



---

## Thorsten Botz-Bornstein's *Organic Cinema: Film, Architecture, and the Work of Béla Tarr*

**Reviewed book:** Thorsten Botz-Bornstein. *Organic Cinema: Film, Architecture, and the Work of Béla Tarr*. New York: Berghahn Books, 2017. 221 pages.

---

### REVIEWED BY BONNIE VAN VUGT

*Organic Cinema: Film, Architecture, and the work of Béla Tarr* is about the philosophy of the organic and how it interacts with the aesthetics of cinema. Thorsten Botz-Bornstein, who is a philosopher specialising in aesthetics and intercultural philosophy, describes his approach as “neo-organic”, as it is drawing on hermeneutics, structuralist stylistics, and some other philosophies that can be seen as organic. In *Organic Cinema* he is carrying out the multidisciplinary project of drawing a parallel between cinema and architecture in order to explain the organic. In large part of the book, Botz-Bornstein compares the aesthetic principles of the architecture of Imre Makovecz and the cinema of Béla Tarr. He also cites philosophers like Gilles Deleuze, and filmmakers and architects such as Andrei Tarkovsky and Frank Lloyd Wright. The ‘organic’ as a concept in the area of aesthetics is respected and previously scrutinised however, and applying it to cinema might be a fruitful new approach to film theory. Botz-Bornstein’s attempt in doing so is very interesting, but unfortunately it is not convincing all of the time. Notwithstandingly, the book is giving a detailed insight in the concept of organicism within aesthetics.

The first question that came into mind when picking up this book was, Why draw a parallel between cinema and architecture? Even though the symbiosis of architecture and film is nothing new, Botz-Bornstein admits in his introduction that the comparison might indeed seem odd at first. He defends his choice with several arguments. Firstly, both the architecture and the cinema he is focussing on are by Hungarians, shifting the discussion area to Eastern European territory. The author takes the body of organic

architecture and applies it to film theory. What organic architecture is doing in space, organic cinema is doing in time. For instance, he uses the whale as a creature in Krasznahorkai's novel and Tarr's film and the 'whale' as an architectural form in Makovecz's architecture. However, in *Organic Cinema* the two disciplines are mainly compared because the specific examples (three of Tarr's films and Makovecz's buildings) are well fit to explain the organic. A point of criticism would be that each format uses different techniques to order space and draw one's focus to important elements, characters, and locations. Of course this is not forgotten by the author, but somehow it seems that Botz-Bornstein is sometimes using farfetched parallels for the sake of the argument, or because they fit nicely under 'organic'.

What exactly is the main intention of the book? According to the author, it is 'to develop the idea of an "organic cinema"'. But then why do we need organic cinema, as we already have 'contemplative cinema'? Botz-Bornstein argues that the organic is much more interesting, because there is more to say philosophically about what it means to be organic. Whereas 'slow cinema' only refers to the pace, and 'contemplative cinema' to the reflective element and the atmosphere it creates, Botz-Bornstein finds these definitions too vague and not sufficient to describe this particular type of cinema. This is a good point and the arguments he uses are clear. However only in the last two chapters on organic places and the organic camera shot the argument starts to get interesting for film theory. Here Botz-Bornstein explains that the long take and the space are conceptually linked.

It seems that the rest of the book is aiming to explain organic philosophies through three of Bela Tarr's films. According to Botz-Bornstein, the organic philosophies share 'the ambition to define the relationship between the universal and the individual not in terms of oppositions but of paradoxes'. He takes examples from different philosophers and explains the nature versus math dichotomy, which is the main topic in Tarr's *Werckmeister Harmonies* (2002) and a clear example to explain the organic. Furthermore, he explains the organic in other chapters by using (musical) harmonies, humanism, politics, place, the spiritual and the camera shot as cases. Sometimes his writing style is as though he has been taking an 'organic' approach here as well, sometimes it is like he started writing without a clear format or structure, which leads the reader to question at times where the argument is actually going. But to quote the author himself,

'the logic of organicism tries to draw the entire world into a coherent, harmonious structural network by following a model that is not formal but imitates the immanent, self-sufficient logic of nature. Unlike mathematics, the organic structure is not following a predetermined order' (60).

So it might be more suitable to credit him for being true to his own philosophy.

Still, it made me wonder why he is discussing topics like kitsch, theology and Eastern Europe next to contemplative cinema, architecture, Béla Tarr, Imre Makovecz and László Krasznahorkai's novels, all to get to a notion of the organic. Isn't that just too many side paths to the main project? He is already addressing a lot of different areas, by sidestepping to other isms or subjects, the overall argument gets chaotic. Instead of taking all these big divergent topics, it would have benefited the coherence of the whole had the writer elaborated upon only a couple of them. To look at art, culture, politics, architecture and other non-cinematic topics is always useful when thinking about cinema but in the end one needs to realise that it is, also, a separate discipline with its own logic and own structure. Yes, one can learn from other areas, but they should not be overexploited just for the sake of finding a parallel between every aspect of it. Ironically, that approach seems very unnatural.

In the second part of the book Botz-Bornstein goes into more detail on the differences between organicism and postmodernism. He is well-read and the book demands (or at least expects) from its readers that they are familiar with Béla Tarr's films and philosophical theories of Deleuze, Bergson, from Kant and Schelling to Lukacs and Wittgenstein, Derrida and yet others. The underlying question Botz-Bornstein is asking is what reality is, and if reality is mathematical or natural. Obviously, he is arguing for the natural, organic approach in describing reality and against the notion of a mathematical realism. He prefers Goethe over Descartes, nature over mathematic calculation and organic buildings over the Vitruvian humanist metric of the body in architecture. He is explaining this preference by using Eszter, the protagonist from Krasznahorkai's *The Melancholy of Resistance* (1989) and Tarr's *Werckmeister Harmonies*, and attempts to locate organic harmonies while not using the 'mathematical' tuning of Andreas Werckmeister. 'Eszter's "deconstruction" of humanist universalism leads to an organic world in which individual elements are "cosmically" justified', demonstrating how organic thought does not seek to organise the universal into mathematical formulae, but rather shift attention to the 'relative' via the individual mediated by a cosmic harmony (120).

*Organic Cinema* is blowing new life in the philosophical considerations of contemplation and nature that were once thought to be outdated. For those who seek an understanding of a new approach to film theory reading this book might be a bit disappointing, as it is more an analysis of the organic than of organic cinema. It does not offer a clear organic film theory, but the book is worthy reading for all those interested in aesthetics. All in all, it serves well as a comparative analysis as it uses organic philosophy, architecture, and cinema in a refreshing way as a counterbalance to contemporary trends of spectacle architecture and fast-paced, action cinema.

bonvanvugt@gmail.com