

# Damnation. Interview with Janice Lee

Feliz Lucia Molina

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*"[Nothingness]... is not just a void in which we lose ourselves. Nothingness, and the death that leads to it, grants the world meaning, and also makes poetry possible." – Graham Foust and Samuel Frederick's introduction to In Time's Rift by Ernst Meister*

*"We cannot identify ourselves with their feelings. But we enter into something more essential, into the very duration at the heart of which things penetrate and affect them, the suffering of repetition, the sense of another life, the dignity assumed in order to pursue the dream of this other life, and to bear the deception of this dream." – Jacques Rancière, Béla Tarr, The Time After*

*"...realism, for its part, requires us to go ever deeper into the interior of the situation itself, to expand, ever farther back, the chain of sensations, perceptions, and emotions which make human animal beings into beings to whom stories happen, beings who make promises, believe in promises, or cease to believe in them. As such, it is no longer with the official deployment of time that situations are confronted, but with their own immanent limit: there, where lived time is connected with pure repetition, where human speech and gestures tend toward those of animals." – Jacques Ranciere, Béla Tarr, The Time After*

*"In the Tarr films human dignity is not based on morality. It is not based on the fact that in spite of their absolutely hopeless and desperate situations the characters remain what they are, however low what they are brings them." – András Bálint Kovacs, The Cinema of Béla Tarr: The Circle Closes*



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**Feliz Lucia Molina:** In *Damnation*, there's a sense of filling in spaces and times that might potentially exist; that do exist once the initiation has been made - the initiation and act to place oneself as much as humanly possible inside the filmy text, frame by frame.

In the scene *The Cows* in *Sátántangó*, we're left to interpret whether the cows are actually "saying [anything] to each other," but that's not the whole point. Obviously cows speak to each other. But when it comes to cows speaking to each other in a film, representation (as always deceitful) is doubly rendered by you. So we rely on you as this vessel of rendering. I'm watching you watch the cows, but perhaps it's a mixture of you and Béla Tarr. "The single cow slowly becomes many..."

**Janice Lee:** Partially this is a translation of my own gaze, and then your gazing upon my gaze. Rilke's "Suddenly one has the right eyes," really resonates with me here. This isn't an exercise in faithful description of course, though this vignette is one of the most directly translated scenes in the book. It's the first shot of *Sátántangó*, so it starts to train your gaze. *This is the way you watch. This is the way you see.* It's like a new way of seeing, like the way I've been seeing all my life has been wrong, or at least *other*. But the camera forces me to keep my distance. Intimacy is only found through duration (the shot is nearly 8 minutes long), and the waiting/watching manifests a sort of strange relationship. But the relationship isn't with the cows, persay. They're too far away, foreign, completely preoccupied with themselves. And it's not exactly with the camera either, though our perspectives merge for a period of time. It's not exactly with Tarr, because he's sort of invisible, nonexistent. So it's sort of with the world of these films. But it's the world that I perceive to be that world. So the newly minted relationship seems to be with myself, my new gaze, eyes, way of existing, waiting. I'm quoting myself now, from [this](#) if that's all right:

*There is a description of cows that reads as an ekphrastic exercise. But in many other parts, while watching and enveloped in the gaze of the film, I felt like I was trapped in a confessional booth and giving confession. The long takes of the film opened up for me, not the possibilities of aesthetic contemplation, but ethical and moral contemplation. Redemption, as a possibility, was impossible, but not nonexistent. The feeling of eternity could penetrate my being over the course of minutes. The images weren't just inviting me to*

*contemplate, there was almost an ethical obligation to mirror back and contemplate the situation of my own particular self, a strange connection between their hopeless situation and my own, a strange hope in the landscape of hopelessness. In my mind, I was giving confession while immersed in these sustained gazes. (To whom?) The experience was meditative, hallucinatory, compulsive.*



**FLM:** So your experience of watching *The Cows* enabled this sense of the confessional, although, it was a shared confession with the world of the film? You say intimacy is only found through duration (for one has to wait and watch for events to unfold), but how does movement and gesture play into it? The confessional booth as a kind of stagnant space literally provides room for contemplation; the confessional booth as a technology for social/spiritual control sets up the perfect scene of patriarchal forgiveness. A moment in a work of art can immediately transport one to the center of contemplation. Can you tell me a little more about how *The Cows* or other parts of Tarr's films literally made you feel like you were giving a confession and what was it you were confessing to?

**JL:** The camera keeps me at a distance, so I watch from afar. Obligation, or something like it but not quite that, doesn't let my eyes wander from the screen. So though I am not there, a real and physical distance separates us, the duration, the slow and steady movement of the cows, the camera's pan past the textured buildings and catching up again to the cows, allows me to keep pace with them, be closer to them somehow. Intimacy is found through an empathy of gesture too. The long take opens up a space for contemplation, because there is time, because

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there is space, but the long take is also claustrophobic, obligatory, familiar but uncomfortable, unfamiliar but redemptive. Freud's concept of the *unheimlich* and *heimlich*, the point at which these overlap and cross over into each other's planes. Isn't this what it feels like to give confession? And it's not the *what* that's being confessed, but the *why*. Intimacy, too, seems linked to indifference.

**FLM:** Yes, here the *what* and *why* are inextricably linked. Confession's two modes of transmission: speech acts and acts of writing or in silence with the belief that G/god or something other is listening. But in this case you felt as though a confession was taking place in the act of watching. Somewhere in the visceral depths of the moving-image with so much space time and empathy, the little red light above the confessional door turned on. What was the process like while going back and forth between watching Tarr's films and writing *Damnation*?

**JL:** All of *Damnation* was written while watching the films. The film's world, sounds, pacing, space, emotional gravity, etc controlled the creation of the text, propelled it. So maybe in a way the text is a transcription of the confession itself. It's a completely different mind space I was occupying, a different way of seeing, and the residue of this still affects the way I exist in this other world. I'm still recovering I think. You're right about the empathy. The whole experience has made me more empathetic (not sympathetic), but there is no redemption here. That isn't the point It's not like confessing in this case leads to some kind of relief, but the possibility of it, the possibility of this whole process, experience, way of being and seeing, is in a way relieving.



**FLM:** I guess that's one of the powers of

transcription. The text gets lifted off from its original skin and enters into a different body to produce an uncanny third thing. I'm thinking now of the possibilities of transference during the act of transcribing. I don't really want to ask this, but would you call this book somewhat motivated by 'conceptual writing' practices (strictly speaking for the method of transcription as having been a recurring trope in that literary movement)?

**JL:** That's an interesting question, and not one I think I can really answer adequately. First, let me admit that the more conceptual writing gets talked about as such, especially in recent months, I feel like I know less and less what conceptual writing actually is, like where do these boundaries exist if they even exist. Having said that though, conceptual writing practices, at least to me, seem to be rooted in intention, that the intention: interior, physical, material, conceptual, thoughtful, etc. is the center, which the writing circles out of. In this way, I think of my past books as more exploratory. For example, both my two first books started out with questions, premises that were explored through web-like explorations. *Damnation* though, didn't start with this same kind of intention. It didn't even start with much agency. Meaning, I never set out to write this book. I never thought, "I'm going to watch these films and write a book about them." It started much more organically, in secret almost, then obsessively, compulsively.

**FLM:** In *The Confession*, "There is an unreality that splits us apart from another reality beneath. Sometimes we eat others to affirm our existence." Eating (others or G/god) as an act of communion or to kill entirely. Tell me about how the process of writing was something like a private durational performance. It makes sense that the private act, or as you say, secret, would bleed out the confessional.

**JL:** Yes, the confessional is a strange sort of public/private space too, isn't it? You're in this tiny dark box by yourself, except you're not by yourself at all, and the strange sort of privacy and secrecy of the act is still sort of on display. So to describe writing as a "private durational performance" seems apt to me. And as the saying goes, "You are what you eat."

**FLM:** For you, why Béla Tarr?

If that were an easy question to answer, *Damnation* might not exist. Part of the question

probably has to do with how I became acquainted with Béla Tarr in the first place. I had always been a fan of the filmic long take and directors such as Tarkovsky, Wong Kar Wai, Pasolini, Tsai Ming-liang... I think I encountered Tarr first, though, when a friend showed me a clip on YouTube of the opening sequence of *The Werckmeister Harmonies*. I was awe-struck. This kind of long take, though similar in some ways to many others, also stood out to me as so quietly beautiful, desperate, longing, profound, generous. I couldn't fully articulate the experience of watching that scene, and maybe I still can't. The interest opened up further with a group viewing of *Sátántangó*, Tarr's 7-hour masterpiece. If I hadn't already been, here, after that experience, I was in love. Not necessarily with Béla Tarr, the person, but with the vision, the perspective, the world view that Tarr offered through his films. This having something to do with human dignity and love, the indifference of eternity, the existence of hope in a world without redemption, the inevitable failure of hope, the intimacy of duration, the excess of nothingness, and empathy. When I first read Nietzsche in fourth grade, something not fully articulated resonated with me, and in a way, I feel as if this world of Tarr, on utter and simultaneous hope and hopelessness, is connected to that feeling I felt as a child and have carried with me until this point today. Perhaps I feel I understand something of Rilke's capacity of "learning to see" or "learning to see again," or Nietzsche's now mythological "Turin horse" incident, when in Turin, he witnessed the brutal and violent beating of a horse and was taken in such a moment of desperate empathy, threw his arms up around the horse's neck to protect it, and then collapsed onto the ground.

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Janice Lee is the author of [KEROTAKIS](#) (Dog Horn Press, 2010), [Daughter](#) (Jaded Ibis, 2011), and [Damnation](#) (Penny-Ante Editions, 2013). She is Co-Editor of *[out of nothing]*, Reviews Editor at *HTMLGIANT*, Editor of the new #RECURRENT Novel Series for Jaded Ibis Press, Executive Editor at *Entropy*, and Founder/CEO of POTG Design. She can be found online at <http://janicel.com>.

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## REFERENCES

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