The Funambulist Pamphlets 11: Cinema

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The title of Béla Tarr’s most recent film (2011), A torinói ló (The Turin Horse, 2011), refers to the horse that Nietzsche saw being beaten almost to death by its master, and that he consequently hugged before sinking into prostration for a few days. This event is said to have been the trigger to Nietzsche’s “madness,” from which he would never exit. This film relates the narrative of this horse’s life as well as his master and his master’s daughter’s life before (or after) this event. The setting never changes: a small stone house in the middle of a Beckettian landscape, where the father and the daughter repeat the same routine every day. Tarr shows us this routine
in his beautiful long sequence shots that have defined his style since *Damnation*.

The film starts with the beginning of a storm that will never cease increasing in intensity throughout the narrative. Leaves, trees, clothes, and fabrics are all subjected to this heavy wind. Even the light itself changes drastically from quasi-monochromatic whites to darkness at the end of the movie. Everything seems submitted to a sort of entropy in which all means of subsistence are affected. The horse refuses to move, then to eat and drink, the water of the well disappears, the words of the book the daughter reads resound as pure meaningless sound and, ultimately, the light itself dies. Nietzsche is never explicitly evoked (although the prophet who visits the master and his daughter at some point recalls Zarathustra to some extent), but we might want to see this entropy of matter as a parallel to the entropy of the mind he experiences. I would even be keen to propose the idea that this whole film consists in the vision that Nietzsche had when he saw this horse being beaten to death. Tarr’s long sequences would therefore contrast with the sudden and punctual event Nietzsche experienced in a paradoxical parallelism of time scales with which I remain fascinated (see chapters 14 and 15).

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