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## Werckmeister Harmonies

### Abstract

This is a film review of the 4K restoration of *Werckmeister Harmonies* (2000), directed by Béla Tarr and Ágnes Hranitzky.

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### Author Notes

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**Werckmeister Harmonies (2000), dir. Béla Tarr and Ágnes Hranitzky**

**Trailer: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8YGdkxI0rU4>**

If film festivals are partly about the thrill of the new, they can also be about the pleasures of the old. The first film I went to at TIFF this year was a screening of a recent 4K restoration of *Werckmeister Harmonies* (*Werckmeister harmóniák*), directed by Béla Tarr—the melancholy titan of Hungarian art house cinema—and his spouse, the editor Ágnes Hranitzky.

Tarr is slow. Very slow. And he makes slowness transportive—an ecstasy even. (Maybe we can only experience true joy and sorrow when they erupt out of boredom?) My first experience of Tarr was watching his 1994 classic *Sátántangó* during the depths of the first pandemic February, beneath bleak grey Canadian skies. The film, which is over seven hours long and shot in austere black-and-white, follows the dreary denizens of a dreary Soviet-era Hungarian village across endless stretches of mud, rain, and despair, punctuated by short outbursts of hope and violence. (Susan Sontag apparently once said of *Sátántangó*, “I’d be glad to see it every year for the rest of

my life.”<sup>1</sup> I don’t disagree.) The seven-minute opening shot gives a foretaste of what will come: cows leave a shed and trudge slowly—and somehow vaguely violently—toward the horizon.

Why is this image magnetic? I’m sure I couldn’t tell you. But trust me when I say that there’s something about a Tarr film that transports like little else can. Nowadays, in the age of the smartphone, a two-minute video can feel long. A Tarrian 439-minute film sounds downright impossible. We bob from stimulus to stimulus, distraction to distraction, latter-day creatures with the attention spans of goldfish. To settle into a Tarr film is to shift into a radically different mode of being. You allow yourself to feel boredom in real time, alongside other emotions. There’s a rawness to this. It opens you up. For reasons I still don’t understand, I ugly-cried at the end of *Werckmeister Harmonies*, scuttling off to the semi-privacy of the multiplex bathroom to recoup myself.

For a Tarr film, *Werckmeister Harmonies* is brisk— high on plot, low on rain and mud, and lasting only two and a half hours. Nonetheless, it remains invested in an aesthetics of duration: the movie consists of only thirty-nine shots (Tarr is famous for the long take). Also, to say that there’s lots of plot for a Tarr film isn’t saying much. As the director puts it: “I despise stories, as they mislead people into believing that something has happened. In fact, nothing really happens as we flee from one condition to another ... All that remains is time. This is probably the only thing that's still genuine—time itself; the years, days, hours, minutes and seconds.”<sup>2</sup>

What about this story, then? It’s quite spare, a sort of fairy tale or parable. Our protagonist is János Valuska (played by German actor Lars Rudolph) a youngish man in a small Hungarian town, who has cosmic—even mystical—proclivities. He works nights. He has a map of the stars above his bed. He tends to an aged uncle with eccentric theories about the imperfectability of musical harmonies. A circus comes to town, boasting a whale and a mysterious figure known only

as “the Prince.” The latter figure, whom we never see, unleashes a dark something in the townspeople (or really, townsmen). They riot. They rape. They kill. They fall prey to the demagogic voice of the Prince. If, on the one hand, this seems a clear allegory for fascism (as many viewers have noted), the symbolism here is too diffuse, too weird, too dreamlike, to be pinned down to any single theme. So is the film’s persistent interest in the mystical, the oddball, the singular. János doesn’t hear the siren call of the Prince. His affinities lie elsewhere—with the silence of the whale.

Predictably perhaps, Tarr has, in interviews, resisted political readings of the film. Is this an existential allegory of death, despair, and fascism, made by a former philosophy student? “No, I just wanted to make a movie about this guy who is walking up and down the village and has seen this whale.”<sup>3</sup> Whatever you say, Béla. The movie has obvious political subtexts. And they surely play differently now than they did 22 years ago when it was first released. In 2000, art house cineastes might have approached this fascist allegory in a spirit of cultured abstraction. That’s harder to do in 2022, when authoritarian demagogues are suddenly everywhere. Viktor Orbán was already on the Hungarian scene back then, but it’s only recently that North Americans have come to understand how he turned Hungary into a semi-autocratic state without ever formally dismantling democracy. Alarmingly, the US Republican Party has begun looking to Hungary as model for how to manage voters back home. “Does Hungary Offer a Glimpse of Our Authoritarian Future?,” asked the *New Yorker*’s Andrew Marantz this past summer, while covering the 2022 Budapest meeting of the Conservative Political Action Conference.<sup>4</sup> Maybe. Florida’s “Don’t Say Gay” bill was certainly borrowed from Orbán’s Hungary, and it could be an augur of things to come. *Werckmeister Harmonies* hits harder now. Its despairs and joys don’t seem so distant.

*Werckmeister Harmonies* is, in its way, a horror film, and one centering on a man with (to quote the TIFF website) a “cosmic worldview.” It thus sits curiously alongside a “cosmic horror” film like *Venus* (see my review in this issue). In *Werckmeister Harmonies*, distinctively, religion is less a content than a tone or vibe. It is part of how the film achieves its aesthetic—meditative, metaphysical, cosmic even. (In taking religion as a film aesthetic, not a film content, I follow religion scholar M. Gail Hamner). One reviewer talks about the “spiritual element” in Tarr’s films.<sup>5</sup> That’s the quality that interests me. This film is peering into the darkness of the human soul, in all its political ugliness. It draws that social inquiry into relief by looking upward and outward—to the harmonies of music, the music of the planets, the melancholy body of a taxidermized whale, stolen from the deeps.

As János walks through his night shift as newspaper delivery guy, he starts hearing rumors of upset in the cosmos—caused, apparently, by the Prince and the whale. There are intimations of doom and miracle, religiously inflected bad omens: cracked church clocks, mysterious plagues, gospels testifying to how destruction begets new life. “How are things in the cosmos?” someone asks János. “Everything is fine,” he replies. János apparently doesn’t see doom coming. Even when it’s at his door, he only has eyes—disarmingly round, large, intense eyes—for the silent sublimity of the whale.

The film’s very title invokes the cosmic register. János’s Uncle György loves to rant about Andreas Werckmeister, the Baroque music theorist who established modern counterpoint. Werckmeister thought musical harmony was linked to the harmony of the planets turning in their spheres, and that both together were the perfect work of God. The task of the human composer was to realize this perfection on earth. György emphatically disagrees. Perfection is for the gods

alone. György's passion project is to untune his piano, reversing the technical advances of recent centuries to return to ancient music with its limited set of notes.

With divine perfection firmly out of reach, the film flirts with nihilistic despair. "Nothing counts, János. Nothing counts at all," counsels one character. Yet it punctuates this despair with eruptive moments of transcendent joy. The first burst of joy comes in the very first shot—a long 11-minute take that has amassed a kind of cult following since the film was first released. Many of Tarr's most joyful scenes happen in tattered local bars, with drunks dancing whimsically, often to a pumping accordion. In this particular bar, a youngish man—our hero, János— choreographs his compatriots into a cosmic dance. One bearded drunk becomes the sun, standing still and flitting his fingers. Another becomes the earth, circling around him. A third becomes the moon, circling the earth. János narrates, leading them through the dark despair of an eclipse, before everyone erupts into chaotic movement—and the bartender finally ejects them. It's weirdly moving. There's a particular quality of whimsical joy that Tarr is able to wring out of such scenes that I've never encountered anywhere else. The ecstasy here is totally fused to utter mundanity.

The intensity of this feeling is sustained by the score, composed by longtime Tarr collaborator Vig Mihály. The pining strings of the main theme are highly repetitive, keening between elation and despair, and the repetitiveness is probably part of what makes the theme affecting: it traps your emotions. It also erupts only during the mystical or ecstatic moments of the film, moments that puncture the drab realities of everyday life and the slide into fascism. The planets, a whale, a naked old man—who, totally vulnerable and open to the potential violence of a mob, seems to recall the bare life of the Nazi death camps; his unsettling presence transforms the mob into something else, something sadder and more meditative.

The film's cosmic register revolves around the whale, the unspeaking body that is the functional counterpoint to the disembodied voice of the fascist Prince. The whale rolls into town inside an immense truck—a loud, rumbling, machinic thing that contrasts with the baleful quiet of the animal inside. It arrives at night. The next morning, János, our doleful hero, is first in line to see the imported wonder. Entering the truck alone, he enters a rapturous state (cue the score), circling the whale and gazing intensely into its dead eye. We go to that place of rapture with him. What sort of emotional state is this? Is it mystical or quasi-religious? Does it help immunize the soul against the siren call of fascism? I'm sure I don't know. All I know is that I want to be right there with János, first in line to experience this wonder, repeatedly even.

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<sup>1</sup> “Deep Waters” *The Guardian*, April 18, 2003.

<sup>2</sup> Roger Ebert, “A Haunting Film about a Haunted Village.” September 8, 2007. Rogerebert.com.

<sup>3</sup> “Deep Waters,” op. cit.

<sup>4</sup> Andrew Marantz, *The New Yorker*, “Does Hungary Offer a Glimpse of Our Authoritarian Future?” June 27, 2022.

<sup>5</sup> Derek Elley, “Werckmeister Harmonies,” *Variety*, June 5, 2000.