

**Becoming Béla Tarr's Bêtes, or How to Stop Being Afraid of Ceasing to Be a Human
Being**

James Martell

“Slowness is a dangerous power, since it has the passion of immobility, with which, one day, it
will end up getting confused.”

---Edmond Jabès

“Another end of the world is possible.”

---Written on a wall in Nanterre, April 2016.

I

We all remember Nagg's joke in *Endgame*, the story of an Englishman “in a hurry for the New Year festivities,” who goes to his tailor to get a pair of striped trousers. First the tailor tells him that the trousers will be ready in four days. Not having them by then, he says that he will have them in a week. A week later, he says that in 10 days, and so on.... Until, one day, exasperated, the Englishman tells him: “God damn you to hell, Sir, no, it's indecent, there are limits! In six days, God made the world. Yes Sir, no less Sir, the WORLD! And you are not bloody well capable of making me a pair of trousers in three months!” To which the tailor responds:

“But my dear Sir, my dear Sir, look—

(disdainful gesture, disgustedly)

—at the world—

(Pause.)

and look—

(loving gesture, proudly)

—at my TROUSERS!” (Beckett 30)

The punch line of the story is based not only on a critique of the sad state of the world, but also on the notion that, sometimes, speed—even *divine* speed—can be nothing else but a clumsy, and

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precocious blunder than ends in catastrophe. In other words, speed, one of the stereotypical traits of smartness (“you’re fast”—a colleague told me recently, and then pointing to one of our students he added—“but she’s faster”) can end up revealing intelligence’s underside: sheer stupidity. Analyzing Pynchon’s reflections on his early writings, together with Kant’s example for stupidity (“outdoing”), Avital Ronell describes how the speed of intelligence can turn easily into its troublesome double:

Shooting ahead, these velocities point to the foreclosive speed of the overachiever, designating those who travel the fast track: they have created a situation in which the conventional connotations of *fast* derail and no longer support an equivalency with *smart*. Inevitably, coming around a sharp curve of logic, fast means slow. Hastening to finish, achieve, conclude, these overachievers prove that one can be fast and stupid.
(28)

This problem of thinking-speed appears when we look at the world today, and with it, at the state of what we can call “humanism” and “humanist thinking.”¹ These days, stupidity and the hurry to (not) think are particularly striking when we consider recent events like Brexit (“did we decide this too fast?”), the rising and emboldened waves of nationalisms, phobias (xeno-, homo-, islamo-, etc.), and overt fascist and racist drives in both Europe and the US, religious extremisms all around the world, together with what we can call a renewed surge of “anti-intellectualism” (“people in this country have had enough of experts” said Michael Gove during the Leave campaign), or—dropping all euphemisms—an increase of the public’s exhibition of its own stupidity, as well as of its enjoyment (*jouissance*) of it.² Humanism and humanist thinking are at stake here because these renewed tendencies and impulses belong to the same historical landscape where Humanism was lastly tested (the aftermath of WWII) and ultimately deemed philosophically insufficient—if not “dead” altogether. Humanist thinking and philosophy represent this rush to (not) think, because they begin with the supposition that we know what a human is, presupposing thus the solid identity of the thinker or the person asking the questions. Even with all its Sartrean calls for radical responsibility, the identity of the thinker of humanism has never really been at stake in his or her questions.³

Perhaps the biggest shock that accompanies the resurgence of these deleterious tendencies is that the historical results of Fascism and Nazism were marked with the sentence: *Never again!* However, as Arnaud Villani remarked in 1988, we could already be disappointed of how, in the hurry to recognize these threats in order to avoid them, we have painted them in a

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rushed way (“with rites and uniforms” included), weakening thus “our capacity—already feeble—to detect under *new faces* (they are always possible) a return to the spirit of Fascisms” (“Le Jardin...,” 174).⁴ In other words, in our rush to be able to identify the worst enemy (the possible return of the striking new beginning of the West: the Holocaust), we put in one bag labeled Fascism an “impossible knot of prejudices, epistemological illusions, [an] ordinary complex of cowardice and stupidity, [and a] micrological puzzle of everyday meanness” (“Le Jardin...” 174). This quick identification made us then miss these traits under new faces, and we allowed them as a consequence to “install themselves in the simplicity of the silent masses and the ‘dumbed down people,’ but this time it was less discoverable” (“Le Jardin...” 174).

In 1966, Foucault had warned us, in *Les mots et les choses*, about the hurried thinking of Humanism, and especially about the need to go beyond any philosophy or thought dictated by the essence of man. According to him, it was Nietzsche’s identification of the death of God with the death of Man (the coming forth of the *Übermensch*) that heralded the possibility—and necessity—of a new beginning for thinking, and thus for philosophy itself.

If the discovery of the Return is indeed the end of philosophy, then the end of man, for its part, is the return of the beginning of philosophy. It is no longer possible to think in our day other than in the void left by man’s disappearance. For this void does not create a deficiency; it does not constitute a lacuna that must be filled. It is nothing more, and nothing less, than the unfolding of a space in which it is once more possible to think.
(*The Order of Things* 373)

Thus, with the philosophy dictated by man dead, and this creative void in its place, we could start thinking again, and stop falling on anthropological traps, vicious circles of definition where we could not recognize the new (nor the old) due to our hurried tendencies to identify and categorize, to think that we had—as humans who understand themselves, and thus merit to measure the world—already always understood.

However, as our history goes, even after Foucault’s 1966 diagnosis, we kept falling on these anthropological traps, trying to measure any phenomenon through what we believe is human (be it anthropological, psychological, or historical), and thus to create transcendental or empirical foundations based on man’s measures and definitions of itself. It seems thus that in order to go beyond this impasse, it is not enough to denounce humans/ism’s hubris—which takes man’s question of itself as the tautological explanation of both, man and the universe—and that thinking

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itself (*cogitatio*), in its constant hurry to understand, can never escape its delusions of quick comprehension.⁵

Two years after Foucault's *Les mots et les choses* appeared, following also a Nietzschean path, Deleuze took the critique of humanist philosophy further, and examined not only the possibility of thinking anew, but also thinking's essential relation to its supposed opposite: stupidity. For him, philosophy had to stop confusing stupidity with error, and to consider the first one as a transcendental problem, that is to say, as a condition of possibility for thought itself. When Avital Ronell answered Deleuze's call to think stupidity transcendently, in her homonymous book from 2003, the problem of stupidity appeared finally—in its relation to other evils and flaws like cruelty and meanness—not as an empirical or accidental condition anymore, but precisely as *the question of thinking itself*:

Cowardice, cruelty, baseness, and stupidity are not corporeal forms [...], nor are they mere facts of society and character, but rather *the structures of thinking as such*. Reformulating the question of stupidity is another way of stating the interrogatory challenge, “Was heißt Denken?”: What calls forth thinking, or why is it that we are still not thinking? (21)

Here we see the historical inscription of the transcendental question of thought. Not only “what is stupidity,” “what is thinking,” or “what calls forth thinking,” but most importantly at this, our own historical juncture (look at the world now): why is it that we are *still* not thinking? Or, in other way: how can we finally approach—or perhaps surrender—to thinking? But is it even possible to question or *criticize thinking*—*cogito*'s hard self⁶—without becoming stupid in the process? When, as we have seen, one of the problems of thinking is the hubris that pushes us—as humans who know what and who they are—to hurry up and identify, or to believe that we have recognized a problem, or that we possess the necessary knowledge in our hands for understanding it all, should we not, like the idiot Valuska from László Krasznahorkai's *The Melancholy of Resistance*—in an extreme example of Heideggerian *Gelassenheit*—begin to think *by renouncing thinking*, and thus knowledge itself?

When he declared that he knew nothing of the universe, they neither believed nor understood him, but it was quite true: Valuska really did know nothing about the universe, for what he knew was not exactly knowledge. He had no sense of proportion and was entirely lacking the compulsive drive to reason; he was not hungry to measure

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himself, time and time again, against the pure and wonderful mechanism of ‘that silent heavenly clockwork’ for he took it for granted that his great concern for the universe was unlikely to be reciprocated by the universe for him. And, since this understanding of his extended to life on earth generally and the town in which he lived particularly—for it was his experience that each history, each incident, each movement and each act of the will was part of an endless repetitive cycle—his relationship to his fellow human beings was governed by the same unconscious assumption; being unable to detect mutability where there plainly wasn’t any, he made like the raindrop relinquishing hold of the cloud which contained it, and simply surrendered to the ceaseless execution of his preappointed task. (80-81)

But if we give up knowledge like him, if we surrender like a raindrop, what would it be, our task? Can the slowness with which a raindrop generates and falls describe a new speed for thinking, a way of thinking without hubris, without hurries, without quick identifications based on a dreamt identity, without a hold on a tautological principle based on what we believe is human, and thus rational or logical? Let us go slowly, and in order to look closer at the possibility of a different speed for thinking, let us visit another universe, one directed precisely by an extreme slowness, a universe concomitant and bound to Krasznahorkai’s novels: Béla Tarr’s world.

II

Something happens when, after the title credits, we enter and remain, for more than seven minutes, on a slow travelling shot of cows exiting a farm, while we listen to their mooing and their steps on the mud, accompanied by the wind blowing and eerie bells in the distance. What happens is slow, almost imperceptible. But it is there, and we as viewers of *Sátántangó*, are an integral part of it. If it is true that, as Jean Genet wrote “*Our sight can be alive or slow, depending on the thing seen, as much as on us (...)*” and that “*when it lands on a painting by Rembrandt our sight gets heavy, almost bovine*” (“Ce qui est resté...” 21, my translation, Genet’s italics), it is fair to ask if, when we look at these cows at the beginning of Béla Tarr’s 7 hours and 30 minutes film, our sight gets heavy as well, becoming Rembrandtian, touching something that the painter captured in his last works. And if there is a link between what is bovine and art, a link that passes through the speed of our sight, what is the nature of this link? And if this link is connected to the animal, how much of

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it is still human, and how does this participation in the animal—and perhaps in something else that is different from both, humans and animals, but still linked to them—affect our conception of art, both as expression and as perception?⁷

With its more than 7 hours, its extremely slow travelling and tracking shots, its intermittent silence, and the repetitiveness of its actions, *Sátántangó* is a paramount example of how the cinema of Béla Tarr creates a spatial experience, of how it turns time into a space where, inhabiting it as spectators, we question our identity not only with regards to our body, but also as thinking beings.⁸ As Elzbieta Buslowska expresses it in her reading of Béla Tarr's films through Deleuze, there is here “something one can only sense, ambiguous, singular beyond individual experience; physical, concrete, and virtually present, real in a non-realistic sense; a space of ‘unfixed’ identity” (113). But what exactly is this space of “unfixed” identity, how is it created, and more importantly, what does it do to us, viewers, and what do we do *in* it, since as a space we come to inhabit it, for two, seven hours, or even more?⁹

Let us go back for a moment to the first scene of *Sátántangó*. What we see at the beginning is a background, a series of stalls with cows coming out of them. At the front we see only the ground, wet and muddled in a series of puddles. At some point, a cow approaches the camera, but just to disappear to the right as the travelling shot gains speed. As we move with the camera to the left, we follow in a medium to long shot the cows, our original animal background, and the only other thing that appears in front of us, is the back of buildings that momentarily hide the animals in their procession. When the camera finally stops moving, we see the animals disappear again from where they came. What we see then is *a background fading into the background*. In this way, together with its slowness, deep focus, and length, it is the constant focus on the background that accounts for all the effects of this first scene. In his use of animals as signs (both objects and subjects), Tarr does not employ them as metaphors or symbols of human traits or emotions.¹⁰ The animals in his films (the dogs of *Damnation*, the cows, horses, owl and cat of *Sátántangó*, the dead whale in *Werckmeister Harmonies*, the horse of *The Turin Horse*, etc.) are always connected to a background or bottom that erases the definitions between the creatures, including us, the viewers. In this way, Béla Tarr acts like the satirical poets, who, according to Deleuze:

[...] proceed through the various degrees of injury, they do not stop with animal forms but continue on to more profound regressions, passing from carnivores to herbivores and ending with a cloaca as though with a universal vegetal and digestive ground. The internal process of digestion is more profound than the external gesture of attack or

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voracious movement: stupidity [*bêtise*] with peristaltic movements. (*Difference and Repetition* 151; translation slightly modified)

As we seat then for hours like characters within his films, immobile and passive¹¹ spectators in front of a window showing us only the background or bottom,¹² what exactly do we experience through this “internal process of digestion,” the stupidity or *bêtise* with peristaltic movements? Facing this background we seat like in front of Goya’s black paintings, especially his *Dog*, experiencing a zone of indiscernibility between the animal and the human. Within this cinematic space, things happen just as within paintings. Here, it is not so much the resemblances between animal forms, but the presentation of the background/bottom that dilutes the limits:

Painting needs more than the skill of the draftsman who notes resemblances between human and animal forms and gets us to witness their transformation: on the contrary, it needs the power of a background that can dissolve forms and impose the existence of a zone in which we no longer know which is animal and which human, because something like the triumph or monument of their nondistinction rises up—as in Goya or even Daumier or Redon.” (*What is Philosophy?* 173; translation slightly modified)

Backgrounds are zones of indetermination and nondistinction, where not only animals and humans, but also things arrive to “that point at infinitum that immediately precedes their natural differentiation. This is what is called an *affect*” (*What is...* 173; translation slightly modified). As we know, according to Deleuze and Guattari, affects are not subjective emotions, objects of psychology or anecdote. They are rather “nonhuman becomings of man” (*What is...* 169), that is to say, actual instances where that which we call human really becomes some-body, or some-thing else: man-dead-whale, community-herd, dead-cat-little-girl, etc.

However, according to Deleuze and Guattari, before these becomings are achieved, in our experience of the affects, there is “that point that immediately precedes” natural differentiation. But where exactly is this point, yet (*pourtant*)¹³ at infinity? Since this point is beyond differentiation, and thus, beyond the possibility of distinguishing an entity or a thinking subject, it is clear that, in order not so much to look at it, but rather to get ourselves to it, we have to let go of the pride of our cogitations—of our closed identities of *res cogitans*—and embrace the idiots that we can become as we watch Tarr’s films. As we know, and as Jacques Rancière remarks, the idiot is a key element in Tarr’s universe—and ultimately, in cinema in general:

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Idiocy is the capacity to transform into gestures the spectacle that one sees through windows, and the shadows stirred up by the words one hears. [...] This conjunction of two idiocies is the very essence of the cinematographic being, the being at once entirely given and entirely removed in a gaze, in gestures, in a gait. (Rancière 42)

When we regard the idiots in Tarr's films (Valuska and his gaze absorbed in the stars that he sees within the eye of the dead whale, Estike's absorbed sight as she walks towards us, with the dead-cat in one hand and the poison that she will use on herself in the other, the doctor at the window looking at the town thinking that the inhabitants are still there when they have left long time ago, Maloin in his tower looking at the ocean as he waits for his destiny, or the stableman and her daughter sitting in front of the window regarding the world disappear), what do we see with/through/as them? Into which gestures do we transform the spectacle they give us? When we see their backs next to the bottomless background, or when we heed their calling—like Valuska's exhortation prior to his performance of the solar system with the drunkards: "All I ask is that you step with me into the bottomlessness"—or in other words, when we, with and through them, touch their affects or points of infinity, we lose our individuation and become idiots or "bêtes" ourselves. In this way, before becoming any-thing, or any-body else (a new identity), we as an audience open up to (our) idiocy, we reach (our) *bêtise* in the mud of non-differentiation. According to Deleuze, this idiocy or *bêtise* is "neither the background nor the individual, but rather that relation where individuation makes the background rise without being able to give it shape" (*Difference...* 197). But what exactly is this background? And how could we picture it when we cannot even give it a figure?

It is difficult to describe this (back)ground, or the terror and attraction it excites. Stirring the background is the most dangerous occupation, but also the most tempting in the stupefied moments of an obtuse will. For this background, along with the individual, rises to the surface yet assumes neither form nor figure. It is there, staring at us, but without eyes. (*Difference...* 190; translation slightly modified)

As we know, in front of this rising of the background, of stupidity, it is always easier to just look away, and to say that idiocy does not concern us, rational and educated beings, or that stupidity is not really a problem worthy of our philosophical cogitations. But, Deleuze reminds us, the best literature is "haunted by the problem of stupidity [*bêtise*]. By giving this problem all its cosmic, encyclopaedic and gnoseological dimensions, such literature was able to carry it as far as

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the entrance to philosophy itself” (*Difference...* 189). Tarr’s cinema enacts precisely this haunting, and that is why it provokes both “terror and attraction.” Nevertheless we should never forget Deleuze’s warning: to stir the background is the “most dangerous occupation.” It involves a leap into the unknown that—according to Rancière—could lead us to pure destruction and madness.

But now, in the current state of the world (*disdainful gesture, disgustedly*), as we see it quickly unraveling every day [another attack today], “[t]he loss of illusions no longer says much about our world. The proximity between the normal disorder of the ‘disillusioned’ order of things and the extreme of destruction or madness tells us much more about it” (Rancière 49) But what is this extreme of madness and destruction? In Tarr’s universe, we can see it in the crowds laying waste to the hospital, without fury, with the quiet gestures of an extreme stoicism, in *Werckmeister Harmonies*; or in the quiet exhaustion of the world in *The Turin Horse*, expressed simply by the stableman’s daughter’s—and the film’s—last question: “what is this darkness?” This extreme state has the opportunity to appear when the background rises without individuation being able to give it shape: “this background rises by means of the I, penetrating deeply into the possibility of thought and constituting the unrecognized in every recognition” (*Difference...* 190).

But here we must walk very slowly, and make a distinction before we continue. This rising of the background/bottom is idiocy, stupidity, *bêtise*, but not yet the extreme of madness—even if it opens the possibility for this extreme. For madness to occur there must be a reflexion: “madness arises at the point at which the individual *contemplates itself* in this free background—and, a result, stupidity [*bêtise*] in stupidity and cruelty in cruelty—to the point that it can no longer stand itself” (*Difference...* 190; my italics). As Avital Ronell points out when reading Jean Paul, one of the problems of stupidity is precisely that it does not reflect itself. In its hurry to label everything as understood, stupidity does not recognize its own gestures, and thus the ridiculousness of its figures.

The stupid cannot see themselves. No mirror yet has been invented in which they might reflect themselves. They ineluctably evade reflection. No catoptrics can mirror back to them, the shallowest, most surface-bound beings, the historical disaster that they portend. (18)¹⁴

Accordingly, in order for madness to occur, a recognition must take place, that of the individual looking no more into an indistinguishable background, but into this background rising *as his own idiocy* or *bêtise*: as *his own impossibility of giving shape to the background*. As a kind of transcendental—yet immanent—narcissistic reflection, madness happens when the individual

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does not recognize anything but its empty form, its incapacity to give shape to the background while still recognizing that this is *its* own incapacity: the limit of its own self. This is the madness of Valuska at the end in the hospital, as well as the madness presented to us through all the backs of the characters in front of the background framed in their windows, that is to say, the madness of *our own reflection* from the back, showing us *our own back-ground*,¹⁵ which, in this infinite reflection, we cannot distinguish from any other. Thus, it is only through this lack of distinction of the (back)ground, through the recognized madness of our reflection that we will ever become anything (person, animal, event, etc..) else.

But now, is it possible to recognize our own stupidity, and thus our madness, in the world today (*disdainful gesture, disgustedly*), and thus, to really become something/one else, and allow for a different end of the world?

The temptation is to wage war on stupidity as if it were a vanquishable object—as if we still knew how to wage war or circumscribe an object in a manner that would be productive of meaning or give rise to futurity. [...] Essentially linked to the inexhaustible, stupidity is also that which fatigues knowledge and wears down history.
(Ronell 3)

Fatigued, against our own stupidity, neither can we count on reason, nor on the Enlightenment,¹⁶ nor the hubris of our intelligence. Our last and only opportunity to recognize it is the fold of its madness. This is the minimum fold of reflection that can allow us to see our own *bêtise*, our own stupidity, and, within this minimal distance, to stop tolerating it. As Flaubert expressed it of Bouvard et Pécuchet: “A pitiful faculty then emerges in their minds, that of being able to see stupidity and no longer tolerate it...” (320). This mad faculty is for the Deleuze of *Différence et répétition*, the biggest hope. As the most pitiable faculty it can also become the most royal one, “when it animates philosophy as a philosophy of mind—in other words, when it leads all the other faculties to the transcendent exercise which renders possible a violent reconciliation between the individual, the background and thought” (*Difference...* 190-191; translation slightly modified). Here, with the “intensive factors of individuation” taken as objects, appears the “highest element of a transcendent sensibility, the *sentendum*” (191). But most importantly, here, in the madness that reflects itself in the non-distinguishable background of its stupidity, we can finally *think thought*, that is to say, we can reflect on “‘the fact that we do not think yet’ or ‘What is stupidity [*bêtise*]?’” (191). From this point on then, in the madness of recognition of our own idiocy, we can finally begin thinking. But can we ever finish this beginning?

III

Béla Tarr's last film, *The Turin Horse*, opens with an anecdote about the beginning of Nietzsche's madness. It tells of how he stopped a cabman in Turin from beating a horse, who was refusing to move, by throwing his arms around the horse's neck, and how, after being taken home by a neighbor, he will lie "still and silent for two days on a divan, until he mutters the obligatory last words: 'Mutter, ich bin dumm' [Mother, I am stupid]." The film's introductory voice-off then concludes: "Of the horse... we know nothing." With this anecdote—psychological and empirical—*The Turin Horse* includes the Eternal Return of the Same as one of its themes. As Jacques Rancière has remarked, the devil or Satan in Tarr's films is precisely this movement of returning, or turning around sempiternally¹⁷—be it with the camera, the characters, or through their fatidic destinies. Now, if according to Foucault, philosophy until Nietzsche was grounded on man and anthropology, it is Nietzsche's thought of the Return that marked the end of man's philosophy, and with it, of all thinking grounded on man's delusional definition of itself. This end of a practice of thinking defined by man's measure would have been the extreme madness at that point, that is to say, the recognition of "the unrecognized in every recognition," the reflection of the background that makes Nietzsche say "Mutter, *ich bin dum*": *I am/is stupid*. The recognition of man's own madness was supposed to be the end of man's folly, and with it, a new beginning for thought.

As we know, this ending was not exactly Nietzsche's ending, given that he found himself duplicated, reproduced in the work of Deleuze, Foucault, Blanchot, Derrida, and others. Nor were these words his last words, if we are to believe Saint-Charles, who said that—according to Nietzsche's mother—after falling in that morose state where he would only repeat "*Mutter, ich bin dumm*," at least once again he said something else, when he cried: "Mother, I understood nothing, and they cannot understand me!" (*Le Figaro*). What does this final statement do to Nietzsche's whole oeuvre, and with it, to the notion of the Eternal Return? And what does it do to our understanding of it, as well as to all the insights and subsequent works influenced by Nietzsche? If Nietzsche was the breakthrough that allowed us to go beyond a humanist philosophy, as well as to question the hubris of our cogitations, what happens with this step-beyond when it is declared as a "misunderstanding" by his own author? Have we really started thinking yet, or have we just dropped "like the raindrop relinquishing hold of the cloud which contained it, and simply

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surrendered to the ceaseless execution of [our] preappointed task”? (Krasznahorkai 80-81). But what is this, our “human” task, if it is not to understand? And if we renounce to our own definitions of the human, do we still have one? Let us look at the world right now (*disdainful gesture, disgustedly*). Look at the rising waves of nationalisms, phobias (xeno-, homo-, islamo-, etc.), religious extremisms, and overt fascist drives in both Europe and the US, together with the new waves of “anti-intellectualism,” the increase of the public’s exhibition of its own stupidity, as well as its enjoyment (*jouissance*) of it. Look at everything that repeats itself. Make sure it is a repetition, and not something new disguised as something old, or vice versa.

Perhaps it is true, and we have not yet understood, nor can we ever understand him, or them: neither Nietzsche, nor Valuska, who always before directing his representation of the universe in the bar with the drunkards, tells us: “All I ask is that you step with me into the bottomlessness.” But perhaps, looking into the bottomlessness of our *bêtise*, we can be certain at least of these two facts: that Nietzsche and Valuska were absolutely right: they did not understand anything, and that we cannot understand them. Because, after all, what guarantee do I have that you understand me right now, as you read this? Do you understand when I invite you to join me into the bottomlessness, into the abyss of our own madness, to see what we can become? Do we understand the bottomless abysses that we are, when we finally dare to look and reflect ourselves, to see our own stupidity and recognize it as madness, the possibility of becoming something else beyond the “human”? As Arnaud Villani wrote back in 1988: “To clearly see bottomlessness [*sans-fond*] is to go to the end of what one can do, it is to suppress the half-measures and the false knowledge. Bottomlessness protects from touching the bottom” (“Le Jardin...” 181). But how do we see this abyss, bottomlessness, *clearly*? That is to say, how do we see our abyss not only by letting it rise through our individuation as stupidity—ourselves unable to give it shape, not even recognizing it as our problem (“make America great again,” how great? What is great here?), but how do we see it reflected with our own figure, as *our own* stupidity, our *own* cruelty, and thus, as that which we cannot—and we should not—tolerate anymore, that which should make us—urgently—become something/one else? Is this still a matter of understanding? Can I *understand* my own stupidity, as I believed that I understood my ego? According to Schelling, we cannot understand it all: “This is the *incomprehensible* [*unergreifliche*] base of reality in things, the indivisible remainder, that which with greatest exertion cannot be resolved in understanding but rather remains eternally in the (back)ground” (29).

Look at *our* world now (*disdainful gesture, disgustedly*). By making the background rise while showing us our own silhouette, the empty form of our identifications, Tarr’s films—but not only his films, and not only cinema—allow us to touch the infinite point where, through different

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affects, we engage in many *becomings*. Through the slow extreme of madness and terror of its characters, but also of its camera, his films give us the opportunity to recognize “the unrecognized in every recognition,” the impossible background shape of our own stupidity, and as a result, they remind us that we have not started thinking yet, that as long as we do not reflect on our own idiocy, “human” on “human,” *cogitatio* on *cogitatio*, and see this abyss clearly, fearlessly, but especially self-lessly—as the abyss, the *Ab-grund* of our own self—stupidity will remain unrecognized, and this means: death.

Let us try to recognize it then. Look at *our* world right now (*disdainful gesture, disgustedly*). Look at the repetitions. Look at the attacks in Istanbul, Irak, Brussels, Paris, and Orlando, but also look at what happens in China, India, Latin America, and everywhere, all the time. Look at this repeated violence at home, abroad, on the streets, online, in your own head and words. Look and recognize all these dumb comments (#allivesmatter #heterosexualprideday #mensrights, etc.), look and recognize all these stupid images. Look and recognize all this stupid death, especially when you cannot give it a form anymore. Look at all this stupidity. Why are we not thinking yet?

Slowly, slowly, but also quicker, faster, it is necessary to think at both speeds at once:

To think, it is then to be able to prove the paradoxical works (slow-fast, gathered-relaxed, fluid-compact). To think, is to know how to learn the lessons of Heraclitus (the *polemos*), of Silesius (to rise *higher* than God), of Hölderlin (the crossing of Italian and Greek movements), of Nietzsche (the *return* of force on form, at the highest level of force), in order to be able to avoid dying stupid. Because that does not break down: idiocy, stupidity, for all of us, their final point, is death. (Villani 178-9)

If the final point of stupidity is death, is it possible not to die as an idiot, or stupidly? Do we not all die stupidly, without any possibility of understanding? Is (our) disintegration not the last rising of the bottom *without reflection*? “Mother, I am stupid,” repeated Nietzsche. But to whom was he really talking? To Franziska Nietzsche? Or was it to die Mutter, the Mother, la mère, mater, *μήτηρ*: the Earth, the Source, the Matter, Ground, Background, Bottomless Bottom of the universe itself? “Bottomless bottom, *I* am stupid, I did not understand you. They cannot understand you. Bottomless bottom, you will disintegrate, stupidly. Your death will be your final rising, the rising of the last ground, of the bottomless bottom (*le sans fond*), and there will be no reflection for you, nobody will recognize his/her/its self in you.” In this final rising, nothing will be lost, all will still be there, but nobody will reflect him/her/itself on it/him/her. Under a distant non-understandable

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edict, like the one that makes the raindrop grow and drop from the cloud, all will be consumed, and, dying stupidly dying, nothing will have changed.

So, through various delicate channels, a superior organism welcomed them, dividing them neatly between organic and inorganic forms of being, and when, after a long and stiff resistance, the remaining tissue, cartilage and finally the bone gave up the hopeless struggle, nothing remained and yet not one atom had been lost. Everything was there, it is simply that there was no clerk capable of making an inventory of all the constituents; but the realm that existed once—once and once only—had disappeared for ever, ground into infinitesimal pieces by the endless momentum of chaos within which crystals of order survived, the chaos that consisted of an indifferent and unstoppable traffic between things. It ground the empire into carbon, hydrogen, nitrogen and sulphur, it took its delicate fibres and unstitched them till they were dispersed and had ceased to exist, because they had been consumed by the force of some incomprehensible distant edict, which must also consume this book, here, now, at the full stop, after the last word. (Krasznahorkai 314)

Unless, mad—like Dionysus¹⁸—we become some thing completely different, and quick (it is very urgent! Look at the world now)—but very slowly also, with the speed of the background rising and showing us our own madness—allow for another end to come.

Notes

¹ Notwithstanding the classical authors and traditions denominated “humanist,” by “humanist thinking,” I designate throughout this essay any kind of reflection that has at its base—overtly or not—an anthropocentric or phallogocentric foundation. In other words, any reflection that not only believes that humans have the greatest dignity of all creatures, but also and especially that believes that it understands without any shadow of doubt what is (a) human, and that tries thusly to measure the world from this “understanding.”

² Besides the demonstrations of Trump supporters, one can think of American comedians’ exuberant delight on Trump’s candidacy, a delight that is not unaccompanied by tantamount fear that the joke turns true.

³ Even considering each individual act as an act that involves all “men,” Sartre’s existential version of humanism never puts into question the dignity of the identity of the “human”: “But what do we mean to say by this, but that man is of a greater dignity than a stone or a table? For we mean to say that man primarily exists—that man is, before all else, something which propels itself towards a future and is conscious of doing so” (translation slightly modified). According to Humanism, ultimately it is consciousness, rationality, thought itself—the hubris of the cogito—what would always vouchsafe for the dignity of the human above all other creatures and things.

⁴ All quotes from the volume *Le temps de la réflexion, 1988. De la bêtise et des bêtes* are my translation.

⁵ It is worth noting here that, trying to completely avoid the problem of the human subject, as ooo or Object Oriented Ontology tries to do by counting the subject as just another object within a pluriverse, does not get rid of the problem of the subject, nor does it avoid the hubris of a quick labeling or categorization of the world. As Žižek writes:

[...] every direct access to “subjectless objects” which ignores or bypasses this cut/wound that ‘is’ the subject already has to rely on transcendental constitution: what it describes is a pluriverse of actants formed by a certain transcendental vision of reality. In other words, the problem with subjectless objects is not that they are too objective, neglecting the role of subject, but that what they describe as subjectless world of objects is too subjective, already within an unproblematized transcendental horizon (191).

⁶ The paradox of the cogito’s hard self as the thinking-essence of man would be how much thinking’s hard kernel resembles/is stupidity itself. As Marc Froment-Meurice describes it:

[Stupidity] bathes in itself like a fish in the water—except that it is simultaneously both the fish and the water. This is why it remains untouchable, out of reach, and thus innocent, because it does let one get a hold of it, like a smooth wall, and especially not to criticism: out of criticism because full in/of itself, a self that does not offer a face, and that dilutes immediately in the humble and puffed up tautology: like an angle, but divinely round—remember the “well rounded,” perfect sphere with which Parmenides imagines Being as it is, will be, and would have always been in itself. (“Du pareil au Même” 143)

In this way, as long as thinking is defined by a closed identity (the thinking subject), it would not have been anything but stupidity.

⁷ For an analysis of the notion of “bêtise,” and of how much is it an animal or a human phenomenon, as well as an examination of Derrida’s criticism of Deleuze on this point, see my “The Animal Mirrors: The Human/Animal Divide in Derrida and Deleuze” in *Mosaic* 48/3 (September 2015) 175-189.

⁸ According to E. Gorfinkel, cinema like that of Béla Tarr, in its slowness, allows the audience to experience time and space as a certain extreme where he or she questions both, its corporeal and incorporeal limits:

As a bodily idea, a “mental kinesthesia,” a “touch of endlessness,” tiredness indexes the site where time is felt by the body as the body confronts its own limits or capacities—lingering, hanging at the cusp between a physical and mental state, the physis of reflexivity. Weariness is the tangibility of the infinitely livable as that which one can live through or endure. (316).

⁹ In this way, Tarr’s cinema—but not only his, possibly all very slow cinema, or “cinema of exhaustion”—allows us to *understand while we experience it*, Derrida’s notion of *différance* as “spacing-temporization,” that is to say, as “becoming-space of time” or “becoming-time of space.”

An interval must separate the present from what it is not in order for the present to be itself, but this interval that constitutes it as present must, by the same token, divide the present in and of itself, thereby also dividing, along with the present, everything that is thought on the basis of the present, that is, in our metaphysical language, every being, and singularly substance or the subject. In constituting itself, in dividing itself dynamically, this interval is what might be called *spacing*, the becoming-space of time or the becoming-time of space (*temporization*). And it is this constitution of the present, as an “originary” and irreducible non simple (and therefore, *stricto sensu* nonoriginary) synthesis of marks, or traces of retentions and protentions [...], that I propose to call archi-writing, archi-trace, or *différance*. Which (is) (simultaneously) spacing (and) temporization. (“La différence” 13)

Thus, through Tarr's cinema and the slow *becomings* it allows, we are able to understand—while experiencing—the non-coincidence of our temporal identities. Not only past-I (from 2 hours ago) is not present-I (while I keep watching the camera turn), nor is he the same as future-I (2 hours from now), but the slow trace (both past and pointing towards the future) will never coincide with any past, present, nor future identity, and that is what makes this trace the Deleuzian point at infinitum—which we will see in a minute—that will allow for all *becomings* to happen. It is perhaps only through this slowness and the stupidity (*bêtise*) that it entails—very different from the quick stupidity of the witty and smart—that we come to understand and experience the spacing (*espacement*) of a different kind of thought, the one that we need the most right now.

¹⁰ “Cows are animals endowed with a weak symbolic power. It is, therefore, as an actual heard, and not as an image of herd mentality, that they must appear to us. Their inaugural presence is certainly given without explanation, but we can justify it *a posteriori*: with the departure of these cows, the last stock of a collective farm is being liquidated” (Rancière 37).

¹¹ “This unknown, in the depths of which something new is to be found, is the single thing to which those who do not act, to which those who are nothing but perception and sensation can aspire” (Rancière 32).

¹² Following the different translations of the French word “fond,” I use sometimes “background,” sometimes “bottom” or “ground” to designate or translate this term. There is a complex geography and geometry around these different translations, depending on the verticality of thought, the horizontality of space, and vice versa—or on a complex and undifferentiated resurgence of space or ground.

¹³ The syntax of the original French makes one wonder if there is not a typo, and it should read “portant” instead “pourtant,” since this would make the point an active element that carries (*porter*) the elements of becoming towards the infinitum, instead of a being “however” (*pourtant*) situated there. « C'est une zone d'indétermination, d'indiscernabilité, comme si des choses, des bêtes et des personnes [...] avaient atteint dans chaque cas ce point *pourtant* à l'infini qui précède immédiatement leur différenciation naturelle. C'est ce qu'on appelle un affect” (*Qu'est-ce que la philosophie ?* 164 ; my italics).

¹⁴ As one of the most ironic examples of the lack of reflection of stupidity, when the American comedian Jimmy Fallon did a mirror sketch with Donald Trump in his show, it seems that

neither of them—nor even the audience—were able to see their own reflections in this sketch. In other words, neither Trump saw the joke that he is, nor the host and audience saw the ridiculousness—and its concomitant danger—of having Trump considered for a moment as a real political figure. The historical disaster is lost to all of them/us, as we laugh at who we believe are the stupid ones—never us.

¹⁵ Notwithstanding the sublimity of its idealism, Schelling’s “Grund” is similar to our background. The rising of the ground, and our impossibility of giving it shape, is what he calls the “indivisible remainder”: “This is the incomprehensible base of reality in things, the indivisible remainder, that which with greatest exertion cannot be resolved in understanding but rather remains eternally in the (back)ground. The understanding is born in the genuine sense from that which is without understanding. Without this preceding darkness creatures have no reality; darkness is their necessary inheritance. [...] The arrogance of man rises up [*sträubt sich*] against this origin from the (back)ground and even seeks moral reasons against it.” (Schelling 29)

¹⁶ At the current state of the world, when stupidity seems to spread to every corner, the natural temptation is to call for education, culture, and in general to intelligence as the only barrier able to stop it. However, these humanistic ideals keep failing, and one of the main reasons is precisely that they do not think enough, satisfied by a stereotypical image of the human as a self-defined intelligent being that only needs *to understand* in order to stop doing stupid things. Nevertheless, it is true that, as Avital Ronell points out, when a “historical dumbing” like the one we are in appears, we must not dodge it philosophically, but rather step up to it—but always taking off all our masks of good consciousness:

Is Enlightenment strong enough to contain, repel, or calm the permanent insurrection of stupidity? At this point in our shared experience of history it may be time to contemplate getting off the thought drug, powerful and tempting as it is, that allows equivalences to be made between education and decency, humanism and justice. [...] In a Nietzschean sense one must compel oneself to confront every mask of good conscience to which commitments have been urgently made. On the other hand, one is enjoined to step up to that which has covered for massive acts of unjustifiable indecency. Often such acts have been consigned in the realm of politics to stupidity—a historical type of narcotic, as Marx observed, involving historical dumbing. Even if philosophy has managed to duck it, history requires us to deal with the dope. (24)

¹⁷ “The devil is the movement that turns in circles. It is not his lesson of despair that counts, but all the riches of light and movement that turn with him” (Rancière 24).

¹⁸ Dionysus would be—from Nietzsche on, through Deleuze, Klossowski, and all those who embrace the figure—the possibility beyond Humanism and the limits of the human, the creative impulse, the real, positive power of fiction, the power of becoming, that is to say, of real change. In this way, as Deleuze remarks, Dionysus will be the figure of what is “noble” against the “base” or “vile” impulses of death:

Only Dionysus, the creative artist, attains the power of metamorphosis that makes him become, attesting to surging forth of life. *He carries the power of the false to a degree that is no longer effected in a form, but in a transformation*—“the gift-giving virtue,” or the creation of possibilities of life: transmutation. The will to power is like energy: an energy capable of transforming itself is called noble. Those that merely know how to disguise or travesty themselves, that is, to take on and maintain a form that is always the same, are vile or base. (*Critique et Clinique* 105)

Béla Tarr and Krasznahorkai’s Nietzschean vein is nowhere so clear as in Bernard’s discourse in *The Turin Horse*. Here we see their indictment of *this* end of the world (as it seems probable, these days): the victory of the “base” and “vile” over the “noble” and “excellent,” which could not have happened—could still perhaps not arrive—without the “noble’s” acceptance of it, without their—our—giving it to it. Fighting against this end has to do with understanding that it is possible, that it is coming. But this kind of “understanding” is not simple. It is not a kind of knowledge that one learns, or has as a safe intuition that does not put the knowing-subject, at risk. This understanding means that the subject, that is to say, we, together with all our pretended knowledge of what is “good and bad,” ultimately do not exist. “We,” “you” and “I,” as fixed and safe identities have never really existed, and the outcome of the world (its end), depends on how we understand this, and especially on how we understand and set up to change after this realization.

Bernard: “I’ve run out of palinka. Would you give me a bottle?”

Ohlsdorfer: “Give him some... Why didn’t you go into town?”

B: “The wind’s blown it away.”

O: “How come?”

B: “It’s gone to ruin.”

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O: "Why would it go to ruin?"

B: "Because everything's in ruins, everything's been degraded, but I could say that they've ruined and degraded everything. Because this is not some kind of cataclysm, coming about with so-called innocent human aid. On the contrary, it's about man's own judgement over his own self, which of course God has a hand in, or dare I say: takes part in. And whatever he takes part in is the most ghastly creation that you can imagine. Because you see the world has been debased. So it doesn't matter what I say because everything has been debased that they've acquired and since they've acquired everything in a sneaky, underhand fight, they've debased everything. Because whatever they touch – and they touch everything – they've debased. This is the way it was until the final victory. Until the triumphant end. Acquire debase, debase, acquire. Or I can put it differently if you like: to touch, debase and thereby acquire, or touch, acquire and thereby debase. It's been going on like this for centuries. On, on, and on. This and only this, sometimes on the sly, sometimes rudely, sometimes gently, sometimes brutally but it has been going on and on. Yet only in one way, like a rat attacks from ambush. *Because for this perfect victory it was also essential that the other side... That is, everything that's excellent, great in some way and noble should not engage in any kind of fight. There shouldn't be any kind of struggle, just the sudden disappearance of one side, meaning the disappearance of the excellent, the great and the noble.* So that by now these winning winners who attack from ambush rule the earth, and there isn't a single tiny nook where one can hide something from them. Because everything they can lay their hands on is theirs. Even things we think they can't reach but they do reach are also theirs, because the sky is already theirs and all our dreams. Theirs is the moment, nature, infinite silence. Even immortality is theirs, you understand? Everything, everything is lost forever! And those many noble great and excellent just stood there, if I can put it that way. They stopped at this point and had to understand and had to accept that there is neither god nor gods. And the excellent, the great and the noble had to understand and accept this night from the beginning. But of course they were quite incapable of understanding it. *They believed it and accepted it but they didn't understand it. They just stood there, bewildered but not resigned until something – that spark from the brain – finally enlightened them. And all at once they realized that there is neither god nor gods. All at once they saw that there is neither good nor bad. Then they saw and understood that if this was so, then they themselves do not exist either!* You see, I reckon this may have been the moment when we can say that they were extinguished, they burnt out. Extinguished and burnt out like the fire left to smolder in the meadow. One was the constant loser one was the constant winner. *Defeat victory defeat victory and one day here in the neighborhood I had to realize, and I did realize, that I was mistaken, I was truly mistaken when I thought that there has never been and could never be any kind of*

change here on earth. Because believe me, I know now that this change has indeed taken place."
(My italics)

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