

## Matters of Life and Death: *Aita, The Turin Horse*

BY TIM WONG | JULY 19, 2011

*At the New Zealand International Film Festival: Meditations on mortality and the passing of time.*

An oddly poignant hymn to memory, time, and place, José Maria de Orbe's *Aita (Father)* may appear to be about two custodians of a dilapidated Basque Country estate, though make no mistake: the central character is the frail 13th Century mansion whose nooks and crannies are revealed throughout the course of the film's stately duration. Ostensibly a documentary on the property and its occasional inhabitants, de Orbe's film crisply conflates fictional and nonfictional practices with an eye towards the experimental, resulting in a personal essay on the intrinsic and spiritual value of the house in question. (de Orbe inherited the mansion from family, and spent three years filming it.) Once home to aristocrats or a decadent class, the building's origins are unavoidable when contemplating its image on screen; cinematically, it conjures up allusions to the dwindling dynasty in *The Leopard*; while politically, it seems inseparable from the region's war-torn past (namely, the Spanish Civil War). But de Orbe is more fascinated by the architecture's waning life force than he is the ancestral context or historical burden of the site—a fading, if still breathing entity which history moves continuously through, rather than weighs heavily on.

Periodically, de Orbe's gaze will pause on a muffled conversation between the groundskeeper and caretaker, or an excitable group of school children touring the house—brief human interludes, which merely serve to remind us that people no longer occupy the space, and quite the opposite of advancing any sort of plot, boldly draw attention to a sense of absence and decay (such as when the place is ransacked by vandals one night). If this strategy around dignifying the building's existence sounds aggressively minimalist, it is, however there is more to de Orbe's film than speaking the stark visual language of contemporary art cinema. *Aita* is beautifully edited, and the finite length in which shots are held—never too long, never too short—imbues the static camerawork with a lightness of being while allowing us to lose ourselves within the frame. And as we explore the interior space with our eyes—guided, in part, by the majestic play of natural and artificial light (as in the film projections creatively used to illuminate rooms in darkness)—the sound of ageing is unmistakable. In one scene, the elderly caretaker (Luís Pescador, who tends to the property in real life) presses his ear against the wall of a corridor, catching the echo of a choir whose voice warmly reverberates throughout the ailing structure. Like a seashell, the mansion is a receptacle for ambient murmurs—an elusive leak, the creak of a staircase, or an uncanny silence—and de Orbe amplifies these noises as an evocation of memory and time passing. While it's perfectly justified in the festival's "Go Slow" section, *Aita* is slow cinema at its most heightened and alert, giving improbable life and dimension to a derelict old house.

\* \* \*

Relative to de Orbe's film, Béla Tarr's cinema marches steadily towards death. The Hungarian auteur's latest, **The Turin Horse**, grimly resumes that journey, although if his plans to retire from filmmaking are anything to go by, then it will signify The End in more ways than one. With this knowledge in hand, it's impossible not to view Tarr's reputed final film through the dark fatalist cloud—or should that be, windstorm—hanging over his ominous tale of the abused workhorse whom philosopher Nietzsche supposedly leapt to the defence of, before suffering a mental breakdown. But this equine *Au Hasard Balthazar*, of sorts, begins directly in the aftermath of the incident, speculating instead on the immediate future of the horse, its owner (János Derzsi), and his daughter (Erika Bók). Over the next six days, the quotidian routine of these impoverished individuals is complicated by a sudden, overwhelming malaise; untimely visits from a doom-mongering neighbour and a scavenging gypsy convoy; and an unremitting gale, which seems to have descended on their isolated farm for the express purpose of punishing the callous old man. With every new Tarr film, the threat of apocalypse draws nearer, and there's no mistaking the blackness that has enveloped the characters—and the viewer—by the picture's end.

When asked by a journalist at the Edinburgh International Film Festival how the Q&A at a screening of *The Turin Horse* went, Tarr remarked that he did not think the audience benefited from his attendance, as after the film, he sensed they wanted to be alone. Tarr clearly understands the sobering affect his cinema can have on people, but thankfully, stopped short of apologising for the gloom so crucial to his vision of the cosmos. Critics, too, should refrain from apologising for the bleakness of Tarr's films: far from warning readers of the downbeat experience that's ahead, on the contrary, to do so is patronizing and counterproductive, for their atmosphere of despair is precisely what makes them such powerful and hypnotic works. It's also important to differentiate *The Turin Horse* from the current 'flagellation cinema': those glib treatises on suffering exercised by the likes of Lars von Trier and Alejandro González Iñárritu. Whatever they have to say or make us feel about the fragile human condition—and *The Turin Horse* certainly confronts mortality furiously and with an unblinking eye—Tarr's films are filled with extraordinary images just as likely to rouse an audience and engage them in a contrasting range of emotions. *The Turin Horse* transcends its all too familiar end-of-the-world trajectory with a singular aesthetic rooted in creation and possibility, and much less in the spectre of death.

Though uninspired in content (a flat adaptation of a Georges Simenon novel), even Tarr's previous film, *The Man From London*, was unforgettable in every other respect. Off-key as he may have been then, Tarr is on-song with his swansong, and delivers some of the purest cinema his career: sequences typified by deep, monochromatic photography shrouded in dirt and shadow; an imposing, processional score that stresses each arduous footstep; and the endless anticipation of a cut which, when it finally arrives, is an event in itself. It's ironic that, in a year promising the novelty of 3-D visuals to festival-goers for the first time (*Cave of the Forgotten Dreams* and *Pina*, two hot tickets that are odds-on to sell out), arguably the most three-dimensional film of the programme will be largely ignored by comparison. For exhilaration, one

need not look further than the staggering camerawork in *The Turin Horse*: Fred Kelemen's weightless choreography of the frame and the sheer range of movement and flux achieved in a single, monumental take the kind of cinema that truly pushes the boundaries of big screen filmmaking. It's a maximalist form of minimalism unique to Tarr alone. Eager to see *The Tree of Life* as most of us are, for a genuine event movie—and the last of its kind—*The Turin Horse* should not be missed.

*'Aita', Dir. José María de Orbe*

*Spain, 2010; 85 minutes*

*In Spanish and Basque, with English subtitles*

*Featuring: Luis Pescador, Mikel Goenaga.*

*Screening: [Auckland](#), [Wellington](#).*

*'The Turin Horse', Dir. Béla Tarr*

*France/Germany/Hungary/Switzerland, 2011; 146 minutes*

*In Hungarian with English subtitles*

*Featuring: Erika Bók, János Derzsi, Mihály Kormos.*

*Screening: [Auckland](#), [Wellington](#). For New Zealand International Film Festival dates, programme details, and screenings in other regions, visit [nzff.co.nz](http://nzff.co.nz).*

#### RELATED ARTICLES

- [Post-Festival Report 2011, Part 2: Life, Love and Death](#)
- [Post-Festival Report 2011, Part 1: Meat, or Poison?](#)

---

Article printed from The Lumière Reader: <http://lumiere.net.nz>

URL to article: <http://lumiere.net.nz/index.php/aita-the-turin-horse/>

---