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Hungary, the cradle of organic thought (?)

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Organic cinema. Film, architecture and the work of Béla Tarr, Thorsten Botz-Bornstein (2017) New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books, 221 pp., ISBN 9781785335662

In *Organic cinema*, Botz-Bornstein provides a comparative analysis of the works of Imre Makovecz, a renowned Hungarian architect, and the films of the well-known director, Béla Tarr. The author is very much aware of the controversy of the challenge to draw parallels between the ‘fundamentally nonmythological, unsymbolic cinematic form’ of Tarr’s films, and the ‘highly ideological and deeply mythological architectural style’ (18) of Makovecz – a point that might, at least in the Hungarian context, trigger a very critical burst to the reception of the book. Botz-Bornstein explains his choice of comparing such different personalities and productions by highlighting their very modernist approach to reality that the seemingly different creators share and which, according to him, makes them united under an organic aegis. The natural organicity – the organic forms of space and time – and the rejection of postmodernism thus make the compositions of Makovecz and the *mise-en-scène* of the Tarr-universe strongly interwoven (?).

The symbiosis of cinema and architecture is nothing new of course. The novelty of Botz-Bornstein is, however, that by employing the concept of the organic to the films of the Hungarian director through the spectrum of Makovecz’s formal oeuvre, he establishes a new framework to slow cinema aesthetics and the understanding of contemplative cinema – a term against which he defines *organic*. In contrast to the visuality of slow cinema, organic development extends beyond the atmosphere and style of architecture and film, for it installs a certain kind of totality driven by the inherent quality and discovery of the very materiality of forms. In Tarr’s cinema for instance, the narrative elements and editing are replaced by the very texture of the image which, bounded by the totality of self-determined long shots, creates a mystical, harmonized essence. This organic fusion of texture and movement offers a spatio-temporal explorative experience for it enables the spectator to re-discover the very materiality of the image. As the author highlights, this contemplative method bears an anti-capitalist potential based on the criticism of action cinema and consumerist architecture. By working with two key components, silence and melancholy, the organic forms of Tarr and Makovecz thus create a critical stance and social resistance that, because it works through melancholy, does not form a real revolutionary ground.

In his excellent analysis of the whale as metaphysical creature in Tarr’s *Werckmeister harmonies* (2001) and Krasznahorkai’s *The Melancholy of Resistance* (1989), Botz-Bornstein explains the transformation of nature into culture through the cultural connotations and physiognomy of the animal. As an organic architectural form, the whale signals the interior of a living organism, which is a recurrent motif in the art of Makovecz – see for instance the interior of the *Farkasrét Funeral Chapel* (1975), the village house of Bak (1985) or the *Stephaneum* in Piliscsaba (1995). Whether it reinforces Biblical metaphors and/or symbolises a maternal womb or ship that connects afterlife and this world, the very connotative whale-form recalls the hermeneutical discourse on decay and evolution. The whale, as architectural metaphor, represents a central, cosmic, decaying order that the villagers revolt against by destroying its very structure.

The whale thus serves the purpose of collective reflection, while it also functions as an aesthetic device that connects the part with the whole. As the author pinpoints, the novels of Krasznahorkai and the films of Tarr all show a similar, circular structure – ‘the organic circle of

disintegration and restoration' (29) that is further emphasized by the director's long takes. What evolves this way is the impression that '(...) no authoritarian, central narratives (...) exist, but (...) one narrative element emerges from another narrative element' (30). This pattern that Botz-Bornstein calls 'dynamic paralysis', represents an organic life-circle – the beginning and the end as constantly interwoven entities. Interestingly, the author uses this concept to describe the politico-historical and cultural situation of East-Central Europe in terms of the cycle of 'oppression, frustration, resistance and defeat' (41) and the constant fight to re-establish harmony. However, as he explains, this organism is uncentred that, from the one hand, derives from Hungary's geo-political features – the Hungarian Plain (Alföld) as an empty non-centre – which resonates with Krasznahorkai's uncentred organic patterns and Tarr's uncentred narratives. In Krasznahorkai's *War and War* (1999), the main protagonist drifts in a 'mythical, religious, and visionary center unable to establish a geographical order' (69), while in *Satantango*, the position of the doctor mirrors a fake central point-of-view. As the author pinpoints, this non-centred structure synchronises with the narratives' eternal, imperfect circularity and lack of climax whereby the end of the stories do not offer any kind of solution. In a similar vein, Botz-Bornstein stresses the lack of a metaphysically defined centre in the works of Makovecz and his insistence to create with organic forms that 'employ nature-like structures of space production' (87). As he stresses, this Hungarian organic tradition – the antigrammatical, organic flow of Krasznahorkai's writings, the anthropomorphic forms of Makovecz and the fluid slowness and organic aesthetics of Tarr – is what makes these creators real Hungarian. This rather problematic and reductive perspective assumes that the essence of 'Hungarianness' must be found in the relentless search for organic forms and its immanent political and associations, which reduces the art of the country to a very limited aesthetic tradition. The author might feel the controversial potential of this statement when he emphasises the key importance of resistance that appears in the form of melancholy in the selected art pieces, and which could be a more adequate explanation to the very ground of organic space. In this understanding, contemplation – a key term of the book – follows a natural-organic logic because it represents a fluid model of the tragic history that Hungarians are circulating with/in.

In the organic unity of past, present and future, melancholy serves as an implicit, rebellious action wrapped in silence and lethargy, a common phenomenon characteristic of Hungarian art. From this perspective, the rebellious act of Hungarians assumes a passive position which, instead of resistance, might rather illustrate a masochistic, resigned and subjected approach to life situations. For this reason, its rebellious potential is somewhat doubtful and the organic might be interpreted more as the form of a trap-situation that imprisons Hungarians into an endless mourning cycle.

Drawing on the philosophy of György Lukács, Béla Hamvas, Jacques Derrida, Hugo Häring, Sigmund Freud, and Johann Wolfgang von Goethe while constantly shifting between investigating the given (nature) and the constructed (culture), and dissecting questions of harmony, fundamentalism, and realism, Botz-Bornstein comes out with an often controversial, but stimulating explanation to the Hungarian organic. Unfortunately, his analysis mainly covers *Werckmeister harmonies* and barely touches upon the other films, novels and architectural forms of the selected artists, which often results in vague and fragmented statements on the *organic* in Hungarian thought. Still, while combining film theory with the theory of architecture, music and theology, the organic method could offer a new alternative to deconstructionism, constructivism, cultural studies, and cinema aesthetics. For this reason, *Organic cinema* deserves academic attention, especially because it has the potential to create a new platform. Unfortunately, the methodological flaws and his tendency to essentialize core elements of national culture, prevent

the author from providing a comprehensive argument about the connections of organicity in various art forms. After the comprehensive quantitative analysis of András Kovács Bálint (2013), and Jacques Rancière's (2013) philosophical essay-book the cinema of Tarr, *Organic cinema* returns to the roots of one-ness and, through philosophical lens, draws the image of a mysterious Hungary – a special country locked in the hermeneutics of circularity. Tarr seems to be a filmmaker whose works trigger philosophical investigations mainly, and the detailed textual analysis of his visual excellence in the Anglophone discourse is still an unexploited territory and an awaiting, fascinating task.

References

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