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Both inside the circle and out: Béla Tarr's 'Missing People' at the Vienna Festival

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One must imagine Béla Tarr busy. Even though he has repeatedly insisted on the fact that he considers himself retired – at least as a director of feature films[1] – he has not stopped working since the release of *The Turin Horse* (2011). Currently, he is preparing a book project;[2] between 2013 and 2017 he led his own film school, the film.factory in Sarajevo;[3] at the EYE Film-museum in Amsterdam, Tarr curated an exhibition named Till the End of the World in 2017. Even before his farewell to cinema and his subsequent preoccupation with other institutions, some of his work had already been shown in galleries and museums around the world numerous times. For instance, his magnum opus *Satantango* (1994) had been presented at the Galerie Andreas Huber in Vienna back in 2010.[4] Almost a decade later, Tarr has now produced and presented a new work entitled *Missing People* in the same city, commissioned by the annual Vienna Festival. Prior to the eight performances from 13–16 June, it had been heralded as his return to cinema, as well as some sort of hybrid between film, installation, performance, dance, and music.

In Jean-Marc Lamoure's documentary *Tarr Béla, I used to be a filmmaker* (2013), produced during the shooting of his last film, Tarr tells one of his actors: 'Screenings are still possible, but no more filming!' The festival programme and a booklet that was being handed out to attendees prior to each performance of *Missing People* consequently announced a screening with a duration of 95 minutes and a subsequent exhibition. Some filming, despite everything, had obviously still been possible. But how did it all come together? And what, precisely, if not a film is (or rather: was) *Missing People*?[5]

Gilles Deleuze remarks that "the act of resistance has two faces. It is human and it is also the act of art."[6]

While it is open to debate whether Tarr's latest work is a film (which the director himself says it most certainly is not) or needs to be categorised as something else, *Missing People* clearly is both: it is an act of resistance, and it is an act of art. This resistance primarily aims at a law passed by the Hungarian government in autumn 2018 that effectively criminalises homeless people, allowing the police to imprison them and to vacate shelters. Then again, *Missing People* has not only two faces itself, but features more than 200 of them. For a few months, Tarr regularly spent time with the homeless people in Vienna and after a lengthy process of getting to know them, gaining their trust and friendship, cast around 270 of them to work with him for his commissioned piece.

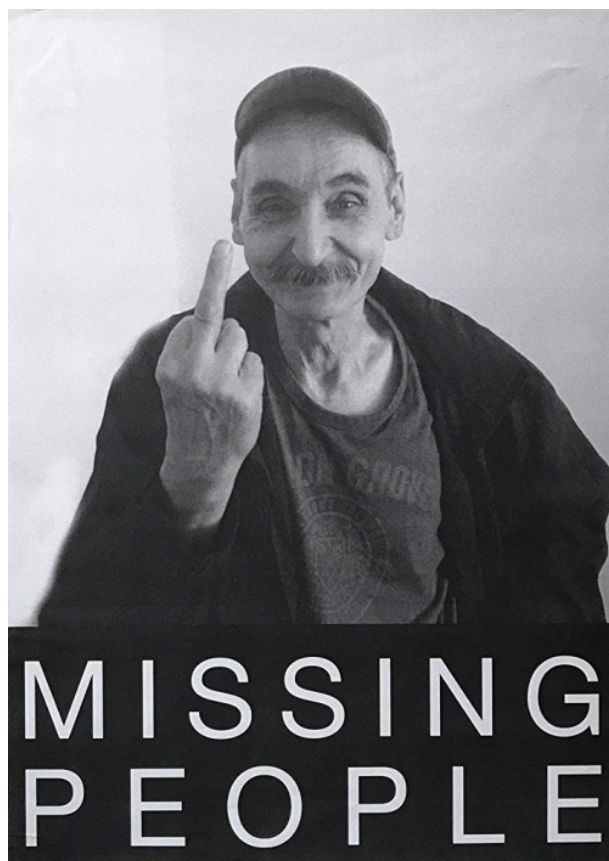


Fig. 1

Having gathered in an entrance hall of the Museumsquartier as mandated by the programme, a group of visitors is soon led to the actual site of the performance by the festival staff. Entering the dimly lit Halle E, the first striking image of the evening is a pile of discarded objects, heaped up near the entrance.



Fig. 2: ©Nurith Wagner-Strauss.

The rest of the room bears the signs and remnants of a large and festive event: half-emptied champagne glasses and leftovers on bar tables, glitter and crumpled-up paper streamers on the floor, with no trace of who or what had been celebrated. On both long sides there are stands with three steps, a mid-sized screen above both. Gradually, people sit down, the door everyone entered through is shut, and the lights are eventually turned down completely. Opposite the entrance, a curtain opens to reveal another screen that takes up the whole front of the wall. This is where the cinematic part of the event begins. And for the first time since *Journey on the Plain* (1995), Tarr – and cinematographer Fred Kelemen, one of his frequent collaborators – shows us something in colour. Slowly and elegantly, the camera moves through a room, the exact same one that we are currently in. Only accompanied by a repetitive yet familiar accordion score, it carefully scans the remains of the unspecified event that we had just been watching ourselves and can still recognise in the shimmering light emitted by the screen. There is no cut in this long take, but after a while the colours begin to desaturate. Finally, the image

becomes black-and-white. The camera rests on the exact same wall the screen is on, but with the curtains closed. Entering through this curtain, we see (and hear) an older man, playing a rattle and pan pipes. The sequence slowly fades to black, leaving everything on- and offscreen in the dark.

After a few moments a new sequence starts, shot in black and white from the outset, as all of the other 21 following sequences will be. The huge front door of the room that everybody had entered through a few minutes earlier is shown. One man pushes another in a wheelchair, and slowly a large group of people, the *Missing People*, all enter the room – this time empty – and form an impressive line-up (Fig. 3). Standing motionless, they watch straight ahead, exactly at the point in the room where we can guess the screen is. And thus, at the same time, they are looking at us, from this very screen. A few moments later, the image fades to black again.[7]



Fig. 3: ©Béla Tarr/Fred Kelemen.

For the next sequence, Tarr uses all three of the screens for the first time.[8] The two screens above the visitors, that had not been in use, show the same image that is being projected on the larger one. In a continuous travelling shot from left to right, the faces of the lined-up people are shown in a medium close-up. After another fade, the fourth sequence then finally reveals what the interior of the room is all about. Whoever had thought of the remains in the room as abandoned by some sort of society gathering, perhaps as a bold and simple contrast to the poverty of the people on the

screen(s), now stands corrected, because these people can be seen thrust around the tables, eating and drinking. While the camera slowly dollies in, everyone seems rather introspective. There is no conversation whatsoever, only an occasional glance or the sharing of scrapings of food or wine. Looking down from the screen and onto the room, the things to be seen there remain the same, but they have profoundly changed their significance. Being among them has a different quality.[9]

Instead of going on with a meticulous recap of all the other sequences – an endeavour that would undoubtedly fall short of the experience – I would rather try and point out single images. The next sequence showed a polonaise of all the *Missing People*, reminiscent of a similar scene in Tarr's *Damnation* (1987). During this circular dance, at least one woman can be seen filming the happening with her mobile phone camera while being filmed herself, visibly elated. Other striking ones featured an older man, affectionately changing the diaper on a plastic doll; a couple gently whispering to each other, exchanging a kiss and shedding a tear; a woman praying in Hungarian; and one man taking all of his belongings out of a plastic bag, before putting them back in and routinely setting up his sleeping bag to settle in for the night. Time and again, such small everyday moments were alternated with sequences that contained traveling shots scanning the room, revealing people sleeping, eating, or motionlessly sitting around. Another remarkable sequence included the camera set up in the middle of the room, slowly revolving inside a ring of fire, through which only fleeting views of people in the back were possible.



Fig. 4: ©Nurith Wagner-Strauss.

The penultimate sequence followed the man in the wheelchair again, passing people sleeping on the ground while heading for the door, before the last shot returned to the pile of trash we had seen at the beginning, again slowly frisking it. After the last image fades to black, the curtains in front of the big screen close and for a while there is only darkness. Then, several spotlights hanging from the ceiling are turned on. Slowly, one after another, they cast their respective beams on different objects in the room that were not noticed before, some even in between the people sitting around. There is embroidery that a woman could be seen making several minutes before, the small wagon one of the people used, and a mirror that one man had stood in front of while applying spray paint colour to his skin and clothes before posing in front of the curtain.



Fig. 5: ©Béla Tarr/Fred Kelemen.

Shortly after that, something even more surprising happens. The curtains draw open again, while this time the screen is raised too. Another part of the room is revealed and festival employees invite everyone to sit on the alebenches that have been set up there, to talk and have a drink. In the front there is another screen, showing short close-up sequences of the faces of all the persons involved in the production, each of them individually. This is accompanied by a score that is not only being played through the speakers but also has a woman with an accordion amplifying it with a live performance. [10] Not all attendees stay for the entirety of this rather open-ended finale to

Missing People, but one who stays until the last face disappears and the music stops is Béla Tarr himself. The artist is present and ready to converse with everyone until the last image has faded, after everyone has been shown and the music has stopped.

Leaving through a side exit, there are many more discarded objects to pass. They are cluttered against the walls of the short passage, where their former owners are impossible to know.[11] As a work of art (and as an act of resistance), *Missing People* can clearly stand its own ground. Nevertheless, it can still be helpful to try and contextualise it. The year 1978 might be as good a place as any to start in search of one of its most central aspects regarding aesthetics, as well as in ethical dimensions. That year, the then 23-year-old Tarr finished a 12-minute examination film titled *Hotel Magnezit*, which in a quasi-documentary fashion showed an older worker accused of stealing. The man is fired from his job and forced out of his hostel. 'And now I am going out on the street', he says at the end, visibly upset, his future unclear at best.

This short sequence and some, if not all, of those outlined above obviously raise questions concerning their staging. Which of these activities are actually those that these people would routinely be performing anyway, outside of this context? Is there any kind of documentary quality to what we see, or are these persons merely being used for Tarr's purposes? Would it be feasible to declare *Missing People*, as Werner Herzog might put it, as a 'feature film in disguise',[12] or rather as something along the lines of what Martin Seel would call a 'poetic documentation'?[13] It might not be possible to come to a satisfying conclusion to these questions. From the outset of his work, Tarr has been preoccupied with those who are marginalised by society; giving a face and a voice to people that are otherwise almost invisible, showing – and preserving – their dignity. This is what has always been integral to his work.

Another one of Tarr's short works underlines this notion and might even be regarded as a direct spiritual predecessor to *Missing People*: the fittingly titled *Prologue*, Tarr's contribution to *Visions of Europe* (2004), a collaborative anthology film project. There are many similarities and connections between *Prologue* and his latest work in Vienna, that Tarr has even called an 'epilogue' to his oeuvre.[14] *Prologue* shows poor and homeless people in Budapest queuing in front of a local food bank. Filmed by the late great Robby Müller, it consists of only one 4-minute long shot in black and white, travelling slowly from right to left, accompanied by Mihály Víg's lamenting score.[15] No

words are spoken.[16] The final image shows a young woman, handing out food rations. In the back of the room she is in there is a watch, its hands stuck at five minutes to twelve. The end credits of *Prologue* then feature all of the actual names of the persons that Tarr showed us. Adequately, for *Missing People*, a staggering 275 names appear in the booklet and the programme online, all listed alphabetically as the artistic team behind it. In both of these projects, Tarr gives each person a face, he insists on them as individual beings, and he gives them a voice, without having to say a single word.

Even if the people that he shows us are no longer in this place, we can look at them longer than ever and we are aware of their presence outside of a comparatively small event. 'The people are missing and at the same time, they are not missing.'[17] In a way, we are also a part of them, as they are a part of us.[18] Not only in this regard, Tarr comes very close to what Lenin famously envisioned and what Godard quotes in *The Little Soldier* (1963): 'ethics are the aesthetics for the future'.[19] They certainly overlap here.

As in so many of Tarr's films before, time is an important aspect to *Missing People*. In all of the sequences described above, he always shows what he has to show from start to finish. Where we might have turned away before, out of carelessness or maybe even in disgust, we now simply share some time. Even outside of a more traditional cinematic context, this still fits seamlessly into Cesare Zavattini's Neorealist ideal: 90 minutes of ordinary people's lives, small details of their everyday realities, nothing ever really happening to anyone.[20] The individual sequences and the activities therein are uninterrupted, they play out in their own time.[21] This means that we cannot take any shortcuts, after our curiosity has been satisfied. There is something very humbling about sharing time with these people, whose lives consist of little else than the circular routines that we can witness small fragments of here, and that we might break out of after one evening, but that they probably will not.

'The stillness and slowness of screen works [...] facilitate a collapsing of the gallery into the cinema, and the cinema into the gallery', the scholar Glyn Davis states.[22] In this regard, *Missing People* also fits neatly into a larger discourse surrounding tendencies of slowness and stillness in cinema and other art forms, especially concerning their sites[23] and institutions, as well as their respective tendencies to influence or infiltrate each other.[24] Ultimately, *Missing People* might not be cinema. It might be regarded as documentary, and it might be regarded as fiction. It is both art and resistance. Every formal discussion around it can still only be an afterthought, regarding

its premise. *Missing People* is as ephemeral as its subject(s). It is life itself.[25] It almost seems like it is not so much of a decided farewell to cinema, but more of a new direction in storytelling. While conjuring the spectres of otherwise almost invisible people, Tarr casts out the spectre of conventional cinematic narrative.[26] His questions stay the same, but right here he does not even have to fully formulate them. While the film historian must be a storyteller,[27] the artist does not. It has repeatedly been noted that Tarr always made the same film over and over again. In a way, he continues to do so. Filming is still possible, even if he does not make any more films. The circle is closed and at the same time, it is open.

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Notes

- [1] C.f. Kovács 2013, p. 18.
- [2] C.f. Pesl 2019, p. 37.
- [3] Tarr frequently invited other filmmakers to offer courses of their own. Among his collaborators was Apichatpong Weerasethakul, who had contributed a new project called *Fever Room* to the Vienna Festival, just a few weeks ahead of the *Missing People* premiere.
- [4] Balsom 2014, p. 41.
- [5] Although it is certainly possible and seems rather fruitful to discuss here Tarr's turn away from working as a filmmaker in the context of larger debates around the post-cinematic, I should note that this is not the aim of this essay.
- [6] Deleuze 2007, p. 329.
- [7] For the remainder of the sequences, the two smaller screens were only in use when the camera moved in circles or travelled through the room. Predominantly though, only the large screen was used, showing – largely in static takes and always without cuts – individual persons following everyday routines. Only seven out of the 22 presented sequences made use of all three screens, and when they were being projected on it was always the same image on all of them. This both forced viewers to concentrate on individual acts and people when only the large screen was being used and otherwise reinforced the circular movement in the shots themselves and/or when the camera rotated itself.
- [8] Of course, Abel Gance's *Napoleon* (1927) springs to mind in any discussion of the (cinematic) usage of three screens. Tarr's project obviously is not close to any sort of triptych experimentation in terms of *grandeur*. His understated use of the three screens repeatedly underlined a sense of absence throughout the whole projection instead.
- [9] On a deliberately personal note: I could not help but feel reminded of Antonioni's *L'Eclisse* (1962) at this point. What would change, if at the end of that film, one would be able to wander the deserted outskirts of Rome? Probably something similar to the feeling that I had after the lights went on in Halle E again.
- [10] Sitting in a pub and listening to the sound of an accordion is probably the closest one can get to actually *being* in a Béla Tarr film. It is a recurrent set piece in *Damnation*, *Satantango*, and *The Man from London* (2007).
- [11] Did they all really belong to the people we saw? Are they trash, or are they – if only for a few days – pieces of an artwork, or even works of art themselves? Could one understand this (better) by trying to relate it to what Beuys had in mind when he conceptualised the social sculpture (C.f. Sacks 2011)? Moreover, one might ask here: What can we learn from an approach to expanded cinema that is informed by Beuys's ideal of the expanded concept of art in general?
- [12] <https://mubi.com/de/notebook/posts/a-documentary-is-just-a-feature-film-in-disguise-an-interview-with-werner-herzog> (accessed on 22 July 2019).
- [13] Seel 2018, p. 92.
- [14] <https://www.bfi.org.uk/news-opinion/sight-sound-magazine/reviews-recommendations/missing-people-bela-tarr-vienna-homeless> (accessed on 19 July 2019).
- [15] If I am not mistaken, the music accompanying the projection of the faces at the end of *Missing People* used the same piece of music that was composed for *Prologue*.
- [16] Tarr also does something similar in *Damnation*, although the travelling there follows the opposite direction.
- [17] Deleuze 2007, p. 329.

- [18] This inclusive approach was also applied to the event itself. On 15 June, everyone who showed up with a copy of the street newspaper *Augustin* was granted free admission to the performance. Still, absence is vital to the work as a whole. As much as the absence of the eponymous character is necessary in Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* (1953), in as much as the absence of 'music' is key to Cage's *4'33"* (1952), and in the same way that the lack of pictorial and colourful elements is exactly the point in Rauschenberg's *White Painting* (1951).
- [19] C.f. Sterritt 1999. It should also be noted that all of the people involved were paid.
- [20] This also means that Tarr's 'post-cinematic' project harks back to a tradition of using non-actors and the everyday in film, especially in early (fictionalised) documentaries and the avant-garde praxis, where – even before the neorealists – one might think of Robert Flaherty, F.W. Murnau, Walter Ruttmann, or Alberto Cavalcanti. This connection to early cinema is even more poignant considering that we practically see a silent movie for a very long time, in the end even accompanied by a live musician. The surroundings of a festival also seem much closer to a fairground than to an institutionalised cinematic *dispositif*. It might not even be too farfetched to compare the leftovers of the party in the middle of the room to the *faux terrain* of the nineteenth century panoramas.
- [21] Applicable (or advisable) in such a context or not: this means that *Missing People* – or at least the first part of it – clocks in at an average shot length of around 4½ minutes.
- [22] Davis 2016, p. 108.
- [23] Whether this – or any similar – event can be regarded in terms of a 're-auratisation' (Gass 2008, p. 158), contrasting what Benjamin famously remarked upon (Benjamin 1968), remains a question for another essay and is beyond the scope of this article.
- [24] C.f. Koepnick 2014, Schrader 2018, as well as Nadin Mai's remarkable [blog](#).
- [25] In this regard, it certainly comes close to the expanded cinema concept proposed by Gene Youngblood some 50 years ago, that 'is ultimately nothing less than life itself'. C.f. Uroskie 2014, p. 9. See also Youngblood 1970, p. 41.
- [26] C.f. Frampton 2009, p. 140.
- [27] C.f. Cherchi Usai 2008, p. 90.