If you ever find yourself looking for something boring to watch, just pick one of Béla Tarr’s films. They are among the most boring films you might ever hope to find: intensely, immersively, and fascinatingly—transcendentally, even—boring.

Tarr’s *The Turin Horse* (2011) is almost static, moving at what David Campany, in *Photography and Cinema*, terms a “glacial tempo” (37). Tarr’s camera crawls almost painfully slowly, and the living, breathing humans in the film often move less than the objects around them. The film follows Ohlsdorfer—an elderly man—and his daughter over the course of six days, as they mechanically carry out a routine we can infer was established long ago. Tarr follows their every move, even when what they are doing seems trivial, and even—especially—when they aren’t doing anything at all. In one scene, Ohlsdorfer’s daughter walks to the stove after he lies down to rest; she holds a pot, collects two potatoes, places them inside the pot, and, after pouring water into the pot, begins boiling the potatoes. She sits facing the window, completely still as she looks out and waits. Only the stillness of the scene itself surpasses the stillness of her form: the only movement comes from the leaves that flutter outside, visible through the windowpanes. Tarr’s camera edges steadily until it stops directly behind her, and with a rigid, symmetrical, and static shot, plasters her in a lifeless position of solitude. We look at her back as she looks out the window; the light from the stove occasionally flickers, but beyond that, there is no movement from her or the camera for one and a half minutes. But the stillness doesn’t end there; Tarr takes boredom to a whole new level by showing us the quintessentially trivial ritual of potato-boiling multiple times over the course of six days, following Ohlsdorfer’s daughter religiously, and returning always to the same static shot of her looking out the window.

Why, then, should we watch *The Turin Horse*, a film that seems at best pointless, at worst, utterly devoid of substance or value? Certainly nothing is happening, but if we are speaking of the same *nothing* as W. H. Auden was
when he wrote that “poetry makes nothing happen” in his “In Memory of W. B. Yeats,” then nothing is the very something we want to happen; it is to be desired that nothing happens (36). When it comes to such films, where action and progression are ostensibly absent, “the point [is to] see what’s here, finally to look and to know you’re looking, to feel time passing, to be alive to what is happening in the smallest registers of motion,” Don DeLillo tells us in his novel *Point Omega* (6). The “smallest registers of motion,” so minute they are mistaken by the unattuned mind for nothing, become visible to our consciousness, become the very focus of the film, and we translate the “meaningless” into thought; nothing becomes a significant something through the intimacy of observation.

In fact, DeLillo’s novel is based on *24 Hour Psycho*, a film installation much like *The Turin Horse* in that nothing happens, and to fascinating effect (McGrath). In 1993, artist Douglas Gordon took Alfred Hitchcock’s *Psycho* and both silenced it and slowed it down to last an entire day. The resultant piece, *24 Hour Psycho*, runs at two frames per second, “each scene long enough to yield more meaning than was ever required by the narrative”; even the slowest, seemingly continuous movements become distinct and prominent against the slow progression of time (Campany 39). This new temporality demands complete concentration; even the unobservant viewer, one who normally notices only the most obvious changes in a given length of time, finds that the same period now opens up a world of minute observations and conscious thoughts. We see this principle at work in *The Turin Horse* in an extremely close-up shot of Ohlsdorfer eating, only part of his hair shown, the shot ending midway down his neck. Each bite he takes of his potato forces us into a surprising and unexpected intimacy with his chewing. It’s excruciating to watch him eat: he frequently cringes at the burn of the hot potato, yet attacks it ferociously nevertheless. The laborious pacing leads us to notice the condition of extreme starvation under which he lives and to experience a compassionate sadness upon realizing that this, the sole meal of the day, is likely his period of greatest feeling and movement—certainly it is the most active we see him. He often looks up, and we cannot help but concentrate on his eyes, which are piercingly empty, their drooping edges carrying the toil of age and the gravity of longing.

Watching *The Turin Horse* is an inherently tedious experience, and we feel the weariness and weight of trivial routine. But it is precisely these quotidian activities that Tarr elevates, exalting the course of daily life as something worthy of our awareness. He inverts our expectations of film, making us pay attention to the very things we usually think are inconsequential or boring,
and masterfully evokes in us a hyper-awareness of these trivialities. The familiar is examined in such detail that it becomes unfamiliar; in this microscopically close view of the stuff of everyday life—the rusted metal of the burning pot, the deep wrinkles etched onto Ohlsdorfer’s face, the dusty weakness of his daughter’s hair, and the eerie whisper of the blowing wind—nothing evades our awareness, and everything has the potential to be reborn with new, substantial meaning.

This is the operating principle behind Tokyo’s *Sukiyabashi Jiro Ginza*, a ten-seat, sushi-only restaurant—if you can even call it a restaurant—buried underground in a subway station. Its façade is no more interesting than a commute on the train, but reservations must be made a year in advance, because this hole-in-the-wall eatery has been awarded three stars by the Michelin Guide and is, according to chef Anthony Bourdain, the best sushi restaurant in the world (qtd. in Killingsworth). It’s bizarre, because the menu’s sole offering is sushi, a food that does not need to be cooked; its simplicity—just raw fish on rice—perplexes us. How could its chef, Jiro Ono, be recognized by the Japanese government as a living “national treasure,” and why would people fly from other countries, crossing oceans, just to eat this sushi? (Killingsworth). Perhaps it is because the dish itself is so simple, so basic, that each ingredient and component can receive Jiro’s utmost care and attention. He and his assistants massage the fresh octopus for half an hour daily, slice the fish precisely to the millimeter, and even sculpt the rice base painstakingly to the perfect shape and density (Killingsworth). The result is that his diners also pay just as much attention, savoring and lingering on each taste and texture. Eating becomes a revelatory experience.

We see this same simplicity and freedom from distraction in Tarr’s films—we discover the complexity of his films without being hindered by complication. When Ohlsdorfer’s daughter’s back is to the camera for a full minute and a half, she is entirely still, just as the frame is entirely still, and Tarr gifts us with the luxury of time, but also demands the same gift from us. At first, we don’t see much. Gradually, however, this stillness, Tarr’s “inanimation” of an animate being, when juxtaposed with the rapid, spontaneous and unpredictable movement of the leaves outside the window, reveals that though Ohlsdorfer’s daughter appears protected from the strong wind and tough cold of the outdoor chaos, her house, dark and barely lit, functions more like a kind of prison, fastening her to the dreariness of two potatoes boiling in a pot. That she looks out, and only out, beyond the jail cell windows, and does not even flinch, cements for us her lack of power, her inabil-
ity to carry out any kind of action, a spiritual stasis to complement the physical one that Tarr presents.

The prolonged freeze frames that punctuate the film give it an aesthetic more photographic than cinematic. Tarr's images function like photographs; he "isolates, preserves and presents a moment taken from a continuum," says Huber Damisch (qtd. in Clarke 24). What movement there is stops entirely in these frames, making way for the "traditional sense of 'presence' typical of art's materially fixed media such as painting, sculpture and photography" (Campany 39). In the one and a half minutes of the still shot of Ohlsdorfer's daughter staring out the window, we involuntarily come to perceive it as a photograph, much as we would read and understand the paintings hanging on the walls of art museums. Thus, the characters and events are removed from the usual chronology of a plot-driven film, giving us the liberty to contemplate things we might otherwise miss: the way Ohlsdorfer's daughter's hair whips violently in the fierce wind, like tentacles assaulting and consuming her face, suggests the character of a vicious beast, making us see that she struggles always, even with her own body.

People spend hours in art museums, removing themselves from the normal flow of time in daily life, immersing themselves so that they can be transported to another world. In contrast, little time is usually given to a film: the typical film lasts about an hour and a half and offers instant gratification. But the breaks in *The Turin Horse* replicate, on screen, the movement and pauses distinctive of our spatial experience of a room in a museum. In a gallery, we move from one static artwork to another, literally but also psychologically pausing each time we encounter a frozen image. Because the two phases of our gallery experience—the state of movement and the stationary state—stand in sharp contrast to each other, and because our stationary periods break the regularity of our movement, we experience the artwork in a way that induces us to think, reflect, and ponder. As Jiro serves only one piece of sushi at a time, heightening its presence in his diners' minds and giving them the opportunity to taste truly, so the sharp stillness of the images in *The Turin Horse* gives us room for reflection within the film, awakening us to each and every subtlety.

This type of film can be problematic for some viewers: as Wim Wenders, a German director, comments, "When people think they've seen enough of something, but there's more, and no change of shot, then they react in a curiously livid way" (qtd. in Campany 37). But with Tarr's films, first the boredom turns into anger, then the anger turns into confusion, and, finally, confusion turns into curiosity. Our anger spurs a deeper desire to make sense of the film:
as it is said that love’s opposite is not “hate” but “indifference,” a “livid” response is better than not feeling or caring at all for the film. Watching Tarr’s films, we find ourselves waiting, impatient for something to happen, frustrated by the feeling of constantly expecting something more. Our initial frustration causes us to wonder if there is something we’re not seeing, so we begin to look harder, becoming fully attentive and alert to the film, developing an extreme sensitivity to the stories and activities that others might find valueless, allowing ourselves to see a story where others don’t, essentially making nothing happen. Just as Tarr intended.

And nothing indeed happens, and happens beautifully, not just in The Turin Horse but also in Tarr’s Damnation (1988). The film begins with a foggy white shot of pails moving mechanically along a cable line, punctuated by the hollow noises of the friction of the pail handles against the unoiled cable. With an almost-static camera movement, we retreat from the scene and into the main character’s room, watching the robotic movement through a window. Zooming out further, we see the back of his head, a still silhouette against the empty land at which he stares.

The film returns many times to the pails moving mechanically one by one along the elevated pulley line, but whether we see them through window grilles or hear them in the background, nothing changes their monotonous motion as they pass each other again and again. This relentless return to a scene where there is no action but the motion of pails not only pushes us to find more meaning in them, but also etches the scene indelibly in our minds. Repetition and alert wonder make the scene difficult for us to forget, and house it in our minds so firmly that we can make deeper connections: later on in Damnation, in a scene inside a bar, we see almost all the people inside dancing, or rather moving along the perimeter of a large circle they have formed, and we are reminded instantly and evocatively of the pails. The people move slowly and in unison, but are barely dancing; instead they are just going along, one after the other, for a monotonous two and a half minutes. Gradually, we begin to understand the people as pails—or the pails as people. Both move systematically and repetitively without need for thought; the people do the same thing over and over, without much purpose or autonomy. Tarr reinforces this connection when he returns later to the “dancing,” which continues again for over a minute. Presented with such deliberate and insistent imagery and with Tarr’s photographic aesthetic, we begin to question whether the people are any more alive than the pails.

Nothing happens, coming alive as a jewel to be cupped preciously in our hands, but it is we who must respond to Tarr to make it happen: through
alertness and contemplation, we make meaning out of our own discoveries, enthralled by the very things we would otherwise gloss over or ignore. Tarr never explicitly promotes ideas of human disintegration or mechanization of life; we, as viewers, make the connections and ask the questions—questions about our own existence and lives. Though he is its creator, Tarr awards us an active role in the film; to accept it, we must react rather than merely receive. We personally know the value of discovering something unexpected, whether in people or in places, and the way that what is earned can be more valuable than what is simply given. When, over time, we gradually undress and unearth a part of a person—especially a person who is not easy to get to know—and realize we have been blessed with access to a rare treasure, hidden beneath an easily dismissed appearance, that part becomes our own. We have stumbled upon it or earned it, experiencing our own awakening, finding and so, too, making our own magic from it.

In taking the initiative to be engaged, in growing out of the lazy habit of passive viewing, we open ourselves to a new hyper-awareness—of the characters, of the film, of ourselves, and of our world. There is a moment in Spike Jonze's film Adaptation where the fictionalized Charlie Kaufman (Nicolas Cage) stands up in a screenwriting workshop and laments that his script is unexciting because the novel it is based on is “more [like a] reflection of the real world,” where “nothing much happens.” The seminar teacher pauses for a moment, then screams at him in disbelief, “Nothing happens in the world? Are you out of your fucking mind? . . . you, my friend, don’t know crap about life!” After the seminar, Charlie approaches the teacher, realizing how much of life he had hitherto missed. Like Charlie, we wonder if, when we claim that nothing happens in Tarr’s films (or in our lives), we are bored only because we are boring, unentertained only because we are passive, unengaged only because we are asleep to the world.

This idea of participatory hyper-awareness, even just to a deep and human awareness, is both woven into the form of Tarr’s films and reflected in his characters’ lives. The form of his films enables, even obliges us to go through the same experiences as the characters, such as the people in Damnation, whom Tarr presents as lifeless beings incapable of enjoyment, trapped by their own mechanical movement. Even in a sex scene between Karrer—the main character of Damnation—and a singer, a scene from which we expect excitement, nothing seems to be happening. Inside the soundless room, she straddles him and holds on to his vacant body as it sits inert, breathing beside her neck. The slight twitching of her right leg animates the still-life sex.
How is it that a scene that is usually a pinnacle of action—the peak of human pleasure—appears inanimate? The characters seem vacuous, expressionlessly and absent-mindedly fucking, empty vessels even at the climax. Their paralysis exists both on the level of plot and character and on the level of form. As Roland Barthes writes in *Camera Lucida*, “When we define the Photograph as a motionless image, this does not mean only that the figures it represents do not move; it means that they do not *emerge*, do not *leave*: they are anesthetized and fastened down, like butterflies” (57). Barthes’s characterization of figures in photographs, strangely, also seems true of the characters in Tarr’s films. It is not merely because of Tarr’s style—his photographic aesthetic—that the characters do not move; they themselves stay always trapped in the frame, just as they stay wherever they are in their lives, tied down to the very place that forces them, as Karrer says, “to look at the hopelessness of things” (*Damnation*).

For Campany, “the photograph is marked by the trauma and enigma of death,” and it becomes for Barthes something “That-has-been” (Campany 96, Barthes 75). This anticipation of death lies also within Tarr’s characters—in the way Ohlendorfer and his daughter vacantly and unthinkingly repeat the same routine every day; in the way Karrer says, “I look out the window in vain, for years”; in the way he always broods, half his face obscured by light, even in the scene where there is lively dancing all around him—and they “do not *emerge*, do not *leave*” (Barthes 57). But why do the people not emerge, and why can’t they leave? They’re not only in photographs, after all; they are permitted to move, and they do.

A clue might lie in Tarr’s *The Prefab People* (1982), which shows the disintegration of the relationship and marriage between Féj and Feleség. In the opening scene, Feleség is sitting at the dining table, holding a baby, when Féj storms in and starts packing his things, with nothing to say but that he’s leaving. The camera follows Feleség sharply as she puts the baby down and chases Féj around the apartment, her panic heightened by his relative indifference. At the door, she forces him into an embrace, clinging to him so resolutely that he must fling her off twice before managing to open the door and leave. Feleség is left alone in the hallway, wiping her tears and silently screaming. This is the moment of Feleség’s physical paralysis; this is the moment of Feleség’s death, and, tellingly, right before Féj leaves, she says, “Where do I go?”
In another scene, Férj tells Feleség that he has received a better job offer in another country, but has to go alone. Feleség does not want him to leave, and they argue:

Férj: I think we have to make a move.
Feleség: Don’t you like it here?
…
Férj: Don’t you see we can’t make a move?

Their exchange highlights Férj’s belief in the centrality of movement to life, and attributes the demise of their relationship to Feleség’s reluctance to move. Later, Férj and Feleség are sitting silently next to each other at a table, when Férj gets up and dances with another woman, leaving Feleség sitting alone, biting her nails and staring intently at him. Férj dances, moving and active, while Feleség sits frozen: a still life in a still frame, surrounded by movement, she nevertheless cannot emerge, cannot leave.

The film’s visual emphasis on setting offers another clue as to why she cannot leave. The Prefab People owes its title to the prefabricated apartment blocks of government housing in late-1970s Hungary in which it is set. Prefabricated apartment blocks were units built near or on the site of construction areas or factories to house workers conveniently near their work-sites. That Tarr has titled his film after a building, even though it seems to deal mainly with the disintegration of a relationship, identifies the film with a specific setting—namely, the Soviet era following the Hungarian Revolution. Titling it thus also limits further the characters’ range of movement and hints that anything we want to know about Férj and Feleség can be found within their setting. More than mere locality, settings constrain relationships and movement. The location of their apartment relative to Férj’s workplace suggests that their lives revolve around work, and that Feleség, unemployed, truly has nowhere to go.

Setting draws our focus so insistently in Tarr’s films because he deliberately emphasizes it. In Damnation, we see many long shots of architecture and landscapes; even when Karrer and the singer, talking at a table, are the presumed focus of the scene and our attention, the camera moves around the room, showing their surroundings excruciatingly slowly, as though giving us a tour of the room. We become impatient, but Tarr persists in revealing the location of their conversation, aiming the camera everywhere but at them, as though the setting itself is the true subject. Tarr draws our attention to the environment, depicting people within a specific place, making characters sec-
ondary to their surroundings, subordinate always to the time and place in which they live.

Setting attains an independent reality, its own life, as it “radically reorients how the modern subject works, lives, and perceives her positioning” (Betz 38). Characters are stripped of autonomy, their self-ownership forfeited to environmental dictatorship. On the fourth day of *The Turin Horse*, Ohlsdorfer asks his daughter to pack their things; they are not going to stay in the same place anymore, and for the first time in the film, they move with purpose, breaking their inescapable routine. They take everything they need, pulling their cart and leading their horse away from the barren trees and unfruitful land. Tarr shows us trees struggling to stay rooted and leaves darting with chaotic disorder, as Ohlsdorfer and his daughter crawl like ants across the landscape and out of sight. But half a minute later, they return, bowing to the strength of the terrifying landscape; Ohlsdorfer’s daughter sits once more inside, and, from the outside, we see her ghostly face through the window pane, vacantly staring out, still and unmoving. Even with the desire and conviction to leave, the characters cannot prevail over the dominance and force of the landscape that has stealthily stolen life, power, agency, and autonomy.

The environment—place, space, or setting—in Tarr’s films reminds us that we move through it, rather than its moving through us. And Tarr does not confine this focus on setting’s power within his films: one of the environments Tarr draws attention to is that of the cinema—the very setting we find ourselves in when watching his film. If we see the movie theatre as an environment that, like Tarr’s other settings, can lend itself variously to boredom, disengagement, stasis, hyper-awareness, vacancy, agency, and being alive, we cannot but ask, “How does the theatre control us?” As part of a generation that seems to require constant stimulation, we visit the movie theatre for easy and immediate access to action, excitement, romance, humour, or any kind of emotion that we could desire. As viewers of the cinema, we’ve been taught that we don’t even have to do anything: vicarious experiences are served straight to us on a silver screen, even cuing us at the moments when we should laugh, cry, or sigh. But these presentations of fiction appear so real and so much larger than life that we often forget they are not our experiences, and the very feelings we desire might evade us because we do not find them of our own accord and make our own meaning out of them. We might consider Aldous Huxley’s proclamation, “oh, how desperately bored, in spite of their grim determination to have a Good Time, the majority of pleasure-seekers really are!” (204). Substituting the passive viewing of stories on film for our
own engagement—with film or with experience—cannot satisfy our desire to feel.

Within the enclosed space of a dark movie theatre, we sit collectively with and indistinguishable from others in ordered, identical seats; we are trapped, still and silent—for movement or noise would disturb others or disrupt the world of the film—as a towering screen feeds, or captures, our minds. To have a good time, all we have to do is “sit back and relax”; because no action is required from us, we are “anesthetized and fastened down,” distanced from engagement through the very way in which we search for it (Barthes 57). Could we emerge? Could we leave? Or are we like Tarr’s characters, trapped in photographic amber as we play out the repetitive and mind-numbing minutiae of our still lives?

WORKS CITED


