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The Central European Imaginary:

Four-dimensional Borderlands in Tarr's *Werckmeister Harmonies*

Globalization by definition involves the shattering of boundaries, the transcendence – or transgression – of neat encapsulated unities in favor of the undifferentiated stuff of post-modernity. While it is theoretically quite possible and convenient to draw neat lines around nations and states and color them in on maps of the world, on the ground it is clear that there are always some messy edges on the borders between cultures and communities.

In their 1992 article *Beyond 'Culture': Space, Identity, and the Politics of Difference*, Akhil GUPTA and James FERGUSON put forth a concept of the borderland in the context of contemporary globalized culture: "The term does not indicate a fixed topographical site between two other fixed locales (nations, societies, cultures), but an interstitial zone of displacement and deterritorialization that shapes the identity of the hybridized subject."¹

They further argue that these borderlands, far from being insignificant, are increasingly the 'normal' locale of the postmodern subject. In other words, living in the gray area between black and white is a key feature of the life of contemporary humans, and coming to terms with a shifting and uncertain identity is thus a key project of humankind.

GUPTA and FERGUSON base their argument in part on the seminal 1992 work of Arjun APPADURAI, *Modernity at Large*. APPADURAI

describes the dialectic of globalization as the constant production and dissolution of locality, where the imagination is inextricably bound up with the social: image as social fact, imagined communities, imagined worlds. He notes that the exercise of the imagination was long a privilege of the elite classes, of artists and visionaries; but now, with the advent of the mass media, anyone can imagine anything.²

But, contrary to what one might expect, the imagination is hardly a benign force. Rather, APPADURAI argues, imagination is an extremely potent force responsible for much of the dynamics of the world today. In contrast to fantasy, imagination is a social force that carries with it an inherent potential for expression, for action. Groups, communities, nations, cultures imagine themselves – and inevitably they imagine themselves in opposition to an Other. Thus the forces of identity construction act in direct opposition to the nature of the reality that most, if not all, people presently find themselves in.³

Taken in the context of the former socialist countries of Central Europe, these two theories are intriguing: not only a physical borderland between East and West, trying hard to redefine itself as Center, the 'countries in transition' found (or perhaps still find) themselves also caught in a temporal borderland between the old socialist or communist system and the new still-evolving democracy. As the enforced uniformity of international socialism crumbles, those caught in the middle are forced to confront the mythical Other, along with all the chaos and uncertainty that inhere within such confrontation.

Sadly, this challenge from the 'outside' all too often evokes an extreme reaction in the form of nationalism or xenophobia as people struggle to hold on to (or create) some sort of fixed identity. In some cases, as in parts of the former Yugoslavia, this struggle takes a tragically violent form; but even when no actual blood is shed, violence is done to the human spirit.

Magyar (Hungarian) director TARR Béla's 2000 film *Werckmeister Harmonies* (Werckmeister harmóniák) beautifully explores these aspects of Otherness, violence and humanity in the context of a typical Magyar community; the film, however, is shot in such a way as to give it a unique 'timeless' and 'placeless' feel, leading one to easily apply it to the wider region as a whole. The director notoriously refuses to discuss the possible deeper meanings of his films, insisting that they stand alone outside the symbolic level. While this may be

1 GUPTA Akhil – FERGUSON James, *Beyond 'Culture': Space, Identity, and the Politics of Difference*. Cultural Anthropology 1992/1. 18.

2 APPADURAI Arjun, *Modernity at Large*. Minneapolis, 1996. 3–7.

3 APPADURAI Arjun, *Modernity at Large*. Minneapolis, 1996. 7–8.

true, there is certainly ample material in his evocative imagery to be explored on the symbolic level as well.

Thus, starting from the theoretical framework outlined above, this paper will explore notions of identity and the imaginary in post-socialist transitional Central Europe and the neighboring South East Europe (Balkans), as presented in the film *Werckmeister Harmonies*.⁴ Visual evocations of place and the creation and dissolution of communities will be analyzed as the characters in the film try to come to terms with the Other and with themselves, ultimately leading to an understanding of the underlying forces that shape the contemporary reality of this complex, beautiful and sometimes explosive part of the world.

I. Music of the Spheres

Weighing in at two and a half hours, there is far too much material in *Werckmeister Harmonies* to begin to analyze it all here. The film, based on the novel *Az ellendéltség melankóliája* (The Melancholy of Resistance, 1989) by KRASZNAHORKAI László, does not lend itself to a typical plot summary. While it does have a narrative form, it is constructed and ideally viewed as a series of individual scenes, each one of which can be analyzed as a discrete entity, and likewise as a part of the whole. TARR's characteristic style, shooting each scene in one complete take (some of which last five or six minutes), emphasizes this integrity of the individual scene. It can be conceived almost as a series of images or frames, like a photo essay. Let me begin, then, by describing some of the key scenes of the film, and with them some of the symbolic figures which will be central to my analysis.

The film opens in a nondescript pub in a nondescript Magyar provincial town filled with the usual collection of nondescript drunks. Into this world steps János, the film's protagonist. At the urging of the patrons, he undertakes to explain to them a curious natural phenomenon they expect to experience shortly: a total eclipse of the sun. As he describes the phenomenon, János pulls the drunks into a living demonstration of the mechanics of the eclipse. One man stands in the center, the Sun; a second slowly rotates and revolves around him, mimicking the motion of the Earth. Finally a third man joins in, also simultaneously rotating and revolving, but around the second man – this third man is the Moon. After a bit of bumbling and stumbling, the play-acting begins to take on the nature of a dance.

But then, at the precise moment of alignment, János freezes the actors in place: the Moon has come between the Earth and Sun, and its body completely blocks the Sun's face. A shadow falls over the Earth. The men remain in such position for a few minutes that seem like an eternity; then János finishes his explanation and sets the in motion again. The Earth emerges from its shadow back into the light of the Sun.

In the next scene János goes to visit an elderly friend, György bácsi. György bácsi is a musician, perhaps a bit of an eccentric. When János arrives, he is in the midst of declaiming against the musical tuning system devised in the XVIIth century by the German Andreas WERCKMEISTER. The scale devised by WERCKMEISTER puts forth a system of equal temperament, which has formed the basis of Western music for the past two hundred years. Its origin lies in an attempt to solve an age-old musical problem: in tuning a scale based on a given harmonic relationship between notes, say thirds or fifths, due to a mathematical anomaly the note at the end of the scale does not perfectly match up with the note that should be one octave below it – middle C and high C are not exactly in tune. Therefore, some compromise is always necessary in tuning. Prior to the introduction of equal temperament, instruments were tuned in such a way that the most important chords were perfectly in tune, less important harmonies were slightly compromised, and one or two notes, called the 'wolf', were so far off that they were unplayable. In equal temperament, though, the pure octave is divided into twelve equally spaced tones, thus allowing music to be transposed up and down the scale, written and played in any key. All the harmonies are compromised to exactly the same degree, which is mathematically determined – thus all notes are playable, but none of them is perfect.⁵

János has to interrupt György bácsi's tirade against this musical outrage to bring him some bad news: he has a letter from György bácsi's ex-wife, Tünde néni, notifying him that she requires his help for a special project. A circus has come to town, and with it, many "undesirable" types are beginning to congregate in the town square. An undercurrent of restlessness can be felt. Tünde néni wants to cleanse the town of these vermin and restore it to its rightful order, full of decent, law-abiding, upstanding citizens. Tünde néni herself, however, does not have the necessary moral authority to carry this

⁴ TARR Béla (dir.), *Werckmeister harmóniák*. Marseille, 2000.

⁵ BICKNELL Stephen. *Temperament: A Beginner's Guide*. <http://www.albany.edu/piporg-1/tmpmnt.html>.

off; and even with the help of the chief of police, she is unable to impose her will on the townsfolk. Thus Tünde néni appeals to her ex-husband, who is well respected in the community, to make a round of the town, gathering signatures of the residents to support her cause. Her 'request' cloaks a barely veiled threat: if György bácsi fails to gather all the required signatures by 4 o'clock that afternoon, Tünde néni will move back in with him. György bácsi is fiercely opposed to the idea and flatly refuses to cooperate, but János argues and finally manages to convince him that it is better to do this relatively harmless deed to appease Tünde néni, rather than having her come back and disrupt all their lives again.

The circus that is bringing all these undesirable types is in itself a great mystery – one day posters appear around the town announcing its arrival, and then in the middle of the night it pulls into town, such as it is. The circus features only two attractions: a colossal blue whale, fully preserved, and the inscrutable 'Prince', about whom nothing concretely is known, but many things are surmised. Rumor has it that he is a dwarf with a mysterious power over people to incite them to riot – violence had broken out in all the previous stops on the circus' tour, and the townsfolk are simultaneously curious and apprehensive.

János himself is much more interested in the Whale than the Prince; he is fascinated by its size and perfection, an awe-inspiring example of God's natural order. After enthusiastically proclaiming its marvels to György bácsi and all his other friends, János returns to the square to have another look at the Whale. He finds that the circus has closed for the day, but he manages to find an unsecured opening in the container and sneaks inside for a peek. While there, he overhears an argument between the owner of the circus and the Prince – the owner insisting that he cannot tolerate any more violence, and the Prince vehemently proclaiming his right to speak to the townspeople. In the end, the owner concedes, and the Prince is given free reign.

The final key scene presents the inevitable: a riot breaks out among the townspeople gathered in the square, who then rampage through the town, burning and destroying everything in their path. They head for the local hospital. Once there, they embark on a swift, silent and brutal attack on the hospital's inmates, all defenseless elderly people. Beds are overturned. Windows are broken. Old women are beaten mercilessly. Everything that can be smashed, broken or destroyed is laid waste. And through it all János watches silently, wide-eyed.



Finally the mob comes to a room with a shower in it. They tear away the curtain to find a terrified old man, half-starved, trembling in the bath. He looks at them silently, resigned. The mob stares back in silence. Then, after a bit, they turn and quietly slink away, one by one. Humanity returns. And only the shattered windows, the broken doors and the bodies lying in the street speak to the madness that has transpired.

II. Imaginary Borderlands

Having laid out the key scenes and characters, let us now move on to the key terms of our discussion: ‘borderland’ and ‘imaginary’. These terms were interrogated by GUPTA and FERGUSON, and APPADURAI, respectively, with the former drawing heavily on the latter. As noted earlier, GUPTA and FERGUSON do not conceive of a borderland in the strict geographical sense of the term, ie. the ‘edge’ of a particular fixed unity, where it comes into contact with another particular fixed unity. Instead, they define it as a zone of ‘displacement’ – the wrong place – or ‘deterritorialization’ – no place.

It is interesting to try to lay out the dimensions of the borderland. While the first two dimensions, length and width, are easy to see on any map, identifying the third dimension – depth – at first causes a bit of a stretch. As the Bulgarian artist Luchezar BOYADIJEV has noted, however, it is only by applying the idea of depth that the reality of identity in post-Socialist Central and South East Europe can be understood. With dozens of identities – national, ethnic, religious and otherwise – overlapping on a single territory, cultures become sedimented, eternally shifting, sometimes even colliding.⁶

This in turn brings us to the fourth dimension – time –, which, as history, serves as the medium in which these identities come to overlap. “What does it mean, at the end of the twentieth century, to speak (...) of a ‘native land’? What processes rather than essences are involved in present experiences of cultural identity?” ask GUPTA and FERGUSON.⁷ With this question, they hit upon the crux of the matter – the fact that contemporary identity is based more on a dynamic process changing over time, than on a static, fixed essence, as traditional philosophy and psychology would decree.

Taken out of its literal context, it becomes easy to see multiple

6 KLUITENBERG Eric, *The Politics of Cultural Memory*. <http://www.nettime.org/Lists-Archives/net-time-1-9907/msg00083.html>.

7 GUPTA Akhil – FERGUSON James, *Beyond ‘Culture’: Space, Identity, and the Politics of Difference*. *Cultural Anthropology* 1992/1. 9.

examples of borderlands, both of time and identity, even in a film such as *Werckmeister Harmonies*, where the action takes place in a single town, and almost in a single locale in the town square. On the most basic level, the two key characters of the Whale and the Prince serve as embodied borderlands. Their significance in this way is perhaps a bit obscured by their superficial appearance, which places them at the extremes of the spectrum – the gargantuan Whale and the dwarf Prince – rather than in the middle where we might expect a ‘borderland’ to lie.

Symbolically, however, they represent two unique examples of creatures on the borderline between humans and our lower kin in the animal kingdom. If we heark back to the olden days of traveling circuses, we can find many examples of ‘freak shows’, in which dwarves and other persons with the misfortune to be born misshapen or disfigured were shown off as curiosities. Their disfigurements were also considered to reflect upon their moral character – a shrunken body was a sign of a shrunken conscience, whereby they deserved to be classed with the beasts, given that humankind’s capacity for moral reason was established with the Enlightenment as elevating us above the rest of the animal world.

The whale, too, functioned as a link between the human and animal kingdoms: as an aquatic it lived in the sea and swam with other fishes, but as a mammal it breathed air, fed its young with milk, and exhibited structural characteristics surprisingly similar to the human skeleton. In fact, the decision to classify the whale as a mammal instead of a fish was greatly controversial at the turn of the XIXth century, since it challenged conventional wisdom (not to mention religious belief) about humanity as distinct from the rest of nature and placed us a little too close for comfort to the world of the beasts.⁸

Moving on from physical to temporal borderlands, the most obvious example is the eclipse described in the opening scene, where day and night seem to merge and overlap. Like the whale and dwarf, this borderland also has a symbolic moral significance: day and night, light and dark, good and evil. In fact, TARR’s use of black-and-white cinematography emphasizes the importance of light and dark in the film, giving it a leading role of its own. When János trudges along the street in one of the opening scenes, we see him passing from dark to shadow to light and back again in the glow of the

8 NAJAFI Sina, *Cutting the World at its Joints: An Interview with D. Graham Burnett*. *Cabinet* 2007–2008/4. 81–88.

streetlights, symbolically mirroring the passage of the Earth in the Moon's shadow and the human soul's descent into darkness and re-emergence therefrom.

And, although it is not explicitly mentioned in the narrative, the film itself is situated within a temporal borderland at the meta-level. The aptly named transitional period in Hungary, following the fall of communism, during which the market economy and civil society should be developed, also represents an inherently chronological process rather than a fixed event, a clean break between the totalitarian past and the democratic future. This borderland between "was" and "will be" is the ephemeral present, in which the film is set – a present that is hard to pin down, that exists more in the minds of the people than in any concrete indicators on the ground.

APPADURAI notes that "one of the most problematic legacies of grand Western social science (...) is that it has steadily reinforced the sense of some single moment – call it the modern moment – that by its appearance creates a dramatic and unprecedented break between past and present."⁹ He goes on to say that "the global is to space what the modern is to time. For many societies, modernity is an elsewhere, just as the global is a temporal wave that must be encountered in *their* present."¹⁰ Thus the temporal borderland of the ambiguous present calls the very idea of modernity itself into question, at least insofar as a particular society or community is concerned.

This quote also highlights the subtle, but inextricable link between globalization and modernity; thus transitional societies are facing not only a temporal, but also a spatial transition, making their modernity critically dependent on today's vast flows of people and ideas, a radically different state of affairs from what such countries experienced during Soviet-dominated state socialism.

APPADURAI argues that it is precisely these flows of people and ideas – in the form of mass migration and the media – that together make up "the *work of the imagination* as a constitutive feature of modern subjectivity."¹¹ For him, the imagination is the driving force of contemporary identity (and identity politics), fed by "diasporas of hope, diasporas of terror, and diasporas of despair."¹² The modern imaginary differs from past imagination in three crucial ways: one, it is no longer the exclusive realm of artists and shamans, but has

entered the everyday life of the average human; two, it is a dynamic force towards action, not an escapist fantasy; and three, thanks especially to the mass media, it is a collective force, a "community of sentiment", rather than the property of a single individual.¹³ Taken together, these three characteristics of the contemporary imagination have grave import for societies in transformation.

In *Werckmeister Harmonies*, the work of the collective imagination in forming identity can be seen most clearly in Tünde néni's efforts to cleanse the town of undesirables. Where before there had been simply townspeople, suddenly categories were introduced: 'Us' and 'Them'. Significantly, this break occurs simultaneously with the introduction of a foreign element into this hitherto homogenous town: the circus. The circus represents both of APPADURAI's elements for feeding the imagination, namely migration or the movement of persons, in the form of the Prince, the Whale and a few other circus personnel; and the media or the movement of ideas, in the potential of these persons to speak to a broad audience at a single locale, as when the crowd gathers in the square to take in the spectacle. It is interesting to note that the circus is perhaps the original form of mass media, given its origin as entertainment for the masses in ancient Rome.

Tünde néni and the Prince effectively set up two competing conceptions for the townspeople to identify with: Tünde néni on the side of tradition, law and order, and the Prince on the side of chaos, change and the unknown. The Prince's identity as an outsider is reinforced by the fact that he speaks a foreign language, Slovak; this fact in itself places him into a singular borderland of 'neighbor-other', as Magyars and Slovaks co-existed in one country for a thousand years, always, however, fiercely maintaining their distinct identities. But Tünde néni herself is also an outsider of sorts, having been divorced from her husband and living away from the town for a long period of time.

Along with their competing ideologies, the two demagogues also employ competing methods of communication: Tünde néni relies on traditional methods of personal contact, which are based more on relationships between people, while the Prince employs the modern mass media approach of speeches to large crowds, which abstracts information from the person communicating it. Thus the unsuspecting townspeople find themselves suddenly called upon to decide which side they are on, the old or the new, the already known

9 APPADURAI Arjun, *Modernity at Large*. Minneapolis, 1996. 3.

10 APPADURAI Arjun, *Modernity at Large*. Minneapolis, 1996. 9.

11 APPADURAI Arjun, *Modernity at Large*. Minneapolis, 1996. 3.

12 APPADURAI Arjun, *Modernity at Large*. Minneapolis, 1996. 6.

13 APPADURAI Arjun, *Modernity at Large*. Minneapolis, 1996. 5–8.

or the possible, order or chaos. Caught in the middle between the two sides, most of them identifying neither with one nor the other, the townspeople live in a margin of uncertainty ripe for exploitation and violence.

III. The Clash of Civilizations

Homi K. BHABHA speaks about the ‘uncanny’ of cultural difference, when difference itself is called into question. This take on borders centers on the notion that no matter how threatening or unsettling a given borderland is, the lack of a border is even more unsettling. “It is as the strangeness of the familiar that it becomes more problematic, both politically and conceptually (...) when the problem of cultural difference is ourselves-as-others, others-as-ourselves, that borderline.”¹⁴

In fact, this is beautifully illustrated in *Werckmeister Harmonies*, where the borderline between “Us” and “Them” is also the border between civilization and barbarism. The riot scene in the hospital has been described as the “crisis of European civilization”; many people read it as a parallel to the events surrounding World War II and the Jewish Shoah (Holocaust), in which ordinary people proved themselves capable of committing tremendous atrocities. Certainly it can be read at this level.

The director, however, has said that the film is partially a response to the conflict in Bosnia and Herzegovina in the 1990s, and this offers equally rich potential for interpretation. As in the Shoah, the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina pitted neighbor against neighbor, with different nationalities who had lived together for hundreds of years finding their differences now so vital that they were willing to kill to preserve their own identity. Onlookers in Western Europe and the United States watched in horror and wondered how such ugly acts as ‘genocide’ and ‘ethnic cleansing’ could be taking place at the end of the XXth century in Europe, the cradle of Christianity, Enlightenment values and human rights.

The easiest answer to this dilemma, and the one most onlookers opted for, was to decide that Serbs and Croats and Bosniaks and ethnic Albanians were somehow different from all of us – that they retained some kind of primitive tribalism, barbarism, that civilization has somehow passed them by. Thus a ‘Balkan ghetto’ is created.

¹⁴ BHABHA Homi K., *Location, Intervention, Incommensurability: A Conversation with Homi K. Bhabha*. *Emergences* 1989/1. 63–88. Quoted in GUPTA Akhil – FERGUSON James, *Beyond ‘Culture’: Space, Identity, and the Politics of Difference*. *Cultural Anthropology* 1992/1. 18.

APPADURAI terms this approach ‘primordialism’: the idea that “all group sentiments that involve a strong sense of group identity, of *we*-ness, draw on those attachments that bind small, intimate collectivities, usually those based on kinship or its extensions.”¹⁵

He notes that this fallacy involves the illegitimate association of two opposing poles of irrationality: one involving group violence, genocide and terror, and the other “any form of behavior that appears antimodern, whether it involves sluggish participation in elections, corruption in bureaucracy, resistance to modern educational techniques, or refusal to comply with modern state policies, ranging from birth control to monolingualism.”¹⁶ APPADURAI further argues that, while primordialist terminology has typically been applied by Westerners to the non-Western world, it has also been adopted, especially by the press, in relation to the explosion of ethnic violence in Eastern Europe after the fall of communism. Thus “the old language of modernization has been replaced by new talk of the obstacles to civil society and sustainable democracy”,¹⁷ and all of Central and Eastern Europe is thereby suspect because of its ‘lack of civilization’.

The advantage of this primordialist thesis for the Western theoretician is obvious – it allows us to continue to sit comfortably at home, safe in the knowledge that our political institutions, philosophies, cultures and values have been developed over centuries to ensure that *we* will never descend into such atrocities. Clearly this approach is based implicitly or explicitly on the ‘Us’ versus ‘Them’ that GUPTA and FERGUSON warned us about. These in turn are based on imaginary notions of communities at the local, national and global levels, generously helped along by the particular dynamics of communist and post-communist politics of place.

As GUPTA notes, one hallmark of XXth century revolutions is the “difficulty of formulating large-scale political movements without reference to national homelands”.¹⁸ Thus, paradoxically enough, it is precisely the internationalist aims of the proletarian movement that fostered an undercurrent of nationalism, ultimately leading to meltdowns along ethnic or national lines in the post-Soviet period.

¹⁵ APPADURAI Arjun, *Modernity at Large*. Minneapolis, 1996. 140.

¹⁶ APPADURAI Arjun, *Modernity at Large*. Minneapolis, 1996. 140.

¹⁷ APPADURAI Arjun, *Modernity at Large*. Minneapolis, 1996. 141.

¹⁸ GUPTA Akhil – FERGUSON James, *Beyond ‘Culture’: Space, Identity, and the Politics of Difference*. *Cultural Anthropology* 1992/1. 12.

In GUPTA's words, "Class-based internationalism's tendencies to nationalism (as in the history of the Second International, or that of the USSR), and to utopianism imagined in local rather than universal terms (...) show clearly the importance of attaching causes to places and the ubiquity of place making in collective political mobilization."¹⁹ He also notes that the fourth dimension – time – packs a potent force, as "the association of place with memory, loss, and nostalgia plays directly into the hands of reactionary popular movements."²⁰

Thus the newly liberated countries of Central and South East Europe are a prime setting for all kinds of line-drawing by many interested parties, both inside the region and out. This is the setting in which TARR created the *Werckmeister Harmonies*, and it is to this particular problem of the shades of gray between black and white, the borders between Here and There, Us and Them, that the film speaks most eloquently.

Going back to TARR's comments about the film being a reflection on the experiences of South East Europe (Balkans) in the early 1990s, on one level this film can be read as the negation of the border between Central Europe on the one hand, and Eastern and South East Europe on the other – a division that Magyars and Slovenes, among others, have fiercely maintained, at least in words. Merely collapsing this distinction, however, does not automatically negate the primordialist thesis – indeed, the film could still be viewed with self-righteousness by a Western European or North American, serving to reinforce our previous divisions into East and West along the Iron Curtain and exposing as a fraud the efforts of Central Europe to redefine itself as different and distinct from its neighbors to the East and South.

But, starting from the assumption that Magyars regard themselves as an integral part of Western civilization, heirs to the glory of the Austro-Hungarian Empire and Europe's greatest legacies, it seems to me unlikely that TARR was trying to assert only the similarities between Central and South East Europeans, the same nationalistic forces at work with the same potential for violence. Rather, I think the film should be read more generally, as a reflection on European (and North American) civilization as a whole, and by extension all humankind – that we all have within us the potential for violence, that no political system or standard of living can be said to ensure that we treat our neighbors with dignity and respect.

¹⁹ GUPTA Akhil – FERGUSON James, *Beyond 'Culture': Space, Identity, and the Politics of Difference*. Cultural Anthropology 1992/1. 13.

²⁰ GUPTA Akhil – FERGUSON James, *Beyond 'Culture': Space, Identity, and the Politics of Difference*. Cultural Anthropology 1992/1. 13.

It is particularly interesting that it is never clear in the film precisely to which extent János takes part in the violence – clearly he was a witness to it, following it avidly; but it is equally possible that he was not just a passive witness, but an active participant – after all, he was certainly there at the scene. This ambiguity in the protagonist, with whom we subliminally identify, places us solidly in the borderland between Us and Them, reinforcing the idea that the distinction does not truly exist – it is merely a product of our collective imagination.

Taken this way, the film can have distinctly religious overtones: "For all have sinned and fall short of the Glory of God," as the Bible says in Romans 3,23. The inherently sinful nature of all men and women provides fertile soil for the growth of hatred and violence, and prevents us from being able to recognize our fellow human beings as sisters and brothers, more alike than different from us. We all have inside of us the capacity for evil; it does not discriminate between East and West, rich and poor, capitalist and communist.

In fact, there is some evidence in the film to support the religious interpretation: the figure of the old man in the hospital scene has a form distinctly Christ-like, or at least martyr-like – suffering, emaciated, bathed in a halo of light. And it is only after this image that the townspeople, the ordinary human folk, come to their senses and feel shame for what they have done. Thus, by implication, it is only the recognition of ourselves as mortals, with our own frailties and imperfections, that leads us to recognize our common humanity with those we otherwise might scorn, and paradoxically to be able then to seek redemption for us all.

IV. Searching for Harmony

The one scene from this film that defies nearly all reviewers in their attempts to weave it into the story line is the scene about musical temperament from which the film takes its name. I believe that analyzing this film in the light of globalization offers potential to riddle out this enigma. 'Temperament' exploits its double meaning, as personality and as balance, powerfully expressing the notion of identity. In the musical analogy, by a quirk of math, just like a quirk of DNA, the identity of keys, like the identity of countries and regions, are arranged on the keyboard (map) and seem to have the potential to coexist.

The film ends with György bácsi going to visit János in the hospital, where he has been since his escape attempt from the town failed. János is now mute, symbolically reverting to an animal-like state after witnessing – or participating in – the brutal raid on what might well have been the very same hospital. György bácsi tells János that he has re-tuned the piano to equal temperament, sacrificing the purity of the harmonies for the sake of the octaves. He says this with a hint of sadness, perhaps resignation, but no bitterness; the world is changing, and equal temperament is here to stay.

Perhaps the same might be said of globalization as well – our world is organized now in ever-larger groupings, in octaves instead of chords. As these various communities come into contact with each other, we can no longer avoid the ‘wolf’, the unplayable combination, the violent clash of sounds and peoples. Our only hope, at least as TARR Béla would have it, is to sacrifice a bit of our notion of purity – whether that be political, ethnic or otherwise – in favor of fitting better into the grand scheme of things. In other words, we have to learn to inhabit the borderlands.

Suggested Reading

- APPADURAI Arjun, *Modernity at Large*. Minneapolis, 1996.
- BHABHA Homi K., *Location, Intervention, Incommensurability: A Conversation with Homi K. Bhabha*. *Emergences* 1989/1. 63–88. Quoted in GUPTA Akhil – FERGUSON James, *Beyond 'Culture': Space, Identity, and the Politics of Difference*. *Cultural Anthropology* 1992/1. 6–23.
- BICKNELL Stephen. *Temperament: A Beginner's Guide*. <http://www.albany.edu/piporg-1/tmpmrent.html>.
- GUPTA Akhil – FERGUSON James, *Beyond 'Culture': Space, Identity, and the Politics of Difference*. *Cultural Anthropology* 1992/1. 6–23.
- KLUITENBERG Eric, *The Politics of Cultural Memory*. <http://www.nettime.org/Lists-Archives/nettime-1-9907/msg00083.html>.
- KRASZNAHORKAI László, *Az ellenállás melankóliája* (The Melancholy of Resistance). Budapest, 1989.
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