Werckmeister Harmonies

Director: Bela Tarr
Country: Hungary
Date: 2000

A review by Richard Willams for *The Guardian*:

The story of Werckmeister Harmonies is taken from The Melancholy of Resistance, a 1989 novel by László Krasznahorkai, who has been one of Tarr's collaborators on his three most recent films. These include Damnation (1987), with which he began to win an international audience, and the seven-hour Sátántangó (1994), of which Susan Sontag remarked: "I'd be glad to see it every year for the rest of my life."

The new film is set in winter, in a small, bleak town in the Hungarian plain, to which a showman brings a stuffed whale, accompanied by a mysterious shamanistic character called the Prince. The town is suffering from neglect: its services are decaying, its crafts are dying out and the drunks outnumber the sober. But the arrival of the whale, a reminder of another world, jolts the population out of its lassitude. The Prince capitalises on the beginnings of unrest, encouraging a mob to set off on a homicidal rampage that takes in the destruction of the town's hospital.

All this is seen mostly through the eyes of János Valuska, an archetypal "wise fool". Played by the German actor Lars Rudolph (seen in Run Lola Run), Valuska wanders the streets by day and night. His informal duties include tending to the needs of György Eszter (Peter Fitz), a respected local figure who has retreated from daily life in order to investigate a conviction that the preludes and fugues of Bach's The Well-tempered Clavier would sound better played on an instrument tuned to just intonation, the archaic form of tuning employed before Bach adopted the guidelines laid down by Andreas Werckmeister, a 17th-century court organist and theoretician whose discoveries are among the foundations of western music.

Eszter's motive seems to be a utopian desire to re-create a simpler, less strictly regimented time. Eventually, however, he is forced to admit that the clashing overtones of the pre-Werckmeister harmonic system simply make Bach's pieces sound bad-tempered.

He is wrestling with this discovery when the forces of order arrive to take charge of the town, in the shape of his estranged wife. Tünde Eszter (Hanna Schygulla, muse of the late Rainer Werner Fassbinder) has taken up with the local chief of police and threatens her husband with a terrible revenge: unless he presents himself to the people as a unifying figure, reassuring them of the new regime's good intentions, she will return to live with him, along with her lover, thus disturbing his peace for ever.

Tarr has resisted all attempts to persuade him to say what his films mean, and everything in Werckmeister Harmonies can be read as a metaphor for something or other. The whale, for instance, can be interpreted as a bitter symbol of capitalism, a bloated, rotting and blank-eyed carcass that engenders a superficial hysteria in those previously denied the sight of such a wonder. Or perhaps the whale and the unseen Prince represent the kind of totalitarianism that encourages its converts to start by sweeping away their old world.

It would be better, perhaps, to adopt the director's own apparent reluctance to seek meanings and to treat the film simply as a fable - a story concealing a generally applicable moral, although in this case with no happy ending or easy interpretation. So maybe not even a fable. Just a story, perhaps, with glimpses of

humanity. More than glimpses, however. The film begins with a mesmerising preface, in the town bar at closing time. We see a stove being lit - a rare hint of warmth. Then Valuska, all wild hair, sunken cheeks and terrible teeth, takes some of the regulars and uses them to illustrate the working of the solar system, clearing the floor and coaxing a collection of half-cut peasants to rotate around each other in a series of unsteady but increasingly complex movements. So magical is this sequence that, by the end, the face of the chap doing duty as the sun seems the epitome of benign radiance.

Later come further indelible vignettes. An ageing postman scoffs his lunch, caressed by a dumpling of a waitress whose gaze is suffused with amiable lust. A more calculated sensuality is evoked by Schygulla and her sozzled police chief, dancing together with a grace and a clumsiness that somehow mesh. And when Valuska responds to a request to feed the policeman's children, he finds two small boys running amok, wearing their father's boots, brandishing swords and banging on every available surface in joyless percussive din - a vision of the anarchy to come.

Tarr, who is 48, originally intended to become a philosopher but began to make 8mm films while still at school. His first, made when he was 16, dealt with a Gypsy family trying to persuade the authorities to let them emigrate to Austria, and his treatment of the subject brought him difficulties with the police. After his second 8mm effort, about a family in a squat, his equipment was confiscated. Banned from studying philosophy, he was allowed to enroll in the Hungarian Academy of Theatre and Film in Budapest, where he explored the possibility of "documentary fiction", adopting precepts that sound like a cross between neo-realism and the present-day Dogme rules: a cast of non-professionals, the combination of a storyboard with improvised dialogue, and the use of hand- held cameras.

With Damnation , his fifth feature, he attracted the support of the American critic Jonathan Rosenbaum, who describes the second half of Tarr's career to date as moving "beyond socialism and realism to look with mordant wit at something more universal: a form of moral decay, perhaps, but with metaphysical implications". For a while Tarr and his partner and editor Ágnes Hranitsky lived in Berlin, immediately after the wall came down, but they moved back to Budapest when the Hungarian government provided money for Sátántangó . It was in Berlin that they met Lars Rudolph, and realised that the actor was perfect for the central role in their version of The Melancholy of Resistance , which they retitled after one of the novel's chapters. Besides Krasznahorkai's script (written in collaboration with Tarr) and Hranitsky's editing, the film also features the music of Mihály Vig and the sound design of György Kovacs. Together they make up perhaps the most remarkable team in European cinema since the heyday of Krzysztof Kieslowski, Krzysztof Piesiewicz, Slawomir Idziak and Zbigniew Preisner.

Tarr admits an affinity with his compatriot Miklós Janscó ("When I was young I watched some of his early movies and I liked them then very much, but I think what he does is absolutely different from what we do"). There is also a somewhat distant admiration for Andrei Tarkovsky, the director with whom his work is most often compared, and Theo Angelopoulos, whose camera maintains a similar steady gaze. He saw the films of John Cassavetes, he says, only after making his films that some critics assumed were influenced by the American director. He seems to want to exist outside any sort of definition, and is willing to play dumb to achieve it.

For him, storyboards are a thing of the past and scripts are written only in order to raise production money. "I have to tell you I absolutely hate the movies that I can watch at the theatres," he said. "They are like comics. They always tell the same stories. We don't like these stories because for us every story is always the same old story from the Old Testament. After the Old Testament, we have no new stories. Movie stories are not new and that's the reason why we think, 'OK, the story's only a part of the movie.'"

All great directors find the element that responds most readily to their instincts, and build their films around it. For Tarr, the biggest part of the movie is time. As a tractor pulls slowly along a night-time street, the shadow of its giant trailer crawling across the town walls, or as the camera watches Valuska and Eszter for minutes on end as they walk silently down a street before heading off in different directions, Tarr is turning cinema's most abused dimension into its most effective tool.

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