Transcendental Style in Film

OZU
BRESSON
DREYER

Paul Schrader is the author of *Transcendental Style in Film*, a book just published by the University of California Press. Schrader's concepts provide the basis for a series of six double-feature programs organized by the Pacific Film Archive on the Sundays and Wednesdays between April 9 and April 26.

Schrader, who coordinated this series and wrote the program notes for this brochure, is also the editor of *Cinema*, a magazine published in Los Angeles, and the writer-director of a forthcoming feature to be shot in the Hudson Bay area. He will personally introduce two programs in the series, those of April 16 and April 19.

Admission to the films in this series will be $1.00 for each individual feature, $1.50 for a double feature, and $8.00 for all six double-feature programs.

TRANSCENDENTAL STYLE IN FILM
PROGRAM NOTES

Transcendental Style: A Primer

The notion of "transcendental style in film" is based on two premises: (1) there are spontaneous expressions of the Holy or transcendent in every culture, an idea developed and expanded in the writings of theologian Mircea Eliade, and (2) there are universal artistic forms and styles common to all cultures, a theory explored by aesthetician Heinrich Wölfflin.

Combining these two premises in relation to motion pictures, *Transcendental Style in Film* posits that there is a common film style used by various film-makers in divergent cultures to express the transcendent.

Although transcendental style, like all transcendental art, strives toward the ineffable and invisible—trying to bring us as close to the ineffable and invisible as words and images can take us—it is neither ineffable nor invisible itself. Transcendental style is first and foremost a *style*; it uses specific film techniques for specific purposes. Although, in the end, one can only postulate how transcendental style actually "works" on a viewer, before that time, he can carefully analyze and define the means which bring him to that end.

The transcendental style in film is seen at its purest in the films of Yasujiro Ozu in the East and Robert Bresson in the West, and, to a lesser extent, in the films of Carl Dreyer, Roberto Rossellini, Budd Boetticher and others. Starting from alien cultural and ideological bases, these film-makers have forged a remarkably common film form.

Although each of these film-makers has strong and identifiable personal and cultural traits, it is more important at this stage, it seems to me, to discover how they are alike rather than how they are different. Their unique quality is the one which brings them together: their ability to transcend personality and culture through style. And it is the Eliade/Wölfflin method which can define this common characteristic.

The transcendental style in film has three stages: the everyday, disparity, and stasis. Through techniques of limitation and restriction the **everyday** suggests that the world is cold, unfeeling, and without emotion or meaning. In the cold, factual minutiae-oriented world of everyday there is no potential for emotion or meaning; there is no place it can come from.

Disparity introduces an overpowering, irrational and undefined sense of commitment (a "passion") into the cold, ordered everyday. There is no reason for this passion to exist, yet it exists nonetheless. Disparity culminates in a decisive action, an action (such as crying) in which the passion actually breaks through the unemotional structure of everyday. The decisive action is the crucial moment of the film; its dual nature is revealed, and the viewer must accept or reject the duality (the duality, for example, that the Holy *can* find expression in a factual world).

In **stasis** the form of the film returns to the hard stylization of the everyday—but with a new purpose. The world is like it once was, but now one understands that the transcendent is just beneath every realistic surface. The three stages of transcendental style correspond to the classic Zen aphorism: "When I began to study Zen, mountains were mountains; when I thought I understood Zen, mountains were not mountains; but when I came to full knowledge of Zen, mountains were again mountains."

As transcendental style takes effect over the time span of a feature-length motion picture, it must gradually root out audience empathy and replace it, in the terms of aesthetician Wilhelm Worringer, with abstraction. A film of transcendental style, like any film, begins as an experience, but it ends as an expression. The purpose of transcendental style is not to make you emote, but to make you understand. The three stages of transcendental style are designed to gradually replace empathy with awareness.

Some Specific Instances

For the Pacific Film Archive film program on *Transcendental Style in Film,* I suggested a series of six double-bills. These couplings are not always as ideally matched as one could hope for, but they do give the viewer the opportunity to compare seemingly divergent films by style, rather than, as is usually done, by theme, character, period, or director. Where else could Robert Bresson and Budd Boetticher share a common platform?

Pickpocket/Tokyo Story

Ozu and Bresson are as far apart as East from West—seemingly. The juxtaposition of *Pickpocket* and *Tokyo Story* emphasizes the vast cultural differences between Bresson and Ozu; they had different conceptions of man, nature, freedom, death, suffering—most every metaphysical correlative. In *Pickpocket* and *Tokyo Story* the most striking difference is Bresson and Ozu's opposing attitudes toward the family in general, and the mother in particular.

Tokyo Story, like all Ozu's films, is structured around the family unit. Ozu emphasizes repetition and cyclicity within family life; day-to-day occurrences and mundane conversations repeat and return, unnoticeably building to that moment when a revelation will emerge from these commonplace events. In this sense, Ozu "lives in" his actors, repeatedly using them not only in a single film, but in film after film. For Ozu, transcendence is a communal activity; the individual reaches awareness by participation within a group. In *Tokyo Story* the mother is the heart of the family unit; her maternal desires send the parents on their trip to Tokyo, and it is through her death that the father and daughter-in-law can meet on the only transgenerational meeting ground: a mutual Zen acceptance of life.

In *Pickpocket,* Michel's mother is an encumbrance rather than an instrument. The family is part of the vale of tears the Bresson protagonist must pass through en route to enlightenment. Michel's mother only appears briefly in *Pickpocket,* but it is clear that her maternal concerns stand in the way of Michel's overwhelming Passion: the desire to pickpocket, which is later replaced by the desire to love. Bresson's protagonists stand in the tradition of the single redeemer: the lonely suffering individual who, like Christ, Moses, or the saints, must intercede between this world and the other. For Bresson, transcendence is individual rather than communal. Bresson believes in the solitary Christ, Calvary and resurrection; the only relation of a Bresson protagonist to his community is metaphorical and iconographic. Therefore Bresson, unlike Ozu, "goes through" his actors, draining them dry and dismissing them after one film.

But the similarities between East and West are more important than the differences. For both Ozu and Bresson the path to transcendental awareness is inescapably one of style. The characters played by Martin Lasalle in *Pickpocket* and Setsuko Hara in *Tokyo Story* both progressively undergo the rigors of transcendental style: everyday, disparity/decisive action, stasis. The decisive action in each film stands out: Hara's burst of tears in *Tokyo Story* and Lasalle's acceptance of Marika Green's love in *Pickpocket.* Both are seemingly implausible events. Nothing in the film has prepared the viewer for these decisive actions, yet when they occur, they seem to be the true moment of revelation the film has been clandestinely headed for all along. If the viewer "accepts" these actions in the broadest sense—both in head and heart—then transcendental style has taken its toll.

The Trial of Joan of Arc/
The Passion of Joan of Arc

Bresson and Dreyer's Joan of Arc films were custom built for comparison. Both relate Joan of Arc's trial in a relatively straightforward manner; both are interested in factual evidence, existing transcripts and historical minutiae. And both are concerned with how Joan rises above, transcends if you will, history and corporeality.

The differences are equally striking. Dreyer's *The Passion of Joan of Arc* only partially employs transcendental style (understandable since at the time of *Joan of Arc* Dreyer was pioneering what later can be called transcendental style). Like the Gothic artist, Dreyer is an artist of disparity; he is only momentarily able to achieve stasis in his films. Dreyer seems more interested in Joan's torment than her transcendence. Unlike Bresson, Dreyer uses his camera to exaggerate Joan's physical torment; over and over again Joan is set in the middle of an expressionistic tableau: grotesque faces and arching corridors leer over and visually oppress the frightened heroine. Dreyer takes Joan to the edge of transcendence, then exhausts her spiritual drives in Gothic frenzy. Like the Gothic artist, Dreyer pushes disparity to its limits, then retreats from stasis. Dreyer's Joan is racked with torment, both spiritual and cinematic; she is spirituality trapped in corporeality, honesty in deviousness, visual simplicity in expressionism. Dreyer shows no real desire to permanently alleviate that disparity, but instead exaggerates it and dwells on it.

Bresson, on the other hand, like a Byzantine artist, pushes his Joan relentlessly into stasis: disparity is never more than a stepping stone to stasis for him. Whereas Dreyer sees Joan as the crucified, suffering lamb, Bresson views her as the resurrected, glorified icon. Bresson has cleansed Joan's trial of all of Dreyer's expressionistic excesses: gone are the grotesque faces, the receding arches, the sweeping low-angle tracking shots. Although Bresson uses the techniques of disparity, he does not let them become an end in themselves. In his only recorded comment on Dreyer's *The Passion of Joan of Arc,* Bresson said, "I understand that at the time this film was a small revolution, but now I only see all the actors' horrible buffooneries and terror-stricken grimaces which make me want to flee."

The respective endings of *The Passion of Joan of Arc* and *The Trial of Joan of Arc* are telling. Dreyer plays it both ways: on one hand he ends his film with expressionistic riot and chaos as Joan burns, on the other, he returns to the stake and pans up toward the heavens. Bresson does not use obvious camera techniques to "push" the viewer's gaze upwards. At the close of Bresson's film, the passive Joan is led to the stake, chained, and the tinder is set afire. The smoke clears and all that remains is the charred stake and sagging chains; Joan's body is no longer there. For Bresson no editorial techniques are necessary; the viewer either accepts this decisive moment or he doesn't, the style has done its work or it hasn't: take it or leave it.

Diary of a Country Priest/
Comanche Station

Neither Budd Boetticher nor Roberto Rossellini is discussed in *Transcendental Style in Film*; the book's argument, I felt, was sufficiently revealed after the discussion of three film-makers. Both Boetticher and Rossellini, however, are valuable additions to the argument, and I wish space permitted me to give them justice in these brief notes. (I have written somewhat ancillary articles on Boetticher and Rossellini, however, in *Cinema* Vol. VI, Nos. 2 and 3.)

No one has drawn the comparisons between Bresson's "prison cycle" and Boetticher's Ranown westerns; the similarities are there, however, and are extremely intriguing and thought-provoking.

Both Bresson and Boetticher put their full directorial weight behind a single-minded, self-defined, moralistic protagonist. Randolph Scott in Boetticher's westerns and Bresson's protagonists are products of disparity: although they exist in a cold world, they are inexplicably motivated by an exterior, overwhelming Passion. As individuals, the protagonists of *Diary of a Country Priest* and *Comanche Station* are not extraordinary (Laydu is not a particularly effective or even humane priest; Scott is not the toughest man or fastest draw), but their extreme self-confidence and even arrogance is justified because they represent an "Exterior" moral order.

Unlike Bresson, Boetticher cannot be described as an artist of transcendental style, but he does use (perhaps unconsciously) just enough of it to make the Scott character unique in American cinema: a lonely Primitive icon wandering anachronistically through the American West. Jefferson Cody (Scott) in *Comanche Station* is a victim of disparity, his world does not jive with his fanatical moral dimension; and it is this spooky tension which gives Boetticher's westerns a weight beyond the normal conventions of a B western.

Another interesting point of contact between the Boetticher and Bresson protagonist is that they both seem to draw inner strength from suffering and sexual abstinence. Witness this interesting progression: personal fanaticism

brings sexual repression, sexual repression brings suffering, masochistic suffering brings spiritual revelation. I think Boetticher and Bresson have both in their own ways (although they would not admit it) tapped the secret strength of the Calvinist moral code: repressed sexuality (homo + hetero) can provide a direct link to spiritual revelation. Perhaps I'm pushing the thesis too hard, but the Bresson and Boetticher protagonists do seem to derive a strength from repressing certain homosexual characteristics.

Beyond this point, however, there can be no realistic comparison between Boetticher and Bresson. Boetticher interestingly introduces the element of transcendental disparity into American westerns and stops there; Bresson, the consummate transcendental artist, charges toward the sublime like a shark toward the kill. The ending of *Diary of a Country Priest* is equally as demanding and audacious as the close of *The Trial of Joan of Arc*: a shadow of a cross fills the screen, we hear the dying words of the priest concluding with the phrase, "All is Grace." Again, Bresson has used the confrontational techniques of transcendental style to bring the viewer face to face with the Wholly Other.

Day of Wrath/Late Autumn

The distance between Bresson and Dreyer only serves, by comparison, to magnify the distance between Ozu and Dreyer. Ozu and Dreyer really are worlds apart and the gap between them is only partially bridged by style.

Ozu and Bresson are united by their desire to use similar means (transcendental style) to achieve similar ends (stasis); Ozu and Dreyer, however, share the means but not necessarily the end.

Day of Wrath is a schizoid work of art. As Robert Warshow first pointed out (with some debatable conclusions), *Day of Wrath* splits right down the middle: the first half of the film employs transcendental style, the second psychological expressionism. In the first half, Marthe, an old woman alleged to be a witch—the nether side of Joan of Arc—is hunted down, tried and burnt at the stake. In this section of the film, Dreyer uses the straight progression of transcendental style: there is an everyday, a disparity and decisive action, and, nearly, a stasis. Dreyer's concern is fundamentally that of transcendental style: not whether the witch and the town folk are good or evil, but whether the supernatural can exist in the factual world.

In the second half of *Day of Wrath,* Dreyer retreats from the simple implication that the holy (or demonic) can exist in human form. After Marthe's death, the film turns its attention to Anne, a young woman who thinks she has become a witch. Dreyer externalizes her inner torment by making her look "witchy" with chiaroscuro close-ups, continually blocking her face half in light, half in dark. The first half of *Day of Wrath* wonders if there are such supernatural things as witches; the second asks why Anne thinks she is a witch.

Late Autumn, like any of Ozu's later films, shows Ozu's structure at its purest and most refined. His films are structured between action and emptiness, indoors and outdoors, scene and coda. The conflicts are always explicated indoors, usually in long dispassionate conversations.

These indoor discussions are set off by "codas": still-life scenes of outdoor Japanese life, empty streets and alleys, a passing train or boat, or—as in the close of *Late Autumn*—a distant mountain and lake. Donald Richie has described Ozu's films as a combination of (1) long shots, (2) medium shots, (3) close-ups, in the usual sequence of 1-2-3-2-1. The codas are placed between certain of the long shots, thus linking conversational indoor scenes with outdoor still lifes. Each of the codas sets off an Ozu "paragraph," to use Richie's terminology. There are no chapters, only paragraphs and codas. The codas reflect the Zen *koan* of *mu,* the concept of emptiness and void. *Mu* is the character used to describe the spaces between the branches of a flower arrangement; in Ozu's films, as in Zen flower arrangements, the emptiness is an integral part of the form. In Western art one would naturally assume that the codas are supposed to give weight to the paragraphs, but for Ozu, as for Zen, it is precisely the opposite: the dialogue gives meaning to the silence, the action to the still life. Ozu's films are permeated with *mu*; he is perhaps the only Japanese director to successfully carry the traditional aesthetics of Zen art into motion pictures.

Voyage in Italy/Ordet

The decisive action in transcendental style may be described as a miracle. This decisive action, even if it is as slight as Michel's acceptance of love in *Pickpocket* or Hara's tears in *Tokyo Story,* is miraculous within the cold context of the movie. In Rossellini's *Voyage in Italy* and Dreyer's *Ordet* the decisive action is more overt: both are "miracle films."

The miracle in *Ordet* is indisputably that. John, the insane son, literally the "fool of God" and very much a product of disparity, actually works the miracle which transcendental style usually symbolizes: he raises his sister-in-law Inger from the dead. In no other film of transcendental style is disparity—the intrusion of spirituality into factuality—more obvious. Even though *Ordet* is Dreyer's purest film of transcendental style (especially in the flat, non-expressive techniques of everyday), he is still unwilling to let the film conclude at rest—in stasis. At the final moment, Dreyer shifts interest away from John, the potential Bressonesque icon, to Inger, the woman raised from the dead. After Inger's resurrection, the film closes on a long sensous kiss shared by Inger and her husband. On the verge of spirituality and stasis, Dreyer thrusts the film back into carnality and disparity. Dreyer sets the viewer up for the transcendent, and reveals the immanent.

Rossellini, like Dreyer, has always worked on the borders of transcendental style. Rossellini came to transcendental style not from *Kammerspiel* and expressionism like Dreyer, but from realism (*Open City, Paisan*). He worked closest to transcendental style in his middle period (*Voyage in Italy, Fear, Flowers of St. Francis*) and has lately in his historical films (*Acts of the Apostles, Rise of Louis XIV, Socrates*) pioneered an astounding mixture of the two.

Voyage in Italy contains many of the familiar elements of transcendental style: a cold, dedramatized reality (everyday), a mysterious spirituality when the Joyces visit the tombs (disparity), a miracle (decisive action), a heightened awareness (quasi-stasis). Rossellini does not strive for stasis in the audacious manner of Ozu and Bresson, but he is obviously working very close to it.

If, in the final accounting, *Voyage in Italy* can be faulted as a film of transcendental style, it is because Rossellini is less interested in confronting the viewer with an expression of the transcendent than he is with exploring certain spiritual needs within himself and his characters. The miracle in *Voyage in Italy* bears more resemblance to the booming of the Marbar caves in E. M. Forester's *Passage to India* than to the raising of Inger in *Ordet*: it is an exploration rather than a confrontation. And transcendental style, first of all, must be a style of confrontation: it must strive to put the viewer face to face with an expression of the transcendent.

A Man Escaped/An Autumn Afternoon

These two films are not necessarily served by being coupled together; they are, in fact, the leftovers from a series of five double-bills. Their pairing only serves to demonstrate again Bresson's interest in the metaphors of freedom/restraint and free will/predestination, and Ozu's corresponding total uncertain for those uniquely Western concepts.

A Man Escaped should ideally be doubled with *Pickpocket*; they are the reverse sides of the same coin. In *Pickpocket* Michel works his way into prison, in *A Man Escaped* Fontaine works his way out; but in both the action is essentially the same: Michel and Fontaine are both exiting from a prison of one sort and entering into a prison of another. It is the Christian paradox: they escape from the prison of the body to become, symbolically, "prisoners of the Lord." Similarly, they both choose of their free will to escape/be imprisoned, and yet are also predestined to do so. In both cases the paradox is resolved by the intrusion of Grace—the ability to accept, as Bresson says, "the mysterious hand which moves over the prison" (*i.e.,* the transcendent). In *A Man Escaped,* Grace is personified by Jost, a young prisoner who is thrown in Fontaine's cell just as Fontaine is about to make his escape. Fontaine must decide whether to kill Jost or take him along—he chooses the latter, and learns later that he could not have escaped without the assistance of a second man. Fontaine was predestined to escape (by the title of the film), yet he would not have escaped had he not chosen of his free will to accept Jost. It is the paradox of salvation.

An Autumn Afternoon is Ozu's final, consummate film, and therefore, probably, the consummate film of transcendental style. Ozu knew he was dying as he directed *An Autumn Afternoon,* and, as a result, the film became purer and more austere rather than looser and more maudlin.

When Hirayama (Chishu Ryu) breaks down in tears at the end of *An Autumn Afternoon* and the film closes on shots of his darkened room, it is the clearest expression of decisive action transformed into stasis in any film of transcendental style. There is no queasiness, anxiousness or thrusting: the movement is natural, smooth and inexplicably cathartic. Previously rejected, pent-up emotions are called for and received, and, just as quickly, recede as the film comes to rest on a nonemotional plateau.

In Bresson's film, stasis is intertwined with the concept of dying. His protagonists achieve stasis through either an actual death (*Diary of a County Priest, The Trial of Joan of Arc*) or a symbolic death, an escape from the bodily prison (*Pickpocket, A Man Escaped*). A release from the immanent, for Bresson, is also a release from the body.

Ozu, on the other hand, does not symbolically kill his protagonists, but enriches them. At the close of *An Autumn Afternoon,* Hirayama is not any nearer death, but, on the contrary, prepared to perceive life more deeply. For Bresson in the West transcendence is a way of dying; for Ozu in the East transcendence is a way of living.