense of moral responsibility become less preeminent – or at least this is what the film seems to imply, by giving voice in key scenes to representatives of such abusive or corrupt institutions. In a manner similar to Tarr's, Fehér uses the familiar plot of *noir*, de-dramatizes it and adds to the narrative elements which are not crucial to the plot, but which give a sense of a more general moral malaise. Like any modernist

approach towards filmmaking, Tarr's and Fehér's stance is ultimately self-reflexive. Directors of the classic *noir* films were probably conscious of their inherent critique of the moral foundations of American society. In Tarr's and Fehér's case, one can assume an even more self-conscious reappraisal of the functions of the genre and a deliberate strategy meant to steer the attention of the viewer away from the conventional plot of a *noir* and towards the social implications of the events and situations captured by the directors.

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NOTES

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2. Mario Adobati, "The Hungarian Post-Communist Black Series (1956–2012). A Preparatory Sketch about the Historical Times' Structure", *Hungarian Studies*, 1 (32), 2018, p. 138.
3. *Ibidem*, p. 135.

4. András Bálint Kovács, *The Cinema of Béla Tarr: The Circle Closes*, New York, Wallflower Press, 2013, p. 2.
5. *Ibidem*, p. 15.
6. Tiago de Luca, Nuno Barradas Jorge, "Introduction: From Slow Cinema to Slow Cinemas", in Tiago de Luca, Nuno Barradas Jorge (eds.), *Slow Cinema*, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2016, pp. 2-4.
7. Friedrich Dürrenmatt, *The Pledge*, translated from German by Richard and Clara Winston, New York, Alfred A. Knopf, p. 13.
8. See Jason Holt, "A Darker Shade: Realism in Neo-Noir", in Mark T. Conrad (ed.), *The Philosophy of Film Noir*, Lexington, The University Press of Kentucky, 2009, p. 44 sqq.
9. James Naremore, *More than Night: Film Noir and its Contexts*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 2008, pp. 40-95.
10. András Bálint Kovács, *The Cinema of Béla Tarr: The Circle Closes*, p. 62.
11. Anna Batori, *Space in Romanian and Hungarian Cinema*, Cham, Palgrave Macmillan, 2018, pp. 147-148.