

*CIRCULUS VITIOSUS DIABOLUS:*  
NIETZSCHEAN THEMATICS IN  
*SÁTÁNTANGÓ*

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*"A non-religious repetition, neither mournful nor nostalgic, a return not desired. Wouldn't the disaster be, then, the repetition—the affirmation—of the singularity of the extreme? The disaster or the unverifiable, the improper."*

—Blanchot, *The Writing of the Disaster*

*"That we were frightened, when you died, no, that your stern death broke in upon us, darkly wrenching the till-then from the ever-since: this concerns us; setting it all in order is the task we have continually before us."*

—Rilke, "Requiem for a Friend"

*"Should we die, the mechanics of life would go on without us, and that is what people feel most terribly disturbed by [...], though it is only the very fact that it goes on that enables us properly to understand that there is no mechanism."*—Krasznahorkai, *War & War*

Hölderlin assumed, or one of his consoling thoughts was that every ferment and every dissolution must lead "either to annihilation or to a new organization of things." Since he didn't consider total

annihilation possible, he affirmed that future ages “must return out of our corruption and decay. I believe,” he avowed, “in a coming revolution in the way we think, feel, and imagine, which will make the world as we have known it till now grow red with shame.”<sup>1</sup> If the cosmos itself will not be annihilated, in the nuclear epoch, in the century of dark matter and dark energy, the exponential probability of the annihilation of humanity as a species seems inevitable. It should be sobering that there are infinitely more beetles than humans on the earth, a conspicuous indication that the planet is clearly not ours, despite our apparent ability to master it. In the interim, as we await our inevitable extinction, and this is our serious game, we struggle to overcome corruption and decay, or to emerge from the uncanny shadow of a nihilism that continues to echo throughout time as it threatens to engulf or consume us like Saturn devouring his children. Whether envisioning the rendition by Goya or Rubens, the image of the devouring god may be the defining one of the 21<sup>st</sup> century: era of sacrifice, cannibalism, and madness. Era of cruelty, mercilessness, and the corruption of power. In the midst of this, we strive to organize things anew; we strive to return out of the preceding age’s corruption and decay and to transfigure thinking, feel-

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<sup>1</sup> Friedrich Hölderlin, *Hyperion and Selected Poems*, tr. by Eric L. Santner (London: Continuum International Publishing Group, 1990), xiv.

ing, and imagining, as Hölderlin hoped to do. His drama on Empedocles warns us though of exceeding our measure. Few heed the signal. If it is imperative to conceive of new ways of existing or new praxes of life, such developments are slow and painstaking, like recovering from a life-threatening malady. Even in the midst of significant transformations, even in the midst of revolutions, whether political, religious, or artistic one is still often ruled by old values, for they have been inscribed in the body over millennia. It is only through patient and persistent work that we can alter our constitution, but often we are violently thrust into the new and the effects of such shocking ingresses into it deceive us into believing that the changes we have undergone are permanent and lasting, but old values continue to reverberate and surface at the most surprising moments.

If we believe or profess to be modern, that is, more advanced, more developed, or more enlightened, and technological innovation compels if not tricks us into thinking such, those innovations are phantasms; they create the pernicious illusion of progress, of some teleological development, and conceal the fact that we are still quite primitive, still as savage as the giants of the Old Testament, still devourers of our children. Refined, perhaps, elegant, indeed, but still Saturnine, still

melancholic—that is, *cannibals*. And the messiahs speak of hope and change as if such things were but instant oatmeal. Add water, if you have it, and presto! However, real transformations are slow, and the tempo of the metamorphosis may not even be *lento*, but an extended *grave*. The naïve optimists will continue to sing their cheery jingles though and castigate those who refuse their panaceas as hopeless pessimists, but true affirmation, which does not refuse suffering, is not easily gained, and resisting hope and those who preach of it is the necessary antidote to myopia, a tonic which keeps us from the opiate trance that messianic figures seek to hypnotize us into with a hope that is only false. To resist facile hope is to recognize and to live with one's suffering, to know that the tragic sensibility must endure, for it is the only clear-eyed vision there is. If we cannot abate the disaster, the one honor we have is the probity of our lucidness.

Bela Tarr's<sup>2</sup> epic film *Sátántangó* is a profound meditation on temporality, nihilism, and the tragic burden of spiritual homelessness.

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<sup>2</sup> For the sake of convenience I will refer only to Tarr as the director but, as listed in the credits, *Sátántangó* is "a film by László Krasznahorkai, Ágnes Hranitzky, and Béla Tarr." Even if film is an essentially collaborative or collective effort, this is one of the few films in the annals of cinema history to actually be credited as having three "directors." *Werckmeister Harmonies* and *The Man from London* are credited the same as well and *Damnation* is credited as a film by László Krasznahorkai, Gábor Medvigy, Gyula Pauer, Mihály Víg, Ágnes Hranitzky, and Béla Tarr. There is no separate director credit for Tarr alone, as there is in his early films.

The film commences with an absurd if not comic prelude during which, in a mud sodden field, several bulls struggle to indiscriminately mount whichever cow they can as the tolling of a death knell resounds. When precisely the prelude occurs in the overall time economy of the film, whether it is simultaneous with the episode that follows it, or whether it is simultaneous with the final reel, remains ambiguous.<sup>3</sup> As an analogue to the characters of the abandoned hamlet, it reflects the absurdity and aimlessness of their lives, which have become almost purely animalistic after Irimias, a false messiah<sup>4</sup> who promised them a renewed life, has supposedly died. Trapped like the figures of Plato's cave, since they are not self-directed, as Irimias says, "they go after that shadow like a herd for they cannot live without splendor and illusion. Leave them alone with these and they go mad and ruin the lot." Are their various means of escape meant to forestall the inevitability of fate, or alleviate the overwhelming nihilism they suffer from, as do even Irimias and his cohort Petrina? Tarr portrays such gestures as futile, symptomatic perhaps of a total failure of the imagination, or a loss of the ability to endow one's life with direction—in Nietzsche's terms, to give sense to the

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<sup>3</sup> Almost every episode of the film, except for several of the second half, overlap with "A hír, hogy jönnek" [The News Of Their Coming], and it is during those episodes that I believe the prelude would overlap, or with the final reel, which is the other moment the bells are heard.

<sup>4</sup> This phrase is essentially redundant since all messiahs are false.

earth. Since, as the narrator observes, the nearest chapel is eight kilometers distance from the hamlet, it has no bell, and its tower collapsed during a war (which war is never specified), the tolling signals an apocalypse that is never to come. And if no apocalypse is to come, ergo, neither will redemption, but redemption is not necessary, only *amor fati*, or the uniting of freedom and order, yet those are the challenging tasks that only one character seems to be able to achieve.

Immediately, Tarr illustrates in the very opening of *Sátántangó* that certain events in the film are deceptive and must be questioned; in particular, religious interpretations of reality are to be mistrusted, for the sound of the bells that toll throughout the film may be nothing more than the auditory hallucination of Futaki,<sup>5</sup> Irimias' most devoted

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<sup>5</sup> Kovács claims that the sound of the bells "come[s] from a cheap belfry, whose rope is pulled by a half-wit," but that is distinctly not true—there are two entirely different sounds that Kovács does not distinguish between: the hard, sharp sound produced by the piece of iron which the "half-wit" clangs versus the soft and mellifluous sound produced by the bells that both Futaki and the Doctor hear. See András Bálint Kovács, "*Sátántangó*," *The Cinema of Central Europe*, ed. by Peter Hames (London & New York: Wallflower Press, 2004), 241. When the Doctor hears the bells at the very end of the film, unlike Futaki, who remains fearful of them, even though he is severely overweight and it is difficult for him to walk, the Doctor travels the long distance to the church to make an empirical investigation of the sound. When he reaches the church, he discovers a "madman" shouting repeatedly, "The Turks are coming! The Turks are coming!", and clanging a piece of iron, which is not what produced the knell. At that moment in the film, the sound of the knell and the clanging iron are blended together, then the latter fades out, and after it the knell fades out as the Doctor traverses the road back to the hamlet. Clearly, there are two different sounds. When reaching his abode, the Doctor boards up the window through which he witnessed the events of the film. It is as if he is returning to chaos, for all light is completely blacked out, and he begins narrating anew the opening of the film, but with

acolyte and, finally, the only character to free himself of the false messiah.<sup>6</sup> When avowing that every one of his films is an interrogation of belief, Tarr himself corroborates that *Sátántangó* is critical of theological interpretations of reality for ultimately they are destructive illusions which purport to be accurate representations of existence.<sup>7</sup> “In each of the films,” Tarr points out, “you can see a combination of faiths, beliefs, and interests. But each faith is revealed as based on illusion. And then it spreads thin and disappears.”<sup>8</sup> For Kovács, Tarr depicts “metaphysical territory” as nothing less “than a shelter from utter despair,

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slight variations—is he erasing the source of the story he witnessed in order to rewrite it anew? Futaki’s first response after hearing the death knell is to flee the town in fear; the Doctor’s is to make an investigation, after which, since no logical answer can be found, to obliterate all light and thus shut out the incoming ‘data’ of the world and then commence narrating a story. Whereas Futaki believes the knell is real, the Doctor thinks that he is beginning to lose his sense of reason. “I must be crazy. I’ve mistaken the bells of the sky for the sound of the knell!” Earlier, just before he hears the knell, he says that his hearing is getting worse and then says, “A cosmic *wirtschaft*.” Thus, he attributes it to either the deterioration of his health, or the sound of the cosmos itself, not to some metaphysical signification of the end of the world.

<sup>6</sup> If other people see through or doubt Irimias at times, at the close of the film, everyone obeys his commands except for Futaki, who is therefore the only person to escape from his clutches. It is clear from Futaki’s expression and the circumspect way he gazes at Irimias before walking away from him and refusing his scheme that he has finally “seen through” him. Thus, as Estike, he offers one of the two pathways out of nihilism; or, at very least, he is finally *divested* of his belief, a dangerous illusion that temporarily led him astray. In the report he makes for the authorities, Irimias refers to Futaki as “dangerous and reliable,” meaning perhaps that he is more free willed than anyone else.

<sup>7</sup> Nietzsche distinguishes between two types of illusion: one which we recognize as an illusion but in which appearance is valued as appearance, and another, the negative type, which isn’t recognized as an illusion, or which we *refuse* to recognize as an illusion and instead assert as an ontological truth, such as Christianity, or any other religious system, metaphysic, myth, etc.

<sup>8</sup> <http://home.earthlink.net/~steeve/bela.html>

and belief in it is the final proof of human defencelessness. It's only good is to enable people to hide their own misery from themselves."<sup>9</sup> Whether that is a virtue is dubious however, soon enough dangerous, and Tarr seems to want people to confront their misery directly, to know suffering as their own. As Kovács puts it, fate for Krasznahorkai and Tarr "is that of the unchanging, of the eternal return. There is no crime needed for it, nor a blow of fate. It applies to everyone, regardless of where we are in the social hierarchy."<sup>10</sup> In revealing that faith of whatever order is based on illusion, Tarr engages in a Nietzschean agon with the ascetic ideal, which Irimias in part represents, and in divesting his viewers of such illusions, Tarr illustrates the degree to which faith is mendacious, the "counter-concept to life" as Nietzsche proclaims, for the concept 'God' is that which brings "together into one dreadful unity everything harmful, poisonous, slanderous, the whole mortal enmity against life!"<sup>11</sup> However, Tarr's statement cannot in and of itself substantiate this argument; the work itself is the sole crucible, but as will be demonstrated, *Sátántangó* does bear out such a critique,

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<sup>9</sup> Kovács, *Ibid.*, 241.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 241.

<sup>11</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, "Why I am a Destiny" §8, *Ecce Homo*, tr. by Duncan Large (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

evident not only in the narration and the events of the film, its “story,” but in its very time structure.

If multiple types of temporality, from chronological to synchronic, narratological, simultaneous, and real are employed in *Sátántangó*, it is through the use of repetition that Tarr most particularly undercuts the illusion of linearity, an orthodox structure of cinema, which can be emblematic of eschatological temporality. Although all films that use multiple time sources certainly don't subvert onto-theological time constructs, in its use of repetition, *Sátántangó* deliberately subverts the illusion of forward movement, thereby eliminating the possibility of closure or finality, which is to say, Judgment Day shall never arrive.<sup>12</sup> Repetition functions not only to deploy a Nietzschean panoply of perspectives from which to perceive events, it also renders eschatological time inoperative and generates the *sensation* of the eternal return in the viewer. Since time cannot literally be elongated, for a second is always a second and an hour is always an hour, in immersing his viewers

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<sup>12</sup> What Krasznahorkai says of the sentences of his novel *War & War* in the novel itself may equally be said of the shots or events in *Sátántangó*: “. . . when the text was examined in greater detail it seemed that time had ceased and history itself had come to an end, so whatever appeared in those huge inflated sentences, whatever new element entered them, none of it led anywhere or prepared the way for anything, it was neither preamble nor closure, neither cause nor effect, simply one glimpsed element of a picture moving at unprecedented speed, a detail, a cell, a chunk, a working part of an indescribably complex whole that stood immobile in those gigantic sentences . . .” (New York: New Directions, 1996), 198.

in time-images that are of an inordinately lengthy duration, which is to say, as opposed to using shots strictly to convey information, such as to establish place, which is a basic convention of commercial films, thereby reducing cinematography to a mere instrument for articulating plot, Tarr lingers over objects, faces, landscapes, *et cetera* and creates the *sense* of elongated time through such extended scenes, which are even exasperating, but purposefully and rightfully so, for the desired effect is to create in the viewer the *feeling* of being s u s p e n d e d in time, or of time being s t r e t c h e d out, that there is no ending which will ever come, just as through returning to the first reel in the final moments of the film, one is made to feel as if there is no beginning either, only an eternally revolving series of cycles that indefinitely and perpetually persist over the course of the film's 435 minutes. In submerging us for such an extended duration in the tragic condition of the characters as well as in the landscape or the cosmos of the film, Tarr forces us to *experience* time differently, to *live it* as the characters live it and to be intimately woven into the invisible web in which they are silently engulfed as they dance into oblivion. To evoke one of Nietzsche's images, one feels as if the eternal hourglass of existence is being turned upside down again and again and again. For Tarr, plot is de-

ceptive because it misleads people “into believing that something has happened. In fact,” he argues, “nothing really happens as we flee from one condition to another. Because today there are only states of being—all stories have become obsolete and clichéd, and have resolved themselves. All that remains is time.”<sup>13</sup> As the sole true remnant then, time for Tarr is the force that resists resolution, the cosmic crucible that shatters anthropomorphic delusions and forces us to countenance existence as tragic. In portraying time as elastic, Tarr subverts if not supersedes plot and deceptive resolutions that purport to offer comfort through creating a cinema of the image in which the poetry of space hovers in its own domain. As Nabokov said of Gogol, and this is a fitting comparison considering Sontag’s comparison of Krasznahorkai to Gogol, the same could be said of Tarr: “the *real* plot (as always with Gogol) lies in the style, in the inner structure of the transcendental anecdote. In order to appreciate it at its true worth one must perform a kind of mental somersault so as to get rid of conventional values in literature and follow the author along the dream road of his superhuman imagi-

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<sup>13</sup> Béla Tarr, “Why I Make Films,” in *The Early Films of Béla Tarr* (Chicago: Facets Video, 1987): 10. This is the booklet to the DVD of *The Outsider*. The same brief essay by Tarr is included in the *Family Nest* DVD, and this passage is quoted on the inside cover to the *Sátántangó* DVD.

nation."<sup>14</sup> However, in Tarr's aesthetic, there is no transcendental anecdote, but his work demands the same mental somersaults as does Gogol's, for Tarr takes his spectators on a similarly heightened imaginative dream road.

If eschatological temporality is rendered inoperative, the promise of transcendence is obliterated and there is an inevitable confrontation with tragic reality.<sup>15</sup> What Tarr refers to as the spreading thin and disappearance of faith is evident both in the film's time structure and in certain conflicts between characters, such as when Kelemen drunkenly narrativizes his encounter with Irimias to everyone in the bar. Mrs. Halics, who, as other characters, interprets Irimias' return theologically as a resurrection, equates Irimias with the savior and counters Kelemen's every drunken utterance with some religious interpretation, often quoting fragments from Revelations. As their dialogue comes to a close, she pronounces that there will "be weeping and mourning, as the prophet says," to which Kelemen replies, "No. Creation. Spritzer! Crea-

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<sup>14</sup> Vladimir Nabokov, *Gogol* (New York: New Directions, 1961), 144.

<sup>15</sup> Kovács also finds a refusal of transcendence in *Sátántangó*, and in Tarr's films in general, and rightfully challenges and refutes the parallel other critics have made between Tarr and Tarkovsky and the rendering of time in their films. But Kovács refers to the refusal of transcendence as the "emptying out" of time, which I don't think is the most accurate phrase, because a form of temporality remains in Tarr's work. As I argue, it is specifically *eschatological temporality* that Tarr renders *inoperative* and in its place espouses a *cyclical conception* of time akin to the ancient Greek or Nietzschean one. It is not that time itself is "emptied out" or eliminated. See Kovács, *Ibid.*, 242.

tion is a spritzer," thus refuting her biblical view of the genesis and destruction of the world and equating it instead with chaos, an ever flowing and foaming over explosive mass. If Kelemen's anarchist vision of everything being dynamited is a fantasy, for most of the details of his story are false, Tarr's view of him is comic whereas the believers in the film are consistently mocked, parodied, or their beliefs undermined. And Tarr denudes Irimias of any sense of power and mystery and continually undercuts whatever power he may have throughout the film.<sup>16</sup> The chaos in which everyone is engulfed is symbolized too in a fleeting but significant detail in the Doctor's room, a detail which has not been remarked upon in any previous essays on the film. As the principal narrator of the film, the Doctor is the prism through which most of its

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<sup>16</sup> When first introduced, Irimias and Petrina are seen from behind as they struggle to walk down a garbage littered street, blown about as if they were both just two other flimsy pieces of garbage beaten by the fierce winds. They are not determined leaders or revolutionaries, but confidence men who dutifully walk to a government office to answer a summons. Unlike messiahs or powerful figures, Irimias and Petrina have to wait in the hallway for the Captain to see them, just as would any one else devoid of power. In their encounter with the Captain, we discover they have committed many petty crimes and, as implied in the scene, have been informants for several years. As Petrina says, trying to convince the Captain that they are not outlaws, "We're loyal citizens of this country, Captain. Our services have been used for a good few years." Also, rather amusingly, when Irimias kneels before a dilapidated building in the woods (which is the same building in which Estike "consummates" her life) that has been engulfed by fog, he pretends as if some great mystery has just occurred, but Sanyi says to him, mocking his pretensions, and clearly not convinced by them, "What, you've never seen fog before?" His main interest in Irimias and Petrina is in his hope that they will procure sexual favors for him in exchange for information that he divulges to them about each of the inhabitants of the hamlet. Sanyi disseminates the rumor that Irimias and Petrina died, so he has been in cahoots with them from the beginning. Thus, he essentially permits those in his community to be deceived by the so-called messiah.

events are witnessed, interpreted, or narrated.<sup>17</sup> On the wall beside the window through which he witnesses the activities of the hamlet, there is a map of the cosmos, but it is a cosmos divested of order, a cosmos before it has become a cosmos, for all of its planets have been excised from the map.<sup>18</sup> *Sátántangó* is then a world without order, a world without governing bodies. Since the government officially abandoned the hamlet as a settlement the state is essentially dead to its inhabitants, a sun whose gravitational tether has been severed, just as the horizon is wiped away in the aftermath of the death of God.<sup>19</sup> “What were we doing when we unchained this earth from its sun? Where is it moving now? Where are we moving? Away from all suns? Are we not plunging continually?” Nietzsche’s madman asks. “Backward, sideward, forward, in all directions? Is there still any up or down? Are we not straying as through an infinite nothing? Do we not feel the breath of

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<sup>17</sup> One could devote considerable analysis to the role of narration in the film and the numerous story versions the film presents. Aside from the Doctor’s version of events, they are also told from the perspective of Irímias, whose version is modified and “corrected,” or *sanitized*, by the state clerks at the end of the film, and their version is yet another. Then there is Kelemen’s lengthy narration of his encounter with Irímias and what is to occur, all of which is his own fantasy, while Estike is too a keen observer or eye through which many events are witnessed. Then there is the version of the narrator of the film itself, and, finally, the version of László Krasznahorkai, Ágnes Hranitzky, and Béla Tarr . . .

<sup>18</sup> Similar maps figure in other Tarr films as well: in *Werckmeister Harmonies*, there is a map of the constellations on the wall above Valuska’s bed.

<sup>19</sup> Communism can be seen as a “god” that has died, too; a guiding ideological force that once gave credence, value, and direction to the citizens of the country but is now merely a lingering shadow.

empty space?"<sup>20</sup> This sense of a complete lack of direction, a phenomenon concomitant with the eruption of nihilism, pervades *Sátántangó*.

It is during precisely such crises that messianic figures like Irimias will emerge and offer panaceas to the world, but such remedies, like the promulgation of humanistic universal ideals, are false and deceptive, comforts that are but provisional and fleeting. As we learn, Irimias does not return to offer any real promise to the inhabitants of the hamlet, but as an agent of the government. To him, the members of the commune are just slaves who have lost their master. Alternately, he returns not only to spy on them, but to con them out of one year's worth of savings through restoring their hope in his utopic vision of a self-sustaining farming community. Too weak to direct themselves, their freedom is unbearable and in the midst of it they betray and deceive one another, caught if not paralyzed by the meaninglessness of their existence, of their inability to create order for themselves, and the film's use of repetition replicates in form the futility of their lives, which is like a *circulus diabolus*, the tango with "Satan." Irimias' prophetic vision is symbolic to them of the sense of order or direction they cannot establish for themselves. He cultivates obedient disciples and they be-

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<sup>20</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science* (New York: Vintage Books, 1974), §125.

lieve he will lead them out of their dissolution and away from the corruption and decay and newly organize their lives. Since his supposed death, they have been unable to lead themselves and their freedom has been nothing to them but a painful yoke. As the Captain later says to Irimias and Petrina, "People don't like freedom, they are afraid of it." Yet, the inhabitants of the hamlet would surely attest that order is the business of the authorities, which Irimias and Petrina proclaim too, but, to the Captain, "keeping order" is *everyone's* responsibility. In stating such, he divests the state of its power and endows every individual with the responsibility of creating order, a sentiment a figure symbolic of authority would clearly not make. In all of the material that I've read on *Sátántangó*, not one writer addresses the scene between the Captain, Irimias, and Petrina, which I maintain is fundamental, a pivotal scene that elucidates one of the film's central tenets. Since the statements on order and freedom are made by an authority figure, though not necessarily one symbolic of authority, I believe they have been generally ignored in criticism of the film.

*Pain is disharmony; consciousness, harmony with the rhythm of being. The mystery of destiny consists in the fact that it is also freedom. Without freedom, destiny is not fulfilled.—Octavio Paz*<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Octavio Paz, *The Bow and the Lyre* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1975), 184.

In viewing the cosmos as devoid of any metaphysical foundation, we are compelled to recognize our solitude and the fatedness of our lives, but being without shelter (God/State) is a difficult task to wrestle with. "Freedom," the police captain professes, "is nothing human. It's something divine, for which . . ." The ellipses here are in the film itself and do not signify an omission of text, but the rupture of the Captain's thought, silence before the imponderable, for freedom cannot be encapsulated in a brief remark, or perhaps even articulated or known at all. Despite the wide standing celebration of and desire for freedom, few people are truly free and self-directed. "Our lives," the police captain continues, "are too short for us to know it properly." Tarr emphasizes the significance of this speech through zooming in on the Captain's face and in continuing to slowly zoom in on him until coming to a medium close-up at the word "passion," at which point the camera remains stationary as the Captain's reflection on freedom continues. He tells Irimias and Petrina, and Tarr almost seems to be speaking to the audience here,

If you're searching for a link, think of Pericles, order and freedom are linked by passion. We have to believe in both, we suffer from both. Both from order and freedom. But human life is

meaningful, rich, beautiful and filthy. It links everything. It mistreats freedom only . . . wasting it, as if it was junk. People don't like freedom, they are afraid of it. The strange thing is there is nothing to fear about freedom . . . order, on the other hand, can often be frightening.

Freedom and order are indispensable and both give rise to suffering, but it is freedom in particular that is here viewed as being maltreated by humanity, which does not seem to truly comprehend it, or have the capacity to actually manage it. Although desired and longed for, it is something which humanity actually fears, hence the propensity to submitting obediently to authority, whether social, religious, or political, and this occurs in extremely subtle degrees, a conformity that receives its most brutish incarnation in fascism of various forms, whether technocratic or other. According to the Captain however, it is not freedom but order that is often truly frightening, and passion is proposed as the managing force which can unite order and freedom, neither of which can be dispensed with. Anarchy is not a sufficient praxis and Krasznahorkai, who in *War & War* speaks of seeking absolute freedom "in the face of constraint,"<sup>22</sup> seems deeply critical of anarchy.<sup>23</sup> It is the *bal-*

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<sup>22</sup> Krasznahorkai, *Ibid.*, 175.

<sup>23</sup> Nietzsche is acutely suspicious and critical of anarchy too, thus there is a parallel with his philosophy here as well. See, for a few pertinent examples: *The Wanderer and His Shadow* §31; *Beyond Good and Evil* §258; *Twilight of the Idols*, "The Problem of Socrates" §§4, 9; *The Antichrist* §25. In addition, there are numerous incisive notes

ance of order and freedom that is necessary, and this seems imperative for Tarr too, a thematic evident in many films, most especially in *Werckmeister Harmonies*, where the outbreak of anarchy is not figured positively but has brutal and devastating results, something which is indicative of *Volk* mentality and its exceeding dangers.

In the midst of the anarchy or aimlessness of *Sátántangó*, Estike, who is around nine years old, is the sole character to achieve the challenging task of affirming her fate if not uniting freedom and order, albeit momentarily, though it is a decisive and eternalizing moment of great significance. If her suicide is largely considered tragic, and Irimias uses it to his advantage, invoking guilt in the community as would a purveyor of the ascetic ideal, an alternative interpretation of her death, however provocative, is possible. It is not that her suicide isn't tragic per se, if it is even accurate to refer to it as suicide, but that it isn't negative, let alone an act to be lamented. Instead, although it occurs after a prolonged period of suffering and neglect if not abuse, it is a moment of *supreme affirmation* during which Estike achieves reconciliation with the cosmos. When lying down next to a tree with the cat that she tortured in what seems to be a dilapidated church, that is, one in

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on anarchy in the *Nachlaß*. Nietzsche is generally critical of anarchy and rather terrified by the prospect that "nothing is true, everything is permitted," which he does not endorse, but *thematizes* to explore the phenomenon of nihilism.

which God is absent, as she contemplates her life, she achieves serenity and, to her, "the trees, the road, the rain, and the night all breathed tranquility." In this moment, which is akin to a Nietzschean instance of overcoming time's "It was!", she affirms everything that happens and, when recalling the previous day, which encompasses her agonizing trial, she becomes joyful and realizes that "*all things are connected*. She felt that these events aren't connected by accident, but there's an indescribably beautiful meaning bridging them. And she knew she wasn't alone for all things and people, her father upstairs, her mother, her brothers, the doctor, the cat, these acacias, this muddy road, this sky, this night down here depend on her, just as she herself depends on everything." In this affirmation, and nothing in the film indicates that her achievement is false, or a self-deceiving comfort, let alone escape, there is a parallel not only with the Captain's statement that "life is meaningful, rich, beautiful and filthy. It links everything," but, fitting with this exploration of Nietzschean thematics, with the thought of the eternal return. When recognizing that all things are connected and specifying how interwoven her life is with the doctor, the cat, *these* acacias, *this* muddy road, *this* sky, etc., Estike's inner monologue evokes "On the Vision and the Riddle," the chapter wherein Zarathustra

encounters the Spirit of Gravity, or dwarf, at the gateway Augenblick. There, Zarathustra questions the dwarf's interpretation of the eternal pathways of the past and the future, which he believes contradict one another, and proclaims, " 'And are not all things knotted together so tightly that this moment draws after it *all* things that are to come? *Thus*— —itself as well? [...] 'And this slow-moving spider [...], and this moonlight itself, and I and you in the gateway, whispering of eternal things—must we not all have been here before?"<sup>24</sup> Estike's affirmation of life is all the more significant since it is made not after a joyful event, but after a severe trial. It is a moment in which she is both able to affirm and love her fate (Nietzsche's notion of *amor fati*) despite her suffering and, most powerfully, when she exercises Nietzsche's notion of free death and "consummates" her life through dying her own death, which is more accurately characterized as the free death of a noble person. "My death I praise to you," Zarathustra proclaims, "the free death, which comes to me because *I* will it. [...] Free for death and free in death, a sacred Nay-sayer when it is no longer time for Yea: thus is his understanding of death and life" (Z: I.21). Estike exercises this very act of dying freely, dying "proudly when it is no longer possible to live

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<sup>24</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), III.2 §2. Further references to this text will be made parenthetically with the letter Z.

proudly," as Nietzsche says in *Twilight of the Idols*, leaving "while he who is leaving *is still there* [...] One perishes by no one but oneself."<sup>25</sup> Unlike the other characters, who are no longer able to truly affirm life and thus live as if already dead, Estike foresees that it is best for her to die and bravely ends her life, but this ending is a *consummation* that is to be honored, the act of a truly free spirit in Nietzsche's sense, someone who dies proudly since she is no longer able to live proudly. One might protest that her act is an evasion of suffering, but this objection is mooted since, in the economy of the eternal return as Nietzsche conceives it, one returns to the self-same life with all being repeated in the same succession and sequence.<sup>26</sup>

If the degree to which we are free is questionable, or freedom is something we lack sufficient time to comprehend or sufficient power to manifest in any absolute manner, one of the most significant free acts we can exercise is that of willing our own death, or, to use Nietzsche's term, consummating our lives.<sup>27</sup> For we are perhaps no different from Rotpeter, the half-ape, half-human character of Kafka's "Report to the

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<sup>25</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, "Reconnaissance Raids" §36, *Twilight of the Idols*, tr. by Duncan Large (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998).

<sup>26</sup> I want to thank Evgeniya Korolyova for raising precisely this objection in a personal conversation thereby compelling me to clarify this point. The challenge of the 'demon' in Nietzsche's aphorism on the eternal return is whether we can endure a life of *exact* repetition, thus nothing is evaded and one's every act becomes eternal.

<sup>27</sup> From Socrates to Seneca to Montaigne to Nietzsche, philosophy is proclaimed to be in part about learning how to die.

Academy,” or the rope that Nietzsche speaks of which is “fastened between beast and Overhuman—a rope over an abyss” (Z: P 4). To Rotpeter, all that is available is “a way out,” there is no freedom, whereas, similarly, there is no absolute freedom for Tarr, but a constantly shifting intermediate state, a dialectical tango between freedom and order, which is exemplified and given shape in the very architecture of *Sátántangó*.<sup>28</sup> As Kelemen chants after recounting his story in the bar, “Tango is my life. Tango, tango, tango. My mother’s the sea. My father’s the earth, my name is tango . . . Tango,” which is to say, life is a ceaselessly repeating movement between freedom and order. This seems to be a fundamental principle for Krasznahorkai, who proclaims in *War & War* that “To love order is to love life: love of order is therefore love of symmetry, and love of symmetry is a memory of eternal truth.”<sup>29</sup> And perhaps even more radically than Nietzsche, for Kelemen, which is to say for Tarr, there is “No sea, no land either . . .”, only a cosmos devoid of planetary bodies, full of promise and terror, and resolutely *unheimlich*.

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<sup>28</sup> In *War & War*, Krasznahorkai speaks of there being “no Way Out, there is only war and war everywhere,” even within ourselves, which sounds distinctly Heraclitean. See Krasznahorkai 1996, 203.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 241.