

Transcendental Style in Film

Ozu, Bresson, Dreyer

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*With a New Introduction:
Rethinking Transcendental Style*



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Rethinking Transcendental Style

What became of transcendental style? What in the 1950s began as art house cinema has blossomed into the hydra-headed creature we call slow cinema. Bresson and Ozu, seen as esoteric and slow, now are audience friendly compared to the multi-hour epics of Béla Tarr and Lav Diaz and Pedro Costa. A theater experience for art house customers morphed into marginalized audio-video presentations shown only at film festivals and art galleries.

What happened? Gilles Deleuze happened. So did Andrei Tarkovsky. And slow cinema was soon to follow.

I WRITE A BOOK

In 1971, at the age of 24, a grad student at UCLA film school, I had the temerity to write and publish a book titled *Transcendental Style in Film*. Forty-five years later I found myself on a panel at the annual convention of the Society for Cinema and Media Studies titled “Rethinking Transcendental Style: New Approaches in Spirituality and Cinematic Form.”

So I started rethinking. How did I come to write the book in the first place and how does its premise hold up after forty-five years?

I wasn't drawn to the topic out of academic obligation or desire to publish. I had a problem and I was looking for an answer. It was the same impulse that caused me to write a screenplay two years later.

I was a product of the Christian Reformed Church in Grand Rapids, a Calvinist denomination which at that time proscribed theater attendance and other “worldly amusements.” So naturally I was drawn to the forbidden—not the forbidden forbidden, of course, but the acceptable forbidden. I wanted to square my love of movies with my religious upbringing. *Through a Glass Darkly* (1961) was the point of entry; *Viridiana* (1961) was the counterpoint of entry.

That didn’t last long. Two years later it was 1968 and I was in Los Angeles in full pursuit of the profane. Calvin College was a memory.

Then, as a film critic for the *Los Angeles Free Press*, I watched the LA release of Robert Bresson’s *Pickpocket* (1959). And wrote about it. And saw it again. And wrote about it again. I sensed a bridge between the spirituality I was raised with and the “profane” cinema I loved. And it was a bridge of *style*, not content. Church people had been using movies since they first moved to illustrate religious beliefs, but this was something different. The convergence of spirituality and cinema would occur in style, not content. In the How, not the What. Susan Sontag was for me (and many others) the first to shine a light in this murky ideological expanse. Her essay on Robert Bresson in *Against Interpretation* (1966) and the “Aesthetics of Silence” in *Styles of Radical Will* (1967) jolted me into thought.¹ Pauline Kael had inspired my first love of popular cinema; Sontag took my appreciation to the next level. Film could and did operate on a spiritual plane.

Yasujiro Ozu was using techniques similar to Bresson in Japanese family dramas. And to not dissimilar effect. These techniques were neither parochial nor Christian nor Western. They were spiritual (related to the spirit as opposed to matter). So I cautiously—and with the generous help of scholars far more knowledgeable than myself—began to explore how such a style worked. I was curious. That curiosity grew. I realized I was far too young to write such a book. But I also realized that nobody else was writing it. I was in a unique moment of transition: my love of movies was full blown and my knowledge of theological aesthetics still intact. In a few years I would not be able to devote a year to writing a book that produced no income. If I didn’t write it now I never would. And neither would anyone else. Sontag, ever voracious, had moved on.

University of California Press was kind enough to publish *Transcendental Style in Film*. Two years later I stopped writing regular criticism and focused on film-making.

ENTER DELEUZE

Transcendental style can be seen, forty-five years later, as part of a larger movement, the movement away from narrative. A way station, if you will, in the post-World War II progression from neorealism to surveillance video.

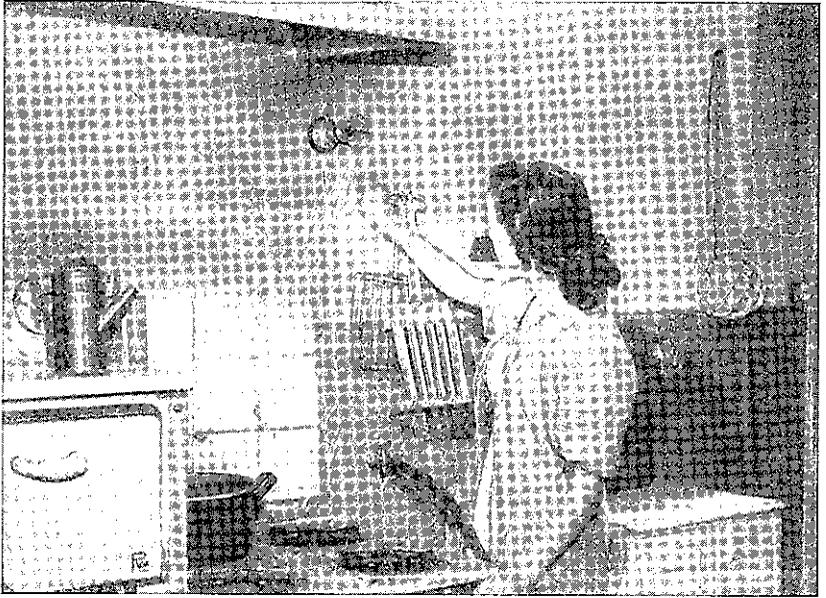
In 1971, struggling with the concept of transcendental style, I sought to understand how the distancing devices used by these directors could create an alternate film reality—a transcendent one. I wrote that they created disparity, which I defined as “an actual or potential disunity between man and his environment,” “a growing crack in the dull surface of everyday reality.”

By delaying edits, not moving the camera, forswearing music cues, not employing coverage, and heightening the mundane, transcendental style creates a sense of unease the viewer must resolve. The film-maker assists the viewer’s impulse for resolution by the use of a Decisive Moment, an unexpected image or act, which then results in a stasis, an acceptance of parallel reality—transcendence. At that time, I had little idea how the phenomenology of such a process would work. I posited that the psyche, squeezed by untenable disparity, would break free to another plane.

Ten years later French philosopher Gilles Deleuze wrote two groundbreaking works on cinema (*Cinema I* and *Cinema II*) and by 1989 both were published in English translations.² Deleuze explicitly addressed the phenomenology of perception through time.

To grossly simplify Deleuze, he contends film history falls into two perceptual periods: (1) movement-image and (2) time-image. Movement-image began with the origins of cinema and was the dominant perceptual principle until after World War II. It’s the action of a projected image. Such movement perceived on screen continues in our minds. We’re hardwired for it. Even after the image of the running man is cut on screen, the viewer still imagines the runner completing his task. Deleuze references Aristotle and the notion of the first mover to explain how our mind continues a movement even after the image has gone. “Light is stronger than the story,” he wrote.

World War II dates the rough demarcation of a shift, more in Europe than America, from movement-image to time-image. Screen movement still occurred, of course, but it was increasingly “subordinated to time.” What does that mean? It means that a film edit is determined not by action on screen but by the creative desire to associate images over time.



The maid strikes a match. From *Umberto D.*

Man exits one room, enters another—that’s movement-image editing. Man exits one room, shot of trees in the wind, shot of train passing—that’s time-image editing. Man exits one room, the screen lingers on the empty door. That’s time-image editing. Deleuze called this the “non-rational cut.” The non-rational cut breaks from sensorimotor logic. Deleuze first sees this in the deep-focus films of Welles but, for practical purposes, it comes to the fore in walking/wandering films like Rossellini’s *Voyage in Italy* (1954), Antonioni’s *L’Avventura* (1960), Resnais’s *Hiroshima Mon Amour* (1959) and *Last Year at Marienbad* (1961). The time-image reached first full expression in the films of Yasujiro Ozu. “The vase in *Late Spring* (1949),” writes Deleuze, “is interposed between the daughter’s half smile and her tears. . . . This is time, time itself. . . . a direct time-image which gives change unchanging form.”³ Movement-image is informed by Aristotelian logic: “A” can never equal “not A.” Time-image rejects the Aristotelian principle of non-contradiction, posits a world where something and its opposite can coexist: “A” can be “not A.”

Deleuze opens *Cinema II* with a description of the four-minute maid sequence in De Sica’s *Umberto D* (1952), the scene which had so impressed André Bazin eighteen years before.⁴ The young girl, a minor character, gets up, comes and goes into the kitchen, hunts down ants, grinds coffee.



Béla Tarr's cows. From *Sátántangó*.

Where Bazin emphasized the scene's realism, Deleuze focused on its use of time. The young maid strikes a match against the kitchen wall three times; it fails to light. *She gets another match and strikes again.* Without cutting, without comment. Irrelevant action in real time. This is a defining moment in cinema. Just as the runaway baby carriage of Eisenstein's *Battleship Potemkin* (1925) epitomizes the movement-image, the "little maid" and her match strikes exemplify the time-image.

Another way to put it: Deleuze feels that "mature cinema" (post-WWII) was no longer primarily concerned with telling stories to our conscious selves but now also seeks to communicate with the unconscious and the ways in which the unconscious processes memories, fantasies, and dreams.

Bergson's concept of duration is crucial to Deleuze's concept of time-image. Time allows the viewer to imbue the image with associations, even contradictory ones. Hence the long take. What began as a four-second shot of a passing train in Ozu grows to eight minutes of meandering cows in Béla Tarr.

Deleuze is getting at the nuts and bolts of transcendental style. This is what I was struggling to apprehend. Our minds are wired to complete an on-screen image. We create patterns from chaos, just like our forefathers did when they imagined stars in the form of mythic beasts. We complete the action.

Film artists realized from the beginning they could use this neurological predisposition to manipulate the viewer. Cinema, after all, is only still images projected in rapid succession. The spectator will imagine the gun firing, the monster emerging from the cave, and so forth.

Postwar film-makers realized that just as movement-image could be manipulated to create suspense, time-image could be manipulated to create introspection. We not only fill in the blanks, but we create new blanks.

Introspection has always been a goal of art. What film-makers (and, as a consequence, Deleuze) came to realize was that introspection created by a moving photographic image is unique. It's not like the introspection evoked by a sculpture or painting or passage of music; it is the by-product of a changing image. Cinematic introspection can be molded to a greater extent than introspection caused by a singular image, say, a Rothko canvas or Zen garden. It can vary. It can change. The film artist molds introspection via duration. Duration can evoke Deleuze's "memories, fantasies and dreams." Duration can peel back the social veneer of an activity. Duration can invoke the Wholly Other.

In the past fifteen years the new field of neuroesthetics, pioneered by Semir Zeki, has sought to scientifically explain what Deleuze theorized. Combining science and aesthetics, neurobiologists use brain scans to study which areas of the brain perceive visual stimuli and how they process it—how in fact, the brain determines whether something is beautiful. ("Can an aesthetic judgment ever be quantified," Zeki rhetorically asks. "The answer is yes."⁵) No one has yet explained how the brain processes slow cinema, but I expect the answer will be as satisfying as knowing how many angels can dance on the head of a pin.

In *Transcendental Style in Film* I wrote about hierophanies evoked by style. Deleuze attempted to explain how that actually works.

TARKOVSKY IS THE FULCRUM

Like Deleuze, Russian director Andrei Tarkovsky sensed a shift in the cinematic winds. He and Deleuze were simultaneously working on the same paradigm shift. Both understood that the use of time in movies had evolved.

Tarkovsky directed five films from 1962 to 1986. He was not interested in the spiritual per se; although he often spoke of the spiritual nature of film art and employed religious imagery, his primary interest was in cinema's ability to evoke poetry and memory—more pantheistic

than theistic. (A disputable opinion. Joseph Kickasola, a theological film scholar, describes Tarkovsky as “one of the most directly religious film-makers ever.”⁶)

Tarkovsky was an aesthete as well as a film-maker. His theoretical writings echo his journey as a director. He came of film-making age during Deleuze’s postwar second era of cinema. Tarkovsky admired Mizoguchi’s long slow takes, Antonioni’s de-dramatized narrative, De Sica’s emphasis on mundane reality, Bergman’s use of ordinary sounds, and most of all, Tarkovsky admired Robert Bresson’s “unity of theory and practice.” On the surface Bresson’s and Tarkovsky’s films are quite different. Critic Fredric Jameson wrote that Tarkovsky likes to gorge the spectator’s eyes whereas Bresson prefers to starve them.⁷ But both artists felt the keys to the artist’s kingdom lie in the application of style over content. It’s the form of things that makes you free.

Tarkovsky rejected the Soviet school of montage in favor of André Bazin’s “ontology of the photographic image” and Bazin’s advocacy of the Italian neorealists. Bazin felt that with the invention of moving photographs, the age-old artistic desire to represent reality had reached its apotheosis. Cinema was “as complete an imitation as possible of the outer world.” Sergei Eisenstein felt that the power of cinema was in its ability to orchestrate reality. Bazin said it was just the opposite: the power of cinema was not to manipulate reality. Neorealism revealed “the aesthetic implicit in cinema.” “Neorealism knows only immanence,” said Bazin. “It is from appearance only.” For Bazin the long take favored by the neorealists enabled spectators to choose what they wanted to see rather than what had been dictated by montage.⁸

Tarkovsky embraced Bazin. Then he turned neorealism on its head. Bazin had written, “The photographic image is the object itself. The object freed from the conditions of time and space that govern it. Viewed from this perspective, the cinema is objectivity in time. Now, for the first time, *the image of things is the image of their duration*” (italics mine).⁹ Of the duration of the Eskimo waiting for the seal in Flaherty’s *Nanook of the North* (1922), Bazin said, “The length of the hunt is the very substance of the image, its true object.”¹⁰ But for Tarkovsky duration was more than mere waiting. It was Henri Bergson’s “*durée*,” duration, time itself, the vital force governing and meditating upon all organic life.

Tarkovsky stands in a line of documentary observers of life. Also in the line are contemplative stylists Ophüls, Mizoguchi, Rossellini, Resnais, Dreyer, Bergman, Ozu, Bresson. What exactly makes him so special?

IT'S ABOUT TIME

Here's what I think is the difference: Ozu, Bresson, Dreyer, Mizoguchi, De Sica, and the rest used film time to create an emotional or intellectual or spiritual effect. Tarkovsky used film techniques to study time. For Tarkovsky time was not a means to a goal. It was the goal.

The manifestation of time on film is the long take. Not the fancy out-the-door-down-the-street long takes of Orson Welles or Alfonso Cuarón—no, even though those takes run long in screen time, they are little different than conventional film coverage. They are driven by the logic of edits: wide shot, over-the-shoulder, close-up, point of view, two-shot.

The Tarkovsky long shot is more than long. It's meditative. The psychological effect of slow cinema's "long take" is unlike any other film technique. Film techniques are about "getting there"—telling a story, explaining an action, evoking an emotion—whereas the long take is about "being there." Julian Jason Haladyn in *Boredom and Art* compares the effect of the long take to a train journey, an early symbol of modernity.¹¹ The train journey places emphasis on expectation rather than presence. The traveler's mind is focused on the destination, not where he or she is here and now. Travelers can't appreciate being in the present because their perception of time and space is constantly shifting. Motion pictures, like modernity itself, embraced this constant flux. Slow cinema, specifically the long take, sought to reverse the headlong impetus of technology in favor of the present.

Andrei Tarkovsky stands at the fulcrum of an aesthetic paradigm shift. His earlier films, *Ivan's Childhood* (1962) and *Andrei Rublev* (1966), although slow-paced and replete with associative imagery, adhered to chronological narrative. As he evolved as an artist, Tarkovsky realized that what he was really after was more akin to boredom (my choice of word, not Tarkovsky's) than slowness. He called it "time pressure."

Toward the end of his life (he died at age 54) Tarkovsky organized his thoughts in a book appropriately titled *Sculpting in Time*. "The cinema image," he wrote, "is the observation of a phenomenon passing through time. Time becomes the very foundation of cinema. . . . Time exerts a pressure which runs through the shot. . . . Just as a quivering reed can tell you about the current or water pressure of a river, in the same way we know the movement of time as it flows through the shot."¹²

The long take gives time power. It intensifies the image. Jonathan Rosenbaum referred to this moment as the "pedal point. . . . When you hold a chord for a long time it becomes meditative, because it gives you

time to think and almost makes a demand on your imagination.”¹³ Watch an image long enough and your mind goes to work.

“The pauses,” director Theo Angelopoulos contended, “the dead time, give the spectator the chance to assess the film rationally but also to create, or complete, the different meanings of a sequence.”¹⁴ The long take demands a viewer involvement—pro or con. “Dead time” (*temps mort*) is predicated on the active viewer. It seems counterintuitive to say that slow cinema requires more viewer involvement, but that is exactly the point. Pedro Costa, a third-generation slow director, made a documentary about Jean-Marie Straub and Danièle Huillet, second-generation slow directors, titled *Where Does Your Hidden Smile Lie?* (2001), in which Straub describes dead time as “a reduction, only it’s not a reduction—it’s a concentration and it actually says more.”

This was a crucial transition in Tarkovsky’s work: from narrative digression to dead time. There is a fundamental difference between being slow to create mood and being slow to activate the viewer. What Bresson and Ozu were moving toward, Tarkovsky brought to resolution. Delayed cuts were extended indefinitely. Ozu’s “pillow shots” (still-life images) became entire scenes.

The opening of Tarkovsky’s *Nostalghia* (1983) speaks volumes. A static shot of a foggy landscape. A compact green car enters screen right. The camera slowly pans with the car. The car exits screen left. The camera holds on the foggy landscape. Will the car re-enter? It does. A couple emerges from the car; they talk, walk into the fog. In that moment—when the car exits and there is no splice—Tarkovsky’s work segued from delayed cut to dead time, from transcendental style to slow cinema.

Tarkovsky didn’t innovate in isolation. In 1967 Pasolini described the long take as “a search for relations among discontinuous meaning, . . . the schematic and primordial element of cinema.”¹⁵ Antonioni, Miklós Jancsó, Chantal Akerman, Jean Eustache, and others were all pushing the boundaries of contemplative cinema. But it was Tarkovsky’s international success that legitimized slow cinema. He was a regular presence at the Cannes and Venice film festivals. Each year brought new honors. By the time he died, he was the poster child for slow cinema.

Tarkovsky’s success was the tipping point in the movement toward slow cinema. There is a before-Tarkovsky and an after-Tarkovsky. Before was art house cinema. After was film festival and art gallery cinema. Before was slow cinema predicated on paying viewers. After was slow cinema underwritten by arts organizations. Tarkovsky was not a “pure” slow cinema stylist—he was more interested in poetry than



stasis—but he made slow cinema fashionable. He made Béla Tarr possible.

WHAT IS SLOW CINEMA?

“Slow cinema” is a fairly recent term used to designate a branch of art cinema which features minimal narrative, little action or camera movement and long running times. Harry Tuttle listed the four criteria for slow cinema as plotlessness, wordlessness, slowness, and alienation.¹⁶ Many terms have been used to describe this phenomenon: stasis, contemplative, austere, abstract, landscape, meditative, “deliberate,” organic, expanded, and, yes, transcendental—all of which in certain cases are accurate. Which is why a multipurpose term like “slow cinema” is useful. It’s malleable.

In the last fifteen years slow cinema has exploded. Slow movies are now being made faster than we can see them. There are slow cinema websites, slow cinema conferences, slow cinema blogs, slow cinema books, slow cinema film festivals, and even a slow cinema VOD website. Forty to fifty slow films were premiered last year, primarily in festivals. They are rarely shown in theaters. Their reach extends to film schools, cinematheques, and art museums. They come from every nation in the world.

Slow cinema has a fundamentally different attitude toward time. The promise of motion pictures was that of a river on which you could float images. Photography through time. Cinema itself was narrative, even if the image was the arrival of a train: there was the first appearance of the train, the train stopping, passengers getting out, and so on. Attach that image to sound, and a story begins. Time serves storytelling.

Slow films invert this relationship. Time becomes the story—or at least its central component. Slow cinema examines how time affects images. It’s experiential, not expositional.

“Time becomes story.” How can time be the story? One has to be careful because it’s so easy to slip into jargon when analyzing film. (What is time? What is story?) Let’s go back to the beginning: the Lumière brothers 1895 *Arrival of a Train at La Ciotat*. The first movie. A steam train pulls into a station. A fifty-second snippet of time from 120 years ago. Eight hundred still frames projected sequentially.

But what if that clip were projected in a loop for five minutes? Five hours? What if the film were slowed so that it took fifteen minutes for the train to arrive? What would the film then be about? Would it be

about the arrival of the train or about your experience as a viewer watching the arrival of the train? What did you think about for those fifteen minutes it took the train to arrive? This is the question conceptual artist Gordon Douglas posed in *24 Hour Psycho* (1993), a version of Hitchcock's *Psycho* projected at two frames rather than twenty-four frames per second, causing it to run twenty-four hours.

Stripped of aesthetic jargon, this then is the definition of "slow cinema": making something take longer than we have been conditioned to expect.

Slow movies have exploded multidirectionally. Not all slow cinema is the same. This is why discussions of slow cinema are so problematic. Not all directors use "slow" techniques for the same purposes. Although it seems logical to discuss directors such as Lav Diaz, Béla Tarr, and Tsai Ming-liang in the same context because they employ similar stylistic devices, their intentions and films are in fact quite dissimilar.

There are many types of slow cinema, but only, I believe, three tendencies. If one accepts that the natural state of cinema is narrative—not necessarily the case, but a defensible premise given that movies are connected images seen over time—then three different branches of slow cinema can be seen to move away from narrative in three different directions, each with a different destination. More on this later.

WHAT ARE THE TECHNIQUES OF SLOW CINEMA?

The techniques of slow cinema may seem arbitrary, but they are practical. They all have the same purpose: to retard time. They withhold the expected.

The *long take* is the sine qua non of slow cinema. These are not the complex long dolly and tracking takes of film school lore; no, these are for the most part static frames, sometimes abetted by languorous pans or dolly moves. The seven-and-a-half-minute opening shot of Béla Tarr's *Sátántangó* (1994), which intermittently studies and follows cows in a barnyard, has become the textbook example of slow cinema. Tarr's last film, *The Turin Horse* (2011), features thirty-one shots over 146 minutes, approximately four and a half minutes per shot.

But a long take need not be of Olympian length to serve its purpose. It just needs to be longer than expected. A static shot of someone, say, making coffee would dramatically require ten to fifteen seconds of screen time. If that shot is held for thirty seconds, it has another effect. Held for a three minutes, quite another. Thirty seconds, however, are

sufficient to create a dissonance between time and narrative, between the narrative time requirements of a particular shot and the actual amount of time allotted to the shot.

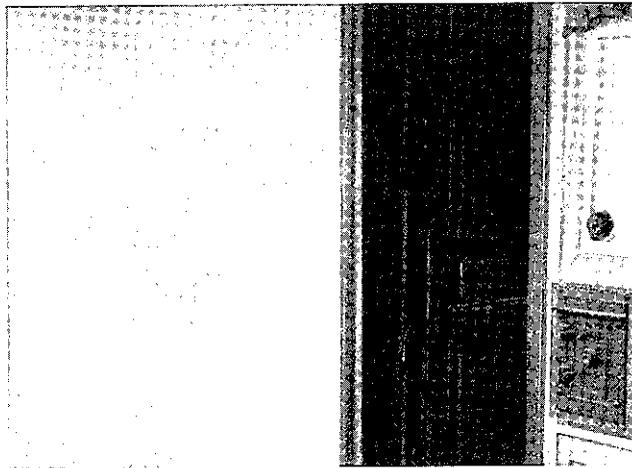
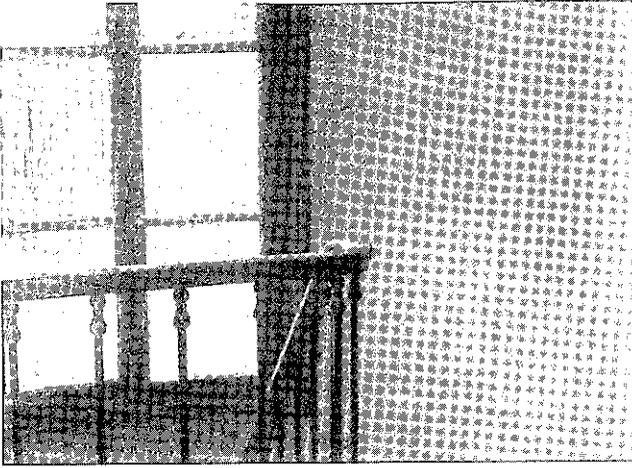
Other film techniques reinforce the dissonance:

Wide angles are favored by slow cinema. A tableau, whether exterior or interior, offers multiple points of interest. One can see the action, the surroundings, the people talking, the people listening, the weather, and so on. The frame doesn't direct the viewer's gaze; it frees it to wander.

Static frame. A locked-off camera position is often employed in conjunction with the long take. "Sometimes when you are very still," film-maker Nathaniel Dorsky (*Love's Refrain*, 2001) explains, "you feel things that are hidden. I think [the static frame] has to do with seeing how deeply you can go."¹⁷ There are variations of the static frame technique. In *Ida*, (2013), Pawel Pawlikowski used a static 1:33 frame but composed for the lower half of the frame. Cristian Mungiu (*4 Months, 3 Weeks and 2 Days*, 2007), like a number of his fellow "New Romanian" directors, pushed the action to the edges of a frozen frame, leaving the center vacant.

Minimal coverage. "Coverage" refers to the different angles a director uses to capture a scene: two-shot, over-the-shoulder, single, close-up, cutaway, and so on. Coverage guides and governs the viewer's attention. The film-maker manipulates the audience's reaction by editing the coverage. Dispensing with coverage, the slow cinema director is left to rely on staging, framing, and length of shot.

Offset edits. When edits occur, they are frequently offset in time—either too early or too late. In normal cutting, a splice is made "on action." If someone leaves a room, the cut is made as the person leaves; if someone enters, it is made as the person enters. In slow cinema the cut is made *after* the character leaves—sometimes much after. I first noticed this tendency in the films of Bresson and Ozu. It threw off the viewer's rhythm—the cut was too "early" or too "late." In this way, the film-maker reorients time. Film scholar Ben Singer described these as "post action lag."¹⁸ Subsequent directors have offset these edits progressively more and more. In 1977 Theo Angelopoulos in *The Hunters* held for multiple beats before and after characters enter and exit. Twenty-five years later Tsai Ming-liang in *What Time Is It There?* (2001) held onto a static frame to the point where the viewer was uncertain if a character would ever enter.



The delayed cut. Beginning, middle, end frames of a shot from *Pickpocket*.

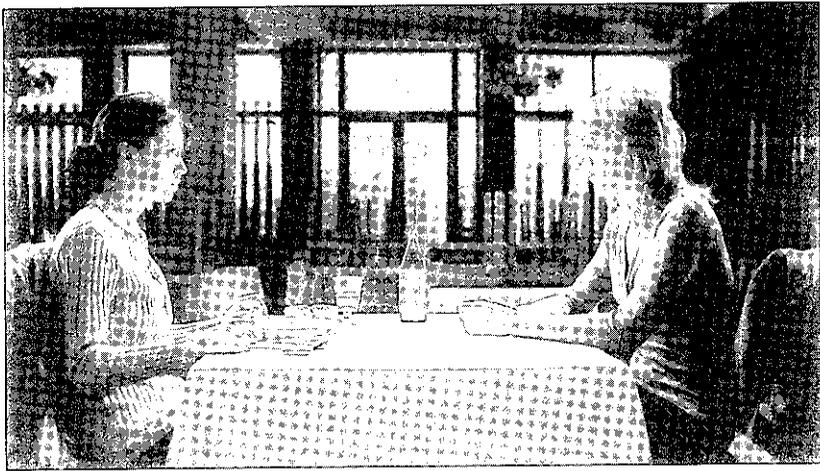
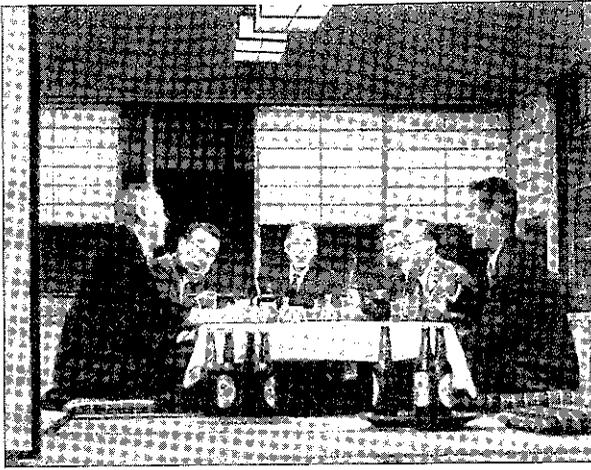
Images preferred over dialogue. Slow cinema isn't very talky. There's dialogue, of course, but not as much as in conventional narratives. Human beings are vococentric; our ears prioritize the human voice over other sounds. Slow cinema film-makers intentionally dispense with dialogue to reorient time. If we watch a scene with and without dialogue, the non-dialogue version will necessarily seem "slower."

Highly selective composed music—if any. Slow cinema favors diegetic sound—that is, sound which emanates from the action on screen. Non-diegetic music, composed music, is the most effective way to control film time; it can make a scene seem fast or slow. The absence of film score heightens the sense of being in a specific moment in time; it "extends" time. Bresson was the first to codify this rule. "No music as accompaniment, support or reinforcement," he wrote in *Notes on Cinematography*.¹⁹ The more a director is committed to slow cinema, the less he or she uses musical scoring. Andrei Tarkovsky and Theo Angelopoulos, for example, began their careers by using composed music, and ended by using little or none.

Heightened sound effects. Practical sound effects fill the vacuum left by dialogue and music. Keys jangle, chairs scrape, motor engines turn over, clothes rustle, wind blows, and humans inhale, exhale. All these emphasize the quotidian, the banal moment-by-moment reality of any situation.

A visual flatness. Slow cinema eschews drama—visual drama as well as story drama. Visual compositions in slow films tend to be symmetrical, not weighted toward specific visual information—no dramatic foregrounding and oblique angles. Camera movement, when it occurs, is painstakingly incremental and most often at right angles—either side to side or directly forward or backward. Human figures are presented as composition equals with other items on screen. David Bordwell uses the term "planimetric photography" to describe this flatness.²⁰ Viewers are refused easy entrance to the image, held at a deliberate distance. They are left to assemble their own visual priorities.

Repeated compositions. Ozu incorporated identical shots into his style, planimetric compositions with a central corridor or road leading directly away from the camera. Sometimes characters (full figure) will walk through these compositions. Sometimes not. The effect is to make the viewer aware of context. It was a leitmotif for Ozu. By 1989 such repetitions had become a central motif, as in Hou Hsiao-hsien's epic *City of Sadness*, which returns to the same compositions year after year.



Planimetric composition. From Ozu's *An Autumn Afternoon*; Cristian Mungiu's *4 Months, 3 Weeks and 2 Days*; Bruno Dumont's *Hadewijch*.

Doubling. In my 1972 book on transcendental style, I also mentioned “doubling,” by which I meant unnecessarily reiterated information. The example I gave was from *Pickpocket*, in which the main character, Michel, states, “I sat in the lobby of a large bank.” (1) The viewer hears this in voice-over; (2) the viewer reads this on screen as Michel writes the words in his diary; (3) the viewer sees this as Michel is pictured entering the lobby of a bank. This overlapping of information is a distancing device.

Non-acting. Barely moving. Bresson referred to his actors as “models,” objects in human form. Performers in slow cinema do not “act” or interpret emotions. They are figures in a composed landscape. Not only do these performers not “act,” they move slowly. Actors in slow cinema tend to take a while to get anywhere, like mimes in a Robert Wilson opera. If a character in slow cinema enters frame headed right to left, the viewer knows two things: (1) the scene will not end until after the character exits frame, and (2) it will take the character a long time to cross screen.

Color and screen ratio. The choice to use black and white when color is the norm doesn’t necessarily retard time but it is a withholding device. It gives less. Compare for example, Pawlikowski’s *Ida* with Margarethe von Trotta’s *Vision*, two films about nuns. *Vision* works in warm yellow colors with shifting camera perspective and brisk editing. *Ida* is just the opposite. Similarly, Pawlikowski’s use of the restrictive screen ratio of 1:33 gives you less.

Not all these techniques are present in a given “slow film.” Some counteract each other. It’s a buffet of technical choices. Slow directors mix and match. Different directors employ different techniques. Some are more austere, some less. But this is the menu.

The techniques may be similar, but the intentions are diverse. A quick (alphabetical) look at some of the prominent practitioners of slow cinema reveals an eclectic group: Chantal Akerman, Lisandro Alonso, Theo Angelopoulos, Nuri Bilge Ceylan, Pedro Costa, Claire Denis, Lav Diaz, Bruno Dumont, Michelangelo Frammartino, Hou Hsiao-hsien, Abbas Kiarostami, Kim Ki-duk, Hirokazu Kore-eda, Nicolás Pereda, Kelly Reichardt, Ben Rivers, Alberto Serra, Alexander Sokurov, Jean-Marie Straub and Danièle Huillet, Béla Tarr, Tsai Ming-liang, Apichatpong Weerasethakul. These are very different film-makers with very different artistic intentions.

Yet they all use slow cinema techniques. What unites them is time.

THE VIEWER JOINS THE MOVIE

"How does time make itself felt in a shot?" Tarkovsky wrote. "It becomes tangible when you realize, quite consciously, that what you see in the frame is not limited to its visual depiction but a pointer to something stretching beyond the frame into infinity."²¹ The viewer makes time felt in a shot. The viewer is operative; the viewer acts upon the image.

These techniques manipulate the viewer's perception of time. Motion pictures have two essential qualities: pictures and motion. Photographed reality through time. Empathy and action. A photograph creates empathy (or identification, if "empathy" is too strong a word)—that sandwich looks delicious, or the sea creature is frightening, for example. A moving photograph creates empathy over time. Two intercut moving photographs create narrative (the definition I proposed earlier).

So this was what films were really good at: action and empathy. The advances in early film-making were designed to emphasize one or the other. Hollywood specialized in action (the chase), the Soviets in empathy (montage). These were the innovations of early cinema. This was what movies did best.

Slow cinema works against the grain of cinema itself. It turns its back on what movies do best. It replaces action with stillness, empathy with distance. The techniques of slow cinema are all, to varying degrees, distancing devices. They push the viewer away from the "experience," that is, from immediate emotional involvement. This is different from modernistic distancing devices in the other arts to the same degree cinema is different from earlier art forms.

Expectations are turned in on themselves. There is no music to guide emotions, no close-ups to indicate importance, no acting to affect feelings, no fast motion to distract the eye.

Slow cinema is passive aggression par excellence. The slow cinema director says, "I know what you want; I know what you expect; but I'm going to do the opposite." Why? "Because I'm after something else and will use your expectations to get it." Roles are reversed. The film-maker, instead of creating a film world in which the viewer needs only to surrender, creates a world which the spectator must contemplate—or reject out of hand.

In her review of Alain Cavalier's *Thérèse* (1986), Pauline Kael complained: "Watching *Thérèse* is like looking at a book of photographs of respectfully staged tableaux and not being allowed to flip the pages at your own speed. You have to sit there while Cavalier turns them for

you, evenly, monotonously, allowing their full morbid beauty to sink it. You're trapped inside his glass bubble."²² *Exactly*.

But isn't this manipulation of another sort? Isn't passive aggression another form of aggression? What is the difference between manipulating film time to create suspense and manipulating time to create boredom?

A lot. Take, for example, the difference between a *smash cut* and a *delayed cut*. Both are manipulations. The smash cut jumps ahead of the viewer's expectations, delivering an action before it is expected. A western saloon: a cowboy's hand hovers over his pistol and—suddenly—a shot has been fired and his opponent lies dead. That's a smash cut.

The same saloon. The cowboy holsters his gun. The cowboy exits—but the camera doesn't cut. It waits at the static empty saloon door for two, three, four, five beats before the scene changes. Time is arrested. A manipulation just as much as the smash cut. But with a diametrically different effect.

The smash cut depreciates the viewer's participation; the delayed cut demands it. After the smash cut, the viewer is propelled unthinking through the ongoing narrative. After the delayed cut, the viewer is frozen outside the narrative. The empty saloon door. Five beats of dead time. *Temps mort*. And during this dead time the spectator is left alone to think or reflect.

In that reflection lives the concept of slow cinema.

Another example serves to demonstrate the intricacies of slow time. Early in Abbas Kiarostami's *Close-Up* (1990), Kiarostami pans with an aerosol can accidentally kicked by one of the characters. The frame holds on the can as it tumbles down the sloping pavement. The drama stops to watch this. Then, just as the can comes to a stop and is about to exit frame, he cuts back to the story he was telling. This is quasi slow cinema. Kiarostami creates a contemplative pace by focusing on an irrelevant action. But he wants to distance the viewer only a little. If he had wanted to really slow time, he would have held on the empty frame after the aerosol can exited. Kiarostami's end game is humanistic, not spiritual, so, having made his point about the need to process information in an unhurried manner, he returns to more conventional narrative.

A final example. Imagine a frozen frame: A bucolic countryside. Fields, two dirt roads. A wooden barn on the right, a flock of goats on the left. Fluffy clouds above. A Béla Tarr frame. We wait; then a man enters from upper frame right and begins to cross the landscape. Slowly. He heads toward lower frame left. The viewer, familiar with the Tarr aesthetic,



The wayward canister. From *Close-Up*.

knows there will be no cut until the man exits lower frame left, however long it takes, three minutes, four, five. So what does the spectator do? Well, look at those clouds—the sun has moved, the shadows have changed. What's that sound? Is a car coming? If so, on which road? The sound passes—no car, but now the goats have moved. Some have left the frame. Will they come back? Oh, look, the sun has reappeared—new cloud patterns. Some goats have returned. Is that a plane overhead? And still the man is only halfway across the screen. (This is an exaggerated example of the opening shot of Bruno Dumont's *Humanity* [1999], which watches a distant character cross the horizon in the upper quadrant of the screen for a minute and twenty seconds.)

What is happening here? A new movie is being created. A simultaneous movie. The spectator's movie. Bazin scholars describe this as “the democracy of the eye”—given opportunity, the eye will explore. The film-maker has forced the viewer to enjoin the narrative process, creating his or her own narrative. The two films overlap: the director's tableau and the spectator's meditations on that tableau.



Humanity, opening shot.

BOREDOM AS AN AESTHETIC TOOL

Deny the viewers what they seek. Deny, deny, deny. Why would a viewer put up with such abuse? Such boredom?

Well, most viewers don't. Most slow films are in fact "boring" (a subjective judgment, but there it is), and the lovers of slow cinema are relatively small in number.

Some slow films have the opposite effect. They hook the viewer. They calculatingly use boredom as an aesthetic tool. Boring morphs into mesmerizing. These are the truly important films.

Why do we take it? The boredom. The distance. First, because effective slow cinema film-makers are masters of anticipation. Employing striking visuals and auditory tricks and bits of activity, the slow film director keeps his viewer on the hook, thinking there is a reward, a "payoff" just around the corner. It's adroit blackmail. If I leave, I'll miss what I've been waiting for. Even the seasoned viewer of slow cinema anticipates *something*. Some moment. Some unexpectation. The wait will be worth it.

Second, because something *is* happening. Cinema lets us look around. Good slow cinema gives us something to see when we do.

The third reason has to do with the act of theatergoing. Going to a film is like going to a church. A commitment is made. "I've come here of my own will and I accept the rules." One doesn't leave a church service after half an hour because it's boring. Slow films prey upon this pact between the viewer and the viewed.

Fourth is what Haladyn called the “will to boredom.”²³ This results in the “passionate yes”—the Nietzschean yes—“that endures while standing before the meaninglessness of a subjective world in the hopes of seeing more . . . of creating meaning where none exists.”

Slow cinema’s not for all viewers. It alienates. It distances. A brief tour through comments on various film blogs demonstrates the anger slow cinema can generate. (A polite example from the blogger “The Swede”: “There is simply no functional reason and no intellectual justification to hold on a shot 10 times longer than the action it’s depicting. It’s amateurish.”²⁴). Slow directors, in fact, are known to respond to the limited acceptance they receive by creating even longer, slower films. Tarr’s *Sátántangó* (1994) runs 7 hours 12 minutes; Diaz’s *Evolution of a Filipino Family* (2004) clocks in at 10 hours 47 minutes, and the year 2020 promises to bring Anders Weberg’s *Ambience* at 720 hours (30 days)—the 7-hour trailer was released in 2016.

But when it works, it works. “No good movie is too long and no bad movie is short enough,” wrote Roger Ebert.²⁵

WHERE DOES TRANSCENDENTAL STYLE FIT IN?

Transcendental style is not slow cinema. It’s one of several precursors to slow cinema. Bazin’s neorealism was another. As were Antonioni’s soulful meanderings. Transcendental style evolved as “time-image.” Filmmakers in different places and different traditions understood they could slow movies down to create a new reality, to explore memory, to beget contemplation, and in some rare cases simulate transcendence.

Transcendental style as I described it forty-five years ago still exists, although it’s as rare now as it was then. The mechanics of transcendental style—the everyday, disparity, decisive action, stasis—can be seen in films like Alain Cavalier’s *Thérèse*, Alexander Sokurov’s *Mother and Son* (1997), Carlos Reygadas’s *Silent Light* (2007), Bruno Dumont’s *Hadewijch* (2009), Jessica Hausner’s *Lourdes* (2009), Eugène Green’s *La Sapienza* (2014), and Pawel Pawlikowski’s *Ida*.

Dietrich Brüggemann’s *Stations of the Cross* (2015) is a striking recent example. Brüggemann’s film consists of fourteen planimetric tableaux, one for each station of the cross. The frame for each is static. As in *Ida*, there is no camera movement until the very end. *Ida* ends with an eye-level tracking shot. *Stations of the Cross* ends with a crane up to God’s POV. Pawlikowski concludes with non-diegetic music à la Bresson; Brüggemann

concludes without music. I asked Brüggemann why he didn't do the "Bresson thing" and hit a music cue during the transgressive final crane shot. He replied, "As we were addressing music as such in the story, I felt it was wiser not to use it. If the priest had talked about camera movements, we'd probably refrained from doing those [camera movements] we did."

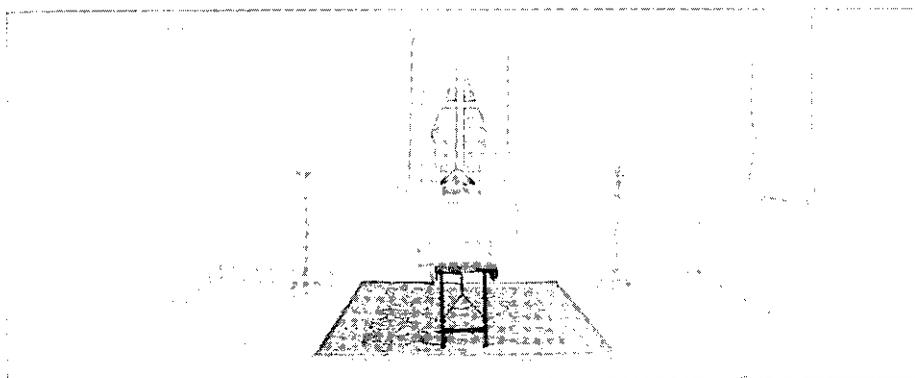
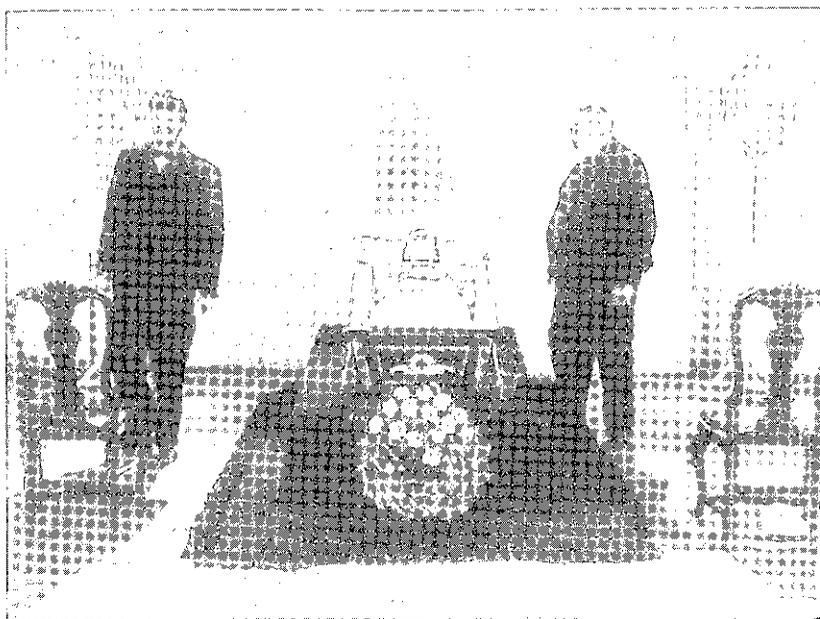
All of these examples involve films with religious characters or themes. This brings up the question of whether transcendental style is tied to spiritual themes. My answer: In theory, no. In practice, more often than not.

To test this point, let's theoretically set two silent films made six years apart side by side: Andy Warhol's *Blow Job* (1964) and Larry Gottheim's *Fog Line* (1970). Both are static shots lasting ten minutes. The first is the face of a young man receiving oral sex. The second is an obscured landscape as the fog slowly clears. Which image is more transcendent? Art history, practice, and good taste says the latter. But then transcendence is in the eye of the beholder.

Transcendental style directors are deceptively difficult to emulate. *Une Simple Histoire* made in 1959 by Marcel Hanoun is a direct imitation of Bresson's style, yet it is "off," not quite right—too much of this technique, too little of that. Hou Hsiao-hsien's "homage to Ozu," *Café Lumière* (2003), seems a bloodless exercise; on the other hand, Hirokazu Kore-eda's *Still Walking* (2008) finds new life in the Ozu formula. U.S.-born French film-maker Eugène Green is the most successful heir to Bresson's style. *La Sapienza* (2014) uses Bresson's techniques—planimetric staging, flat line readings, offset cuts, bursts of unlikely music—to powerful secular effect. Added to this list must be *Silent Light*, Reygadas's luminescent remake of Dreyer's *Ordet* (1955).

There are also faux uses of transcendental style: films that employ abundant means throughout and then conclude with a decisive action and stasis. The most notable example is Lars von Trier's *Breaking the Waves* (1996), which after two and a half hours of action cuts, jittery camerawork, and tempestuous drama concludes with a static "holy image." In the interest of full disclosure, I should mention my perhaps problematic decision to attach the ending of *Pickpocket* to *American Gigolo* (1980) and *Light Sleeper* (1992), films which otherwise bore no evidence of transcendental style.

To my mind, Andrei Tarkovsky was not interested in the transcendental style per se. He had religious themes, obsessions, and characters. He was austere. He employed distancing devices. But his intent was different. A transcendental guide or guru or film director self-effacingly seeks to escort the respondent to another level of consciousness, a



The Miracle. From *Ordet* and from *Silent Light*.

Wholly Other world. The transcendental film director is a “spirit guide.” Tarkovsky was more interested in passing through the portal himself than he was in escorting his viewer. This seems clear in *Nostalgia*. At the end of the film, Dominic, a deranged mystic, immolates himself. In response, Andrei, the film’s protagonist and Tarkovsky’s surrogate, fulfills a promise to Dominic to carry a lit candle across the waters of a mineral pool. The pool is empty but Andrei struggles against



Two endings. Bresson vs. Tarkovsky. From *Nostalgia*.

wind and failing health to complete his task—back and forth, back and forth. Andrei places the flickering candle on a stone ledge and dies off camera. This is stasis, the end point of transcendental style. It's a Bressonian ending. It's the last shot of *Diary of a Country Priest* (1951); it's the last shot of *Trial of Joan of Arc* (1962).

But Tarkovsky doesn't end *Nostalgia* there. It concludes with a black-and-white image of Andrei resting beside his dog outside his

ancestral home before a reflecting pool, poetic images from Tarkovsky's repertoire. The camera pulls back to reveal that Andrei and dog and house are all on a grassy field inside a ruined cathedral. Snow falls, folk music plays. The intent is not to namelessly escort the viewer. This is the artist's self-apotheosis. This is not about the Wholly Other. It's about Andrei Tarkovsky.

THREE DIRECTIONS

When cinema broke free from the iron nucleus of narrative, when time became an end rather than a means, when Aristotle's formulations yielded to Deleuze's, it headed one of three directions.

Imagine cinema as an atom, a tight nuclear ball of neutrons and protons bound by the glue ("strong force" in physicist speak) of narrative. Nuclear narrative glue holds the medium in place. But a particle breaks free. And spins off with great energy. Which direction does the errant particle go? One of three anti-narrative directions.

The further the particle breaks free, the farther it flies, the closer it comes to time itself. "I despise stories," Béla Tarr stated. "They mislead people into believing something has happened. In fact, nothing really happens as we flee from one condition to another. All that remains is time. This is probably the only thing that's still genuine—time itself: the years, days, hours, minutes and seconds."²⁶

Direction One: The Surveillance Camera

A primary impulse of non-narrative cinema is toward *quotidian*, day-to-day reality. Turn the camera on, let it record. This is what excited Andre Bazin about neorealism. "All the arts are based on the presence of man," he wrote. "Only photography derives an advantage from his absence."²⁷ Real time equals real cinema. Cinema's ability to record an event over time, its ability to "imprint of the duration of the object,"²⁸ elevated it above photography. Vittorio De Sica's *Bicycle Thieves* (1948) was "one of the first examples of pure cinema. No more actors, no more story, no more sets, which is to say that in the perfect illusion of reality there is no more cinema."²⁹ An article in *Esprit* after Bazin's death quoted Bazin as saying: "The year 2000 will salute the advent of a cinema free of the artificialities of montage, renouncing the role of 'art of reality' so that it may climb to its final level on which it will become once and for all 'reality made art.'³⁰ Today we call this a surveillance camera.

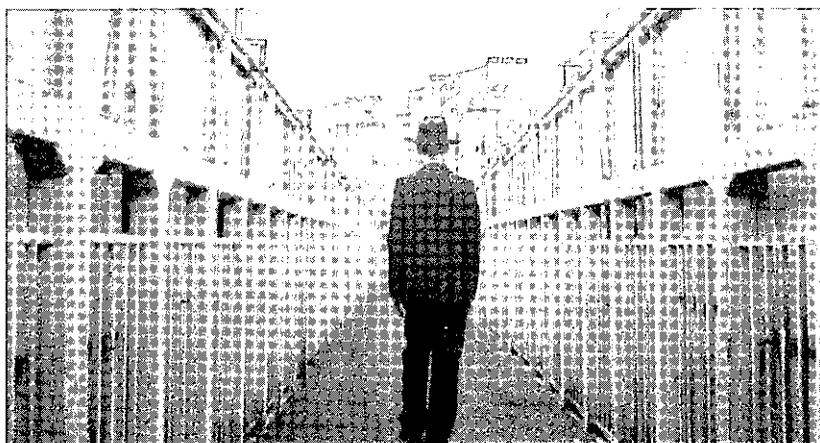
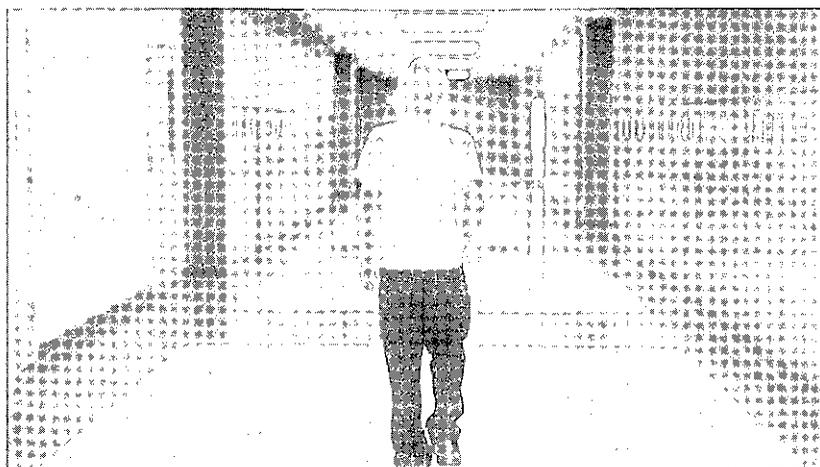
Although Bazin understood the uniqueness of cinema (its “ontology”), he overstated its importance. A cinematic frame is ipso facto a human intervention. A choice. Even without edits, the long take expresses “presence of man,” the presence of the observer.

By 1975 the young maid in De Sica’s *Umberto D* had grown up and become Jeanne Dielman, the single mother in Chantal Akerman’s *Jeanne Dielman, 23 quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles*, who spends thirty minutes at a stretch on household tasks. In an interview Akerman objected to the “hierarchy of images” that gives a car accident or a kiss greater importance than an image of washing dishes. By 2009 Jeanne Dielman had evolved into the family members of Jiayan Liu’s *Oxhide II*, who prepare and eat dumplings over the course of her 132-minute, nine-shot film. The everyday: grinding coffee, preparing meat loaf, making dumplings.

Another manifestation of non-narrative quotidian is the “walking” film. Characters walk around. Matthew Flanagan has traced the roots of this subgenre, beginning with Rossellini’s *Viaggio in Italia* (1954) to Antonioni’s *L’Avventura* (1960) proceeding to Gus Van Sant’s death trilogy—*Gerry* (2002), *Elephant* (2003), and *Last Days* (2005)—and arriving at Tsai Ming-liang’s *Walker* (2012), in which a Buddhist monk silently walks around Taipei for a half hour.³¹ Avishai Sivan’s *The Wanderer* (2010) uses a static camera to observe a young yeshiva student’s aimless meanderings in Tel Aviv replete with repeated compositions and offset edits. Laura Marks uses the word “vestibular” to describe this type of film, meaning its sensibility is based on the sense of balance provided by the inner ear—which I think is a clever perspective.³² A Walking Film, however, is not a road movie, which uses the trope of a travel route to attach narratives like beads on a string. The walking film is an anti-narrative road movie.

Another variant: direct cinema, an “anthropological” cinema developed by Jean Rouch in France and refined by Frederick Wiseman in the United States. In *Chronicle of a Summer* (1960), Rouch chronicled day-to-day events without editorial comment. Chinese director Wang Bing carries this type non-narrative film to extreme lengths with his observational documentaries such as *Crude Oil* (2008), a fourteen-hour film that monitors Inner Mongolian oil field workers as they go about their daily routine.

Realistic non-narrative films have also turned their attention to history, beginning with Roberto Rossellini’s historical re-creation *The Rise of Louis XIV* (1966), Jean-Marie Straub’s *Chronicle of Anna Magdalena Bach* (1968), and Cavalier’s *Thérèse*. Most recently this tradition has



Vestibular cinema. From *Elephant*, *Walker*, and *The Wanderer*.

been carried forward by Spaniard Alberto Serra in *The Story of My Death* (2013) about Casanova and, in a nod to Rossellini, *The Death of Louis XIV* (2016). Rossellini deserves special mention in any discussion about films that push non-narrative boundaries. He was a pioneer of neorealism (*Rome, Open City* [1946]), meditative realism (*Voyage in Italy* [1954]), and historical realism (*The Rise of Louis XIV*). Three groundbreaking trends. Rossellini led the way in each.

All realistic non-narrative films vector the same direction. The more pure they become, the less editorial, the more objective they are; the more they resemble the surveillance camera. That is the end point of Bazin's "objective reality." The unending, all-seeing eye of the closed-circuit camera. "Pure cinema."

Direction Two: The Art Gallery

A second direction cinema can go after it escapes the nuclear glue of narrative is toward pure imagery: light and color.

This type of non-narrative film has existed from cinema's inception. It was termed "experimental" and derived from various artistic movements—abstraction, Dadaism, cubism, surrealism, and constructivism. Hans Richter hand-animated shorts; Oskar Fischinger employed abstract patterns; artists such as Germaine Dulac and Jean Cocteau used photographed images as abstractions.

These avant-garde exercises were outside the realm of "the movies." They were "experimental shorts." Not until they grew to feature-film length were experimental films recognized as a branch of theatrical cinema. Maya Deren was instrumental in the post-WWII shift of experimental cinema toward long form. *Meshes in the Afternoon* (1943), replete with dream imagery—mirrors, wind, staircases, rain, knives—held together by, connected by unconscious associations, ran fifteen minutes. It set the stage for longer and more abstract non-narrative films. Deren argued that the "transfiguration of time"—slow motion, reverse motion, stop motion—was the center of the cinematic art, but her concept, P. Adams Sitney pointed out, was unlike Tarkovsky's. "Deren has a magical view of the manipulation of time"; Tarkovsky's film concepts were based on "the exfoliation of time within a shot."³³

It's not coincidental that Deren came upon the film scene the same time as neorealism and the period Deleuze identifies as the transition from the movement-image to the time-image. Richter completed *Dreams Money Can Buy*, a feature-length surrealist trance film in 1947. The same year

Amos Vogel founded Cinema 16 as a birthing facility for American experimentalism. In 1966 Stan Brakhage released *Dog Star Man* (1963), a sixty-six-minute assemblage of paint on celluloid, fast-cut abstract images, collages, and multiple exposures. Eventually it grew to four hours in length.

The “light and color” movement has several iterations. There is dream (also called oneiric) cinema. There is structural cinema. There is abstract cinema.

Dream cinema, a collage of associative imagery, begins with Jean Epstein’s *Fall of the House of Usher* (1928), continues through Maya Deren and Jean Cocteau, to Sergei Parajanov’s *Shadows of Our Forgotten Ancestors* (1965) and Sara Driver’s *You Are Not I* (1981). Today oneiric cinema is best represented by the late works of Jean-Luc Godard, such as *Goodbye to Language* (2014). There’s a branch of dream cinema that deals with childhood memories, exemplified by Bill Douglas’s *My Childhood* (1972), Terence Davies’s *The Long Day Closes* (1992), and Terrence Malick’s *Tree of Life* (2011).

Structural cinema, which evolved in the 1960s, pursues a predetermined stylistic path—the shape of the film the crucial, the content peripheral. Michael Snow (*Wavelength* [1967]), Hollis Frampton (*Zorns Lemma* [1970]), and Ernie Gehr (*Serene Velocity* [1970]) were structural cineastes par excellence. In the conclusion to *Transcendental Style in Film*, I described them as “stasis artists,” a description I would now amend. Stasis artists in fact follow the third non-narrative direction, the mandala.

Abstract cinema, which began as what Walther Ruttmann called “painting in time” (“Malerei mit Zeit”), follows a line from Fischinger to Norman McLaren’s film scratches to Ken Brown’s psychedelic 8mm light shows. Jordan Belson led the movement toward computer abstract films in the 1960s. Abstract computer visualizations are now omnipresent and, in the case of software artist Scott Draves’s *Electric Sheep* (2005–200?), collective. Draves’s program is “run by thousands of people all over the world,” interacting with participant computers to create ever-evolving abstractions.³⁴

What all these iterations have in common is their end point. The end point is the art gallery. The end point is light and color. Follow this non-narrative direction to its logical conclusion and you encounter artists like Bill Viola and James Turrell who describe their artistic medium as light itself.

The end point of this non-narrative vector is Tony Conrad’s magisterial *Yellow Movie* (1973–infinity). Conrad sought to create a movie that

would never end. To do that, he filled a 1:85 frame with cheap white house paint that would yellow over the decades, thus creating an unending film. Tony Conrad died in 2016, but his *Yellow Movie* is still playing.

Direction Three: The Mandala

A third direction an image electron freed from the narrative nucleus can head is toward meditation. To my knowledge there are no early examples of meditative cinema. The notion that cinema could be used to evoke quietude is a fairly recent one. Static street shots from the silent era may seem meditative today but that certainly was not their original intent.

Film theorists such as Bazin, Jean Mitry, and Deleuze paved the intellectual path for a new cinema: a cinema of inaction. And Bresson may be the prototypical director of inaction. Before Bresson, I can think of no director who proposed inaction as cinematic tool. Bresson made “waiting” a verb. Transcendental style is a mile marker on the journey toward stillness.

There are also iterations of meditative cinema. In the realistic vein, Philip Gröning’s *Into Great Silence* (2005) did for Carthusian monks what Wang Bing did for Inner Mongolian coal workers with a very different result. Wang’s film is sociological, Gröning’s spiritual. Zhang Yang’s *Paths of the Soul* (2016) has a similar impact. It follows eleven Buddhist pilgrims as they trek twelve hundred miles over the course of a year, purposefully falling to the ground every few steps, touching their foreheads to the earth.

There are also imagistic voyages such as those by Godfrey Reggio (*Visitors* [2013]) and Ron Fricke (*Samsara* [2011]). There are seasonal traverses like Kim Ki-duk’s *Spring, Summer, Fall, Winter . . . and Spring* (2003) and Michelangelo Frammartino’s *Le Quattro Volte* (2010).

Growing quieter, there is what Michael Walsh called “durational cinema,” films that observe to the point of trance. Warhol pioneered this subgenre with academic exercises like his eight-hour observation of the Empire State Building, *Empire* (1964). Larry Gottheim’s aforementioned *Fog Line*, ten minutes long, demonstrates how magical waiting can be. James Benning’s *Twenty Cigarettes* (2011)—106 minutes of close-ups of people smoking—is the current exemplar of this tradition.

I would place Abbas Kiarostami’s *Five* (2003) in this category as well. Also titled *Five Dedicated to Ozu*, the film contains five static, dialogue-free shots near the ocean. People passing by, driftwood afloat, ducks

passing by. The fifth shot is a black screen accompanied by the sound of frogs. Moving clouds reveal the reflection of the moon on black water. Twenty-seven minutes later the screen begins to lighten. A rooster crows. Kiarostami's career, like that of Rossellini, traces an arc through the history of observational cinema. He began in the 1970s making neorealist documentary shorts for the Institute for Intellectual Development of Children and Young Adults. He transitioned to feature-length depictions of the lives of common people (a schoolboy, a tax collector). His work assumed soul-searching dimensions in *Taste of Cherry* (1997) and found an end point with moonlight reflected on water in *24 Frames* (2017).

Does durational cinema strive for the surveillance camera or the mandala? Is it an unremittingly open eye or the source of enlightenment? It depends on the observer. One viewer watching the fog drift from the mountains might find it an exercise in contemplative boredom; another might experience it as transcendental meditation.

All meditative cinema shares an end point. It is silence. It is the candle, the rock garden, the flower arrangement. It is the mandala. One can meditate upon a mandala for hours on end. There's nothing more a movie can offer.

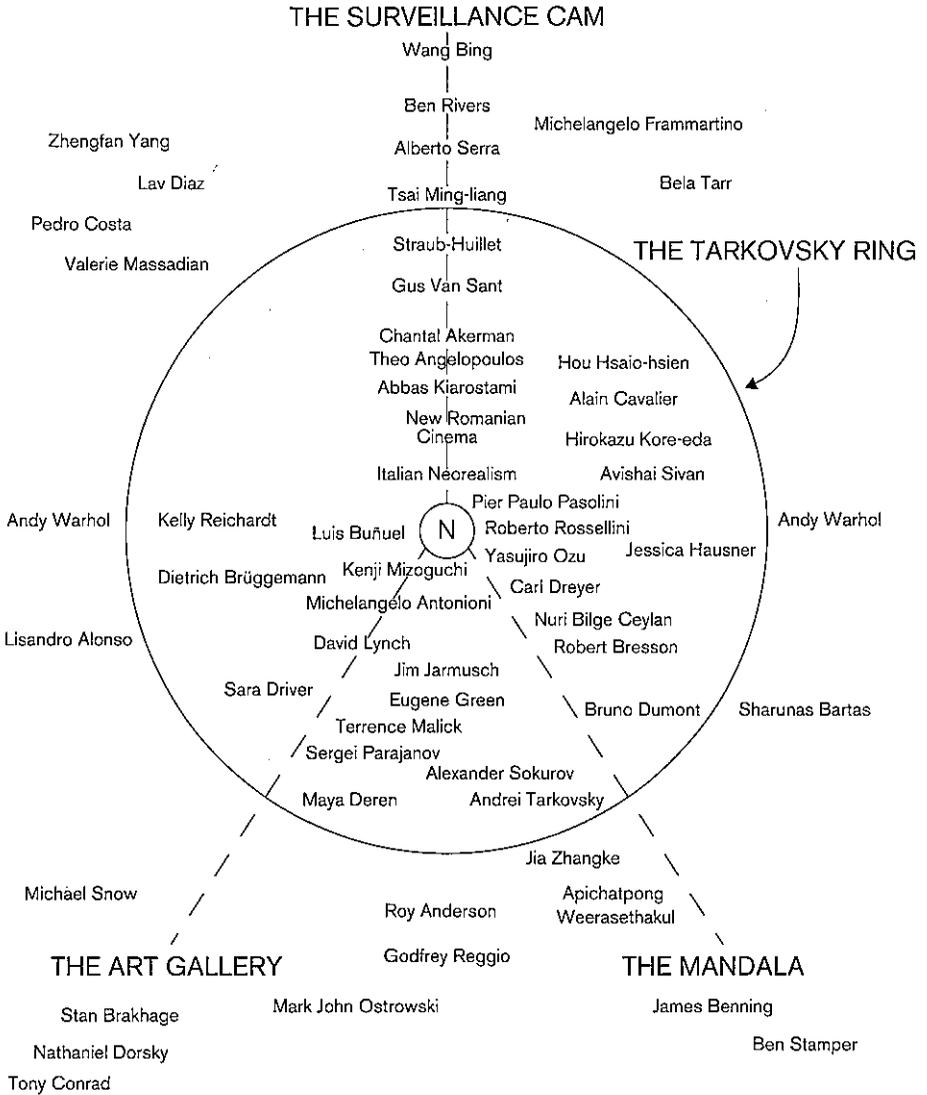
A FINAL NOTE

In 2011, film director Martha Fiennes created a first-of-its-kind installation, titled *Nativity*, which combined all three tendencies: the surveillance camera, the art gallery, and the mandala. Using SLOimage software, Fiennes filmed a nativity scene based on Renaissance paintings. The cast of characters (the Holy Family, shepherds, Magi) are entered into a multilayered computer program that self-generates slow-motion movement both randomly and perpetually. There is no beginning, middle, or end, just a tableau that transforms itself continually like a sophisticated visual version of iTunes shuffle. With 500,000 permutations it is unlikely that this moving painting, this motion picture, will ever end or repeat itself.

The effect is mesmeric. An unending movie.

A DIAGRAM

So much for rethinking. I have a deeper understanding of what interested me forty-five years ago, although the heart of transcendental style remains a mystery.



In order to better understand the ground field of non-narrative cinema, I've created a diagram. The narrative nucleus ("N") lies at the center. Errant electrons run one of three directions: the surveillance camera, the art gallery, the mandala. These electrons pass through the "Tarkovsky Ring" separating theatrical cinema from film festival and

art museum cinema, on their journey to pure concept. The placement of various film-makers in the diagram is subjective and to some degree arbitrary. Directors are represented by the films discussed rather than by their body of work. Not every slow director is included. Transcendental style occupies a bit of space just inside the ring.

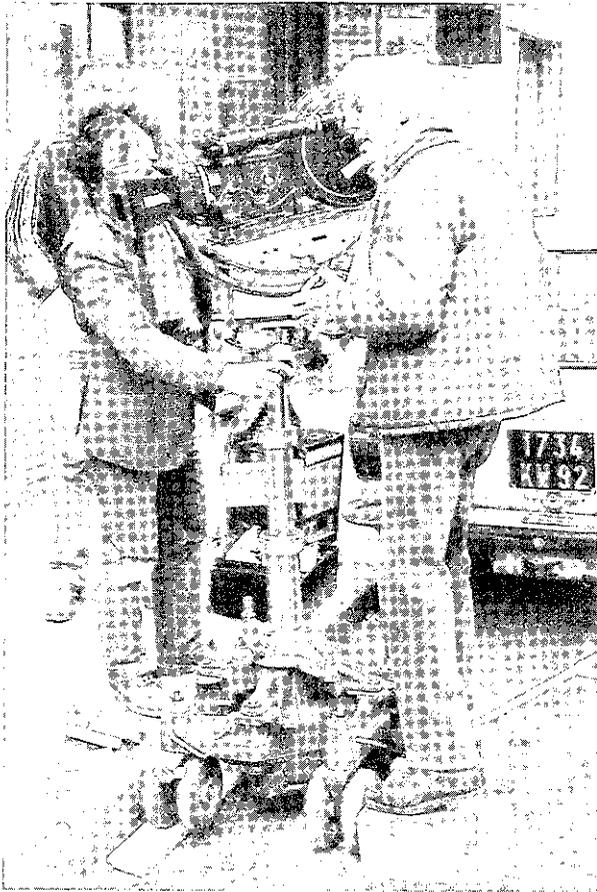
And somewhere in the expanses, each artist finds a place.

II. Bresson

The films of Robert Bresson exemplify the transcendental style in the West, but, unlike Ozu's, are estranged from their culture and are financially unsuccessful. In a medium which has been primarily intuitive, individualized, and humanistic, Bresson's work is anachronistically nonintuitive, impersonal, and iconographic.

The transcendental style in Bresson's films has not been unchronicled. Amédée Ayfre, André Bazin, and Susan Sontag have all written perceptive analyses of Bresson's "Jansenist direction," "phenomenology of salvation and grace," and his "spiritual style." The qualities of transcendental style have also been chronicled by Bresson himself. Bresson is a rarity among film-makers: he apparently knows exactly what he does and why he does it. The many statements Bresson has made in interviews and discussions, properly arranged, would constitute an accurate analysis of his films (a statement which can be made of no other film-maker to my knowledge), and any study of Bresson must take into account his astute self-criticism.

Bresson's output has been meager: nine films in twenty-seven years. Bresson's career, like Ozu's, has been one of refinement, but, unlike Ozu, he served no lengthy apprenticeship. His first film, *Les Affaires publiques* (1934), has apparently been "lost," but his second, *Les Anges du péché* (1943), displayed what one critic called a "vision almost mature."¹ After *Les Dames du Bois de Boulogne* (1944), a film which found Bresson somewhat at odds with his material, Bresson entered



Robert Bresson.

into a cycle of films which present the transcendental style at its purest. The four films of the prison cycle deal with the questions of freedom and imprisonment, or, in theological terms, of free will and predestination. "All of Bresson's films have a common theme: the meaning of confinement and liberty," Susan Sontag writes. "The imagery of the religious vocation and of crime are used jointly. Both lead to 'the cell.'"² All of Bresson's prison cycle films concern spiritual release: in *Diary of a Country Priest* (*Le Journal d'un curé de campagne*, 1951) this release occurs within the confines of a religious order; in *A Man Escaped* (*Un Condamné à mort s'est échappé*, 1956) it concurs with escape from prison; in *Pickpocket* (*Pickpocket*, 1959) it concurs with imprisonment;

in *The Trial of Joan of Arc* (*Le Procès de Jeanne d'Arc*, 1962) it occurs both within the confines of religious belief and a physical prison. Bresson's latest three films—*Au hasard Balhazar* (1966), *Mouchette* (1967), and *Une Femme douce* (1969)—have explored and expanded some of his traditional themes, but do not as yet seem (it may be too early to tell) to have achieved the resolution of the prison cycle.

Bresson's prison cycle provides an excellent opportunity to study the transcendental style in depth for several reasons: one, because the prison metaphor is endemic to certain theological questions; two, because Bresson's statements clear up much of the ambiguity in which critics are often forced to operate; and three, because there are few cultural elements intermingled with transcendental style in his films. In Ozu's films the transcendental style had to be extricated from the culture; in Bresson's films this has already happened to a large degree: Bresson is alienated from his contemporary culture.

Like Ozu, Bresson is a formalist: "A film is not a spectacle, it is in the first place a style."³ Bresson has a rigid, predictable style which varies little from film to film, subject to subject. The content has little effect on his form. Bresson applies the same ascetic style to such "appropriate" subjects as the suffering priest in *Diary of a Country Priest* as he does to such "inappropriate" subjects as the ballroom sequences in *Les Dames du Bois de Boulogne* and the love-making sequence in *Une Femme douce*. In discussing how accidents on the set can affect a director's style, Raymond Durgnat remarked, "It's no exaggeration to say that such stylists as Dreyer and Bresson would imperturbably maintain their characteristic styles if the entire cast suddenly turned up in pimples and wooden legs."⁴

Spiritual sentiments have often led to formalism. The liturgy, mass, hymns, hagiolatry, prayers, and incantations are all formalistic methods designed to express the Transcendent. Form, as was stated earlier, has the unique ability to express the Transcendent repeatedly for large and varied numbers of people. Bresson's statement on his art is also applicable to religious forms and rituals: "The subject of a film is only a pretext. Form much more than content touches a viewer and elevates him."⁵

Susan Sontag has gone so far as to say that Bresson's form "is what he wants to say,"⁶ a statement which is somewhat ambiguous because when a work of art is successful the content is indiscernible from the form. It would be more helpful to say that in Bresson's films (and in transcendental style) the form is the *operative* element—it "does the work." The subject matter becomes the vehicle (the "pretext") through which the form operates. The subject matter is not negligible; Bresson has chosen his sub-

form is content

ject very carefully, as the term "prison cycle" indicates. But in transcendental style the form *must* be the operative element, and for a very simple reason: form is the universal element whereas the subject matter is necessarily parochial, having been determined by the particular culture from which it springs. And if a work of art is to be truly transcendent (above any culture), it must rely on its universal elements. Appropriately, Bresson has set his priorities straight: "I am more occupied with the special language of the cinema than with the subject of my films."⁷

Both Ozu and Bresson are formalists in the traditional religious manner; they use form as the primary method of inducing belief. This makes the viewer an active participant in the creative process—he must react contextually to the form. Religious formalism demands a precise knowledge of audience psychology; the film-maker must know, shot for shot, how the spectator will react. "I attach enormous importance to form. Enormous. And I believe that the form leads to the rhythm. Now the rhythms are all powerful. Access to the audience is before everything else a matter of rhythm."⁸

THE TRANSCENDENTAL STYLE: THE EVERYDAY

The everyday in films has precedents in religious art; it is what one Byzantine scholar calls "surface-aesthetics."⁹ A fanatical attention to minute detail is evident in Chinese porcelain, Islamic carpets, and Byzantine architecture (*belopoeika* and *thaumatopoeike*). In the third-century Alexandrian School the study of Scripture became a matter of minute detail; the Alexandrine exegetes believed that mystic meanings could only be reached through concentration on each detail of the text.

In film, "surface-aesthetics" is the everyday, and is practiced by Bresson: "There is a nice quote from Leonardo da Vinci which goes something like this: 'Think about the surface of the work. Above all think about the surface.'¹⁰ Cinematic attention to the surface creates a documentary or quasi-documentary approach. Concerning *A Man Escaped*, Bresson told a reporter: "I really wish that it would almost be a documentary. I have kept a tone bordering upon the documentary in order to conserve this aspect of truth all the time."¹¹ A screen title to *A Man Escaped* reads, "This story actually happened. I set it down without embellishments." Similarly a title at the beginning of *The Trial of Joan of Arc* reads, "These are the authentic texts." Like the Alexandrine exegetes Bresson believes, "The supernatural in film is only the real rendered more precise. Real things seen close up."¹²

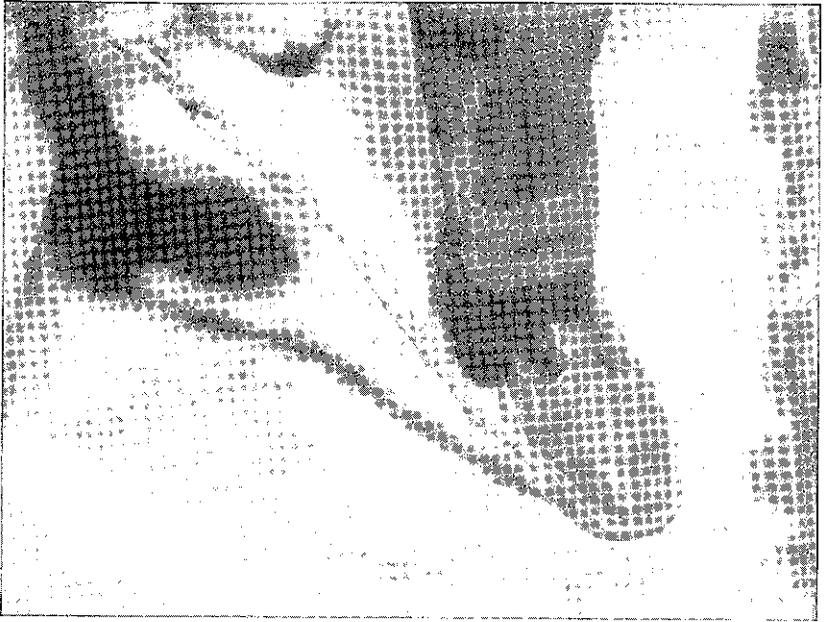
By taking all fact as reality, each fact with neither significance or connotation, Bresson creates a surface of reality. The "surface" is achieved, writes Ayfre, through "a very precise choice of details, objects and accessories; through gestures charged with an extremely solid reality."¹³ Bresson's "reality" is a celebration of the trivial: small sounds, a door creaking, a bird chirping, a wheel turning, static views, ordinary scenery, blank faces. He uses every *obvious* documentary method: actual locations—Fort Monluc in *A Man Escaped* and the Gare de Lyon in *Pickpocket*—nonactors, and "live" sound. Yet there is no desire to capture the documentary ("truth") of an event (the *cinéma-vérité*), only the surface. Bresson documents the surfaces of reality.

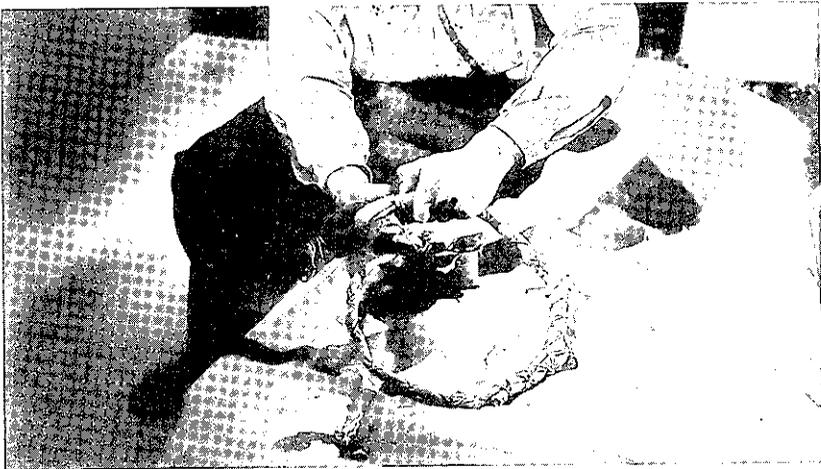
Bresson's everyday stylization consists of elimination rather than addition or assimilation. Bresson ruthlessly strips action of its significance: he regards a scene in terms of its fewest possibilities. A seeming trivial anecdote may illustrate this: while shooting a scene in *Diary of a Country Priest* Bresson instructed an assistant to have a man without a hat walk through the background of the scene. When, a short time later, the assistant told Bresson that the bareheaded man was ready, Bresson corrected him saying that he didn't want a bareheaded man, but a man without a hat.¹⁴ Bresson defines reality by what Aristotle called "privation," by the qualities that an object lacks yet has potential for. Water, for example, is defined as potential steam. In Bresson's films the bareheaded man is potentially a man with a hat, and the everyday is potentially stasis. A reality defined by privation is as desolate and without significance as one defined by nihilism, but it is also predicated upon a change. To use a scriptural metaphor, a privated universe groaneth and travaileth for its potential.

Bresson admits that the everyday is a sham: "I want to and, indeed, do make myself as much of a realist as possible, using only the raw material taken from real life. But I end up with a final realism that is not simply 'realism.'"¹⁵ The realistic surface is just that—a surface—and the raw material taken from real life is the raw material of the Transcendent.

Bresson's use of the everyday is not derived from a concern for "real life," but from an opposition to the contrived, dramatic events which pass for real life in movies. These emotional constructs—plot, acting, camerawork, editing, music—are "screens." "There are too many things that interpose themselves. There are screens."¹⁶ Screens prevent the viewer from seeing through the surface reality to the supernatural; they suppose that the external reality is self-sufficient.

—This is why Bresson's work seems so perverse to the uninitiated viewer: Bresson despises what the moviegoer likes best. His films are





The everyday in *A Man Escaped*: "The supernatural in film is only the real rendered more precise," Bresson says. "Real things seen close up."

“cold” and “dull”; they lack the vicarious excitement usually associated with the movies. Bresson, Sontag writes, “is pledged to ward off the easy pleasures of physical beauty and artifice for a pleasure which is more permanent, more edifying, more sincere”¹⁷—and the average moviegoer is unlikely to relinquish these “easy pleasures” easily. What are the “screens” and “easy pleasures” and how does Bresson ward them off?

Plot

Like Ozu, Bresson has an antipathy toward plot: “I try more and more in my films to suppress what people call plot. Plot is a novelist’s trick.”¹⁸ The plot “screen” establishes a simple, facile relationship between the viewer and event: when a spectator empathizes with an action (the hero is in danger), he can later feel smug in its resolution (the hero is saved). The viewer feels that he himself has a direct contact with the workings of life, and that it is in some manner under his control. The viewer may not know how the plot will turn out (whether the hero will be saved or not), but he knows that whatever happens the plot resolution will be a direct reaction to his feelings.

In Bresson’s films the viewer’s feelings have no effect on the outcome. *Man Escaped* would seem of all Bresson’s films the most plot-oriented; it is about a prison break. But the title dispenses with any possibility of suspense—*Un Condamné à mort s’est échappé* (a man condemned to death has escaped). In *The Trial of Joan of Arc* the viewer, of course, knows the ending, but in case of any doubt the English guard repeatedly reiterates the fact: “She will die.” “She must burn.” The events are predestined, beyond the viewer’s control and beyond—seemingly—Bresson’s.

By using plot to evoke audience empathy, a dramatist limits the ways in which he can manipulate his audience. Even if he toys with the plot, confusing the viewer’s emotions, he nonetheless restricts the result to the emotional level. “As far as I can I eliminate anything which may distract from the interior drama. For me, the cinema is an exploration within. Within the mind, the camera can do anything.”¹⁹ The internal drama is in the mind, Bresson seems to say, and emotional involvement with an external plot “distracts” from it. (There is emotional involvement with Bresson’s films, but it is the emotional involvement which follows recognition of form.)

Bresson’s films, of course, are not entirely devoid of “plot”; each has a succession of events which have a rise and fall, a tension and relaxation,

however slight. By the term "drama," however, Bresson does not mean simply the manipulation of events, but the appeal to the emotions through the manipulation of events. This sort of drama is something imposed on films; it is not endemic to the cinematic form: "Dramatic stories should be thrown out. They have nothing whatsoever to do with cinema. It seems to me that when one tries to do something dramatic with film, one is like a man who tries to hammer with a saw. Film would have been marvelous if there hadn't been dramatic art to get in the way."²⁰

Acting

Bresson's most vehement denunciations are reserved for acting: "It is for theater, a bastard art."²¹ The acting process is one of simplification; the actor modifies his personal, unfathomable complexities into relatively simple, demonstrable characteristics. "An actor, even (and above all) a talented actor gives us too simple an image of a human being, and therefore a false image."²² "We are complex. And what the actor projects is not complex."²³

An actor is primarily concerned with the character of the man he portrays. Bresson is concerned with how he can use that actor to convey a reality which is not limited to any one character. The actor's most convenient approach to a character is psychology, and Bresson despises psychology: "I do not like psychology and I try to avoid it."²⁴ Psychological acting humanizes the spiritual, "good" psychological acting even more so than "poor" psychological acting. Bresson, Bazin pointed out, is "concerned not with the psychology but with the physiology of existence."²⁵

Psychological acting is the easiest and most appealing of all the screens, and therefore Bresson must work the hardest to avoid it. If not properly restrained an actor will exert a creative force in a film—and in a Bresson film, Bresson is the only one who does the creating. "You cannot be inside an actor. It is he who creates, it is not you."²⁶

In order to reduce acting to physiology, Bresson carefully instructs his actors in nonexpressiveness. He forces the actor to sublimate his personality, to act in an automatic manner: "It is not so much a question of doing 'nothing' as some people have said. It is rather a question of performing without being aware of oneself, of not controlling oneself." Experience has proved to me that when I was the most 'automatic' in my work, I was the most moving."²⁷

Bresson's treatment of actors is remarkably similar to Ozu's, and for the same reasons.* Both strove to eliminate any expression from the actor's performance. Neither would give the actor "hints" or explain the emotions that the actor should convey, but would give only precise, physical instructions: at what angle to hold the head, when and how far to turn the wrist, and so forth. Both used repeated rehearsals to "wear down" any ingrained or intractable self-expression, gradually transforming fresh movement into rote action, expressive intonation into bland monotone. Bresson's instructions to Roland Monod, the pastor in *A Man Escaped*, explain both the method and rationale behind this theory of acting: "Forget about tone and meaning. Don't think about what you're saying; just speak the words automatically. When someone talks, he isn't thinking about the words he uses, or even about what he wants to say. Only concerned with what he is saying, he just lets the words come out, simply and directly. When you are reading, your eye just strings together black words on white paper, set out quite neutrally on the page. It's only *after* you have read the words that you begin to dress up the simple sense of the phrases with intonation and meaning—that you interpret them. The film actor should content himself with *saying* his lines. He should not allow himself to show that he already understands them. Play nothing, explain nothing. A text should be spoken as Dinu Lipatti plays Bach. His wonderful technique simply releases the notes; understanding and emotion come later."²⁸

Camerawork

A tracking shot is a moral judgment, Jean-Luc Godard once remarked, and so, for that matter, is any camera shot. Any possible shot—high angle, close-up, pan—conveys a certain attitude toward a character, a "screen" which simplifies and interprets the character. Camera angles and pictorial composition, like music, are extremely insidious screens; they can undermine a scene without the viewer's being aware of it. A slow zoom-out or a vertical composition can substantially alter the meaning of the action within a scene.

* Compare, for example, Ozu's statement about *Late Autumn* with Bresson's statements about drama and acting. "It's very easy," Ozu said, "to show emotion in drama: the actors cry or laugh and this conveys sad or happy feelings to the audience. But this is mere explanation. Can we really portray a man's personality and dignity by appealing to emotions? I want to make people feel what life is like without delineating dramatic ups and downs" ("Ozu on Ozu: The Talkies," *Cinema* 6, no. 1 [1970], p. 5).

Bresson strips the camera of its editorial powers by limiting it to one angle, one basic composition. "I change camera angles rarely. A person is not the same person if he is seen from an angle which varies greatly from the others."²⁹ Like Ozu, Bresson shoots his scenes from one unvarying height; unlike Ozu, who prefers the seated *tatami* position, Bresson places the camera at the chest level of a standing person. As in Ozu's films, the composition is primarily frontal with at least one character facing the camera, seeming caught between the audience and his environment. Again and again, the static, well-composed environment acts as a frame for the action: a character enters the frame, performs an action, and exits.

Bresson's static camerawork nullifies the camera's editorial prerogatives. When each action is handled in essentially the same nonexpressive manner, the viewer no longer looks to the angle and composition for "clues" to the action. Like all of Bresson's everyday techniques, his camerawork postpones emotional involvement; at this stage the viewer "accepts" Bresson's static compositions, yet is unable to understand their full purpose.

Similarly, Bresson avoids the self-serving "beautiful" image. "Painting taught me to make not beautiful images but necessary ones."³⁰ The beautiful image, whether attractive like *Elvira Madigan*, or gross like *Fellini Satyricon*, draws attention to itself and away from the inner drama. The beautiful image can be a screen between the spectator and the event—the pictorial images of *Adalen 31* tell the viewer more about Widenberg's idea of revolution than all his rhetoric. Bresson, on the other hand, "flattens" his images: "If you take a steam iron to your image, flattening it out, suppressing all expression by mimetism and gestures, and you put that image next to an image of the same kind, all of a sudden that image may have a violent effect on another one and both take on another appearance."³¹ André Bazin pointed out that the pictorial sumptuousness of Bernanos's *Diary of a Country Priest*—the rabbit hunts, the misty air—is most vividly conveyed in Renoir's films.³² Bresson, in his adaption of Bernanos's novel, rejected the obvious interpretation, emphasizing instead the cold factuality of the priest's environment.

Editing

Bresson's films are edited for neither emotional climax nor editorial information. Climax cutting, whether in service of a plot or self-sufficient, elicits the artificial sort of emotional involvement which Bresson studiously avoids; metaphorical editing, whether subtle or obvious, is

an editorial rather than an emotional screen, a totally artificial argument imposed from without by the film-maker. Both “interpret” the action of screen.

Like Ozu, Bresson prefers the regular, unostentatious cut. He once described *A Man Escaped* as “one long sequence” in which each shot, each event, led only to the next.³³ Bresson’s editing does not pose any artificial comparisons; each shot reflects only its own surface. “The form in Bresson’s films,” Susan Sontag writes, “is anti-dramatic, though strongly linear. Scenes are cut short, set end to end without obvious emphasis. This method of constructing the story is most rigorously observed in *The Trial of Joan of Arc*. The film is composed of static, medium shots of people talking; the scenes are the inexorable sequence of Joan’s interrogations. The principle of eliding anecdotal material is here carried to its extreme. There are no interludes of any sort. It is a very deadpan construction which puts a sharp brake on emotional involvement.”³⁴

The Soundtrack

Music and sound effects are the film maker’s most subtle tools—the viewer is seldom aware of the extent to which his feelings are being manipulated by the soundtrack. The soft beat of drums or the blare of Mexicali trumpets give the spectator a textbook of information. “The ear is more creative than the eye. If I can replace a set by a sound I prefer the sound. This gives freedom to the imagination of the public. This phenomenon helps you suggest things rather than having to show them.”³⁵

In the everyday Bresson uses contrapuntal sound not for editorializing, but to reinforce the cold reality. The soundtrack consists primarily of natural sounds: wheels creaking, birds chirping, wind howling. These minute sounds can create a sense of everyday life that the camera cannot. These “close-up” sounds are like the close-up shots of Michel’s hands in *Pickpocket*: they establish a great concern for the minutiae of life. And because the ear is more creative than the eye, they create this concern best when the camera is at a distance from its subject.

Bresson, keenly aware of the emotional and editorial potential of music, does not use it at all in the everyday, but instead restricts himself to common, “documentary” sounds. Almost any music artificially induced into the everyday would be a screen; every piece of music carries with it certain emotional/editorial intonations which would interpret the scene. (Bresson, however, does use music as Ozu does, in the decisive action and in stasis. When Bresson uses music as decisive action,

like the use of Mozart's Mass in C Minor in *A Man Escaped*, it is not editorializing but like Ozu's coda music is a blast of emotional music within a cold context.)

In the everyday Bresson replaces the "screens" with a form. By drawing attention to itself, the everyday stylization annuls the viewer's natural desire to participate vicariously in the action on screen. Everyday is not a case of making a viewer see life in a certain way, but rather preventing him from seeing it as he is accustomed to. The viewer desires to be "distracted" (in Bresson's terms), and will go to great lengths to find a screen which will allow him to interpret the action in a conventional manner. The viewer does not want to confront the Wholly Other or a form which expresses it.

The everyday blocks the emotional and intellectual exits, preparing the viewer for the moment when he must face the Unknown. The intractable form of the everyday will not allow the viewer to apply his natural interpretive devices. The viewer becomes aware that his feelings are being spurned; he is not called upon, as in most films, to make either intellectual or emotional judgments on what he sees. His feelings have neither place nor purpose in the schema of the everyday. "The effect of the spectator being aware of the form is to elongate or retard the emotions."³⁶

But moviegoers love emotional constructs, they enjoy emotional involvement with artificial screens, and one can only sympathize with the viewer who storms out of *Diary of a Country Priest* for the same reason he storms out of Warhol's *Sleep*—it's just too "boring." Although the irate viewer's attitude is understandable, his perception is poor. He has mistaken the everyday for transcendental style, and has only seen a fraction of the film. The viewer who stays recognizes that there is more than the everyday, that Bresson has put a strangely suspicious quality into his day-to-day living. The viewer's emotions have been superficially rejected, but they have been simultaneously tantalized by the disparity.

Strangely
suspicious
quality

THE TRANSCENDENTAL STYLE: DISPARITY

One of the dangers of the everyday is that it may become a screen in itself, a style rather than a stylization, an end rather than a means. The everyday eliminates the obvious emotional constructs but tacitly posits a rational one: that the world is predictable, ordered, cold. Disparity undermines the rational construct.

Disparity injects a "human density" into the unfeeling everyday, an unnatural density which grows and grows until, at the moment of deci-

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sive action, it reveals itself to be a spiritual density. In the initial steps of disparity Ozu and Bresson use different techniques to suggest a suspicious and emotional quality in the cold environment. Because Ozu's everyday stylization is more "polite" in the traditional Zen manner than Bresson's, Ozu can use what Sato called a "break in the geometrical balance" to create disparity. Ozu also makes more use of character ambivalence than Bresson does (possibly because of Ozu's background in light comedy), but both employ irony. Bresson, unlike Ozu, uses "doubling," an overemphasis of the everyday, to create disparity. Both, however, create disparity by giving their characters a sense of something deeper than themselves and their environment, a sense which culminates in the decisive action. All the techniques of disparity cast suspicion on everyday reality and suggest a need, although not a place, for emotion.

Bresson overemphasizes the everyday through what Susan Sontag calls "doubling." Through the use of repeated action and pleonastic dialogue Bresson "doubles" (or even "triples") the action, making a single event happen several times in different ways. For example, in *Pickpocket* Michel makes a daily entry into his diary. Bresson first shows the entry being written into the diary, then he has Michel read the entry over the soundtrack, "I sat in the lobby of one of the great banks of Paris." Then Bresson shows Michel actually going into one of the great banks of Paris and sitting in the lobby. The viewer has experienced the same event in three ways: through the printed word, the spoken word, and the visual action.

Bresson's favorite "doubling" technique is interior narration. In *Diary of a Country Priest*, *A Man Escaped*, and *Pickpocket* the main character narrates the on-screen action in a deadpan narration which is often only an audio replay of what the viewer has already witnessed. In *Diary of a Country Priest* the priest calls anxiously on the Vicar of Torcy. The housekeeper answers, obviously informing the priest that the vicar is not at home. The door closes and the priest leans dejectedly against it. When we hear the priest's voice, "I was so disappointed, I had to lean against the door." In *A Man Escaped* the order is reversed: first Fontaine narrates, "I slept so soundly the guard had to awaken me." Then the guard walks into his cell and says, "Get up."

Interior narration is customarily used to broaden the viewer's knowledge or feelings about an event. In Ophüls's *Letter from an Unknown Woman* and Lean's *Brief Encounter*, for example, the heroines recount their romantic experiences through narration. In each case the reflective and sensitive female voice is used as a counterpart to the harsh "male"

world of action. The contrast between "female" and "male," sound and sight, narration and action expands the viewer's attitude toward the situation. Bresson, however, uses interior narration for the opposite reason: his narration does not give the viewer any new information or feelings, but only reiterates what he already knows. The viewer is conditioned to expect "new" information from narration; instead, he gets only a cold reinforcement of the everyday.

When the same thing starts happening two or three times concurrently the viewer knows he is beyond simple day-to-day realism and into the peculiar realism of Robert Bresson. The doubling does not double the viewer's knowledge or emotional reaction; it only doubles his perception of the event. Consequently, there is a schizoid reaction: one, there is the sense of meticulous detail which is a part of the everyday, and two, because the detail is doubled there is an emotional queasiness, a growing suspicion of the seemingly "realistic" rationale behind the everyday. If it is "realism," why is the action doubled, and if it isn't realism, why this obsession with details?

"The doublings," Sontag concludes, "both arrest and intensify the ordinary emotional sequence."³⁷ That statement, like many by Sontag, is both astute and baffling, and the perceptive reader will immediately ask "How?" and "Why?," questions which Sontag doesn't attempt to answer. The above description may partially explain Sontag's perceptions. The "emotional sequence" is arrested because of the everyday stylization (the blocking of screens); it is intensified because of the disparity (the suspicion that the film-maker may not be interested in "reality" after all). The viewer's mood becomes wary, expectant.

Techniques like doubling cast suspicion on the everyday, and the next step of disparity goes farther: it tries to evoke a "sense" of something Wholly Other within the cold environment, a sense which gradually alienates the main character from his solid position within the everyday. Jean Sémolué has distinguished three levels of such alienation in *Diary of a Country Priest*: (1) sickness: the priest and his body, (2) social solitude: the priest and his parishioners, (3) sacred solitude: the priest and the world of sin.³⁸ The young priest is unable to relate to any of the elements in his environment; even nature, which does not figure in Sémolué's schema, seems hostile to the suffering priest as he collapses under the gray sky and tall, dark barren trees. At this level Bresson's theme would seem to fit his pseudodocumentary everyday technique: the unending conflict between man and environment is one of the cardinal themes of documentary art.

But the conflict is more complicated than it at first seems. The source of this alienation does not seem to be intrinsic to the priest (his neurosis, misanthropy, or paranoia) or to his environment (antagonistic parishioners, inclement weather), but seems to originate from a greater, external source. The priest is the frail vehicle of an overwhelming passion which in the context of *Diary of a Country Priest* is called the Holy Agony (*la Sainte Agonie*). Little by little, as if moving down the Way of the Cross, the priest comes to realize that he carries a special weight, a weight which he finally accepts: "It is not enough that Our Lord should have granted me the grace of letting me know today, through the words of my old teacher, that nothing, throughout eternity, can remove me from the place chosen for me from all eternity, that I was the prisoner of His Sacred Passion."

As in Ozu's films, the passion in *Diary of a Country Priest* is greater than a man can bear, more than his environment can receive. The young priest's cross of spiritual awareness gradually alienates him from his surroundings and eventually leads to his death.

The levels of alienation demonstrated by Sémolué are actually extensions of the Holy Agony. In fact, what seems to be a rejection by the environment is more accurately a rejection by the priest—and not because he wishes to estrange himself, but because he is the unwilling (at first) instrument of an overwhelming and self-mortifying passion.

1. Sickness. The priest's illness seems factual enough: his health slowly wanes and finally fails him because of what is eventually diagnosed as stomach cancer. But there is a complication: the more ill he becomes the more adamantly the priest refuses to take nourishment or rest. He feels himself condemned by the weight he must bear, and associates his agony with the sacrificial agony of Christ. His need for atonement drives him to self-mortification. He eats only small portions of bread dipped in wine, an alcoholic parody of the sacrament. He ignores the needs of the flesh, exerting himself until the moment of death. The physical pain seems to be real enough, but its source is ambiguous; is it cancer or the spiritual malady?

2. Social solitude. The priest's ministry is a failure. He is timid and inept; his parishioners are antagonistic—or so it seems. But it is uncertain whether the priest is actually unfit for the priesthood or whether his devouring passion blocks any attempt at ministry. At first the priest seems unduly paranoid; he thinks his parishioners dislike him. Then he receives an anonymous note, "A person of good intentions advises you to request your transfer. . . ." But the premonition comes first: it is as if the priest willed to be unwanted. The country community at first had no



The sacred solitude of the country priest: "What seems to be a rejection by the environment is more accurately a rejection by the priest—and not because he wishes to estrange himself, but because he is the unwilling instrument of an overwhelming and self-mortifying passion."

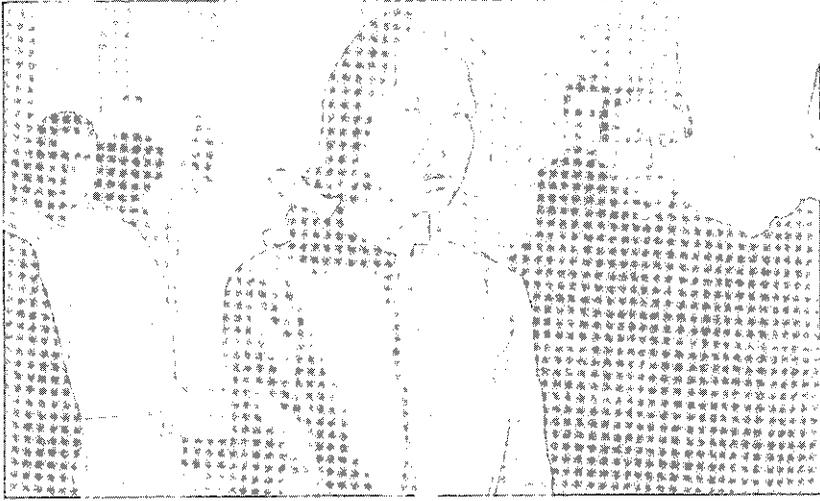
more hostility toward him than they would have had toward any new young priest, but the priest's melancholy turns them against him. After an unsuccessful catechism class the priest enters in his diary, "But why the hostility of these little ones. What have I done to them?" His religious obsession has led him to believe that the mischievous children are against him. The priest's agony alienates the community, and it is an agony which he seems unable to control.

3. Sacred solitude. The priest is unable to cope with the world of sin, either in himself or others. The normal recourse of a Christian, prayer, is not open to him. "Never have I strived so much to pray," he writes. And later: "I have never felt with so much violence the physical revolt against prayer." He is able to bring peace to others, yet has none himself. This is the miracle of the empty hands: "How wonderful that we can give others a peace which we ourselves do not possess. Oh, the miracle of our empty hands." His holy agony allows him none of the temporal means of release which Church, society, and body provide. None of the temporal metaphors can satisfy his passion, so he progresses inexorably toward the metaphor of martyrdom.

On each level the priest's alienation originates in neither the environment nor himself, but in an overpowering, transcendental passion. The melancholy priest earnestly desires to be like his peers ("My God," he writes of the Vicar of Torcy, "how I would wish to have his health, his stability"), but an irresistible force drives him further and further away from them. If the origin of this holy agony is not natural (human or environmental), it is of necessity supernatural.

Bresson's protagonists, like the country priest, cannot find metaphors capable of expressing their agony. They are condemned to estrangement: nothing on earth will placate their inner passion, because their passion does not come from earth. Therefore they do not respond to their environment, but instead to that sense of the Other which seems much more immediate. Hence the disparity; the Bresson protagonist lives in an all-inclusive cold, factual environment, yet rather than adapting to that environment, he responds to something totally separate from it.

It is a shock when Joan of Arc answers her corrupt inquisitors with sincerity, forthrightness, honesty, and complete disregard for her personal safety—she is not responding to her environment in a 1:1 ratio. She answers her judges as if she were instead speaking to her mysterious, transcendental "voices." Similarly, in *A Man Escaped* Fontaine's desire to escape surpasses any normal prisoner motivation. He is nothing but



Disparity in *The Trial of Joan of Arc*: "It is a shock when Joan answers her corrupt inquisitors with sincerity, forthrightness, honesty, and complete disregard for her personal safety—she is not responding to her environment in a 1:1 ratio. She answers her judges as if she were instead speaking to her transcendental 'voices.'"

an embodied Will to Escape; the viewer only sees him as a prisoner whose every breath strives to be free. Throughout the film Fontaine wears a ragged, filthy, and bloody shirt, and when he finally receives a package of new clothes, the viewer rejoices (or wants to rejoice) for him. Instead of trying the new clothes on, Fontaine immediately tears them up to make ropes. To Fontaine's mind (as defined by "privation") the package did not contain new clothes at all, but potential ropes. Another prisoner, who had the desire but not the passion to be free, would have used the old clothes as ropes. Fontaine's obsession is his definitive quality, and it is greater than the desire to be inside or outside of those prison walls. The prison at Fort Montluc is only the objective correlative for Fontaine's passion. In *Pickpocket*, Michel's pickpocketing has the same familiar obsessive quality; it is neither sociologically nor financially motivated, but instead is a Will to Pickpocket. And when Michel renounces pickpocketing for the love of Jeanne, his motivation is again ill-defined. The viewer senses that Michel's overburdening passion has been transferred to Jeanne, but still does not know its source.

In each case Bresson's protagonists respond to a special call which has no natural place in their environment. It is incredible that Joan the

prisoner should act in such a manner before a panel of judges: nothing in the everyday has prepared the viewer for Joan's spiritual, self-mortifying actions. Each protagonist struggles to free himself from his everyday environment, to find a proper metaphor for his passion. This struggle leads Michel to prison, Fontaine to freedom, and the priest and Joan to martyrdom.

The viewer finds himself in a dilemma: the environment suggests documentary realism, yet the central character suggests spiritual passion. This dilemma produces an emotional strain: the viewer wants to empathize with Joan (as he would for any innocent person in agony), yet the everyday structure warns him that his feelings will be of no avail. Bresson seems acutely aware of this: "It seems to me that the emotion here, in this trial (and in this film), should come not so much from the agony and death of Joan as from the strange air that we breathe while she talks of her Voices, or the crown of the angel, just as she would talk of one of us or this glass carafe."³⁹ This "strange air" is the product of disparity: spiritual density within a factual world creates a sense of emotional weight within an unfeeling environment. As before, disparity suggests the need, but not the place, for emotions.*

The secret of transcendental style is that it can both prevent a runoff of superficial emotions (through everyday) and simultaneously sustain those same emotions (through disparity). The very detachment of emotion, whether in primitive art or Brecht, intensifies the potential emotional experience. ("Emotion cannot be projected without order and restraint."⁴⁰) And emotion will out. The trigger to that emotional release occurs during the final stage of disparity, decisive action, and it serves to freeze the emotional into expression, the disparity into stasis.

Before the final stage of disparity, however, Bresson, like Ozu, derives ironic humor from his characters and their alienated surroundings. Irony, in fact, is almost unavoidable—Bresson's characters are so totally alienated from their environment. The country priest's paranoia is cru-

* One can never be sure of audience reactions, but even Eric Rhode, in his argument against Bresson's religious phenomenology, makes the same point: "The Naturalism of Bresson's motifs puts an irresistible pressure on us to expect the usual sorts of explanation for behaviour; but Bresson often ignores motives, quite deliberately. We never learn why Fontaine is imprisoned, why the country priest is snubbed by his parishioners, why Michel is able to go abroad without a passport. These are only a few of the many motives withheld. Because of this unresolved pressure, his heroes arouse a considerable unease in me." Precisely. Rhode also realizes that "many of his paradoxes vanish once we make the often unconscious leap into thinking along his lines," but rejects what he terms the "hey presto' of Grace" (*Tower of Babel* [London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1966], pp. 41-43).

cial, obsessive—and ridiculous. When Olivier, a foreign legionnaire on leave, offers the priest a ride to the railroad station on his motorbike, the priest reluctantly accepts and then feels the exhilaration of the ride. He then states to himself, with no hint of self-parody, that he has been allowed to taste the pleasures of youth only so his sacrifice will be more complete. Bresson also uses understatement as an ironic commentary on his characters. In *A Man Escaped* Fontaine spends every possible moment hiding and disguising his means of escape. When it appears that his cell will be searched, his plan discovered, and he executed, Fontaine says in deadpan interior narration, “I dreaded the thought of a search.”

Irony makes it possible for a film-maker to create disparity over a period of time. If a viewer does not want to completely accept the dilemma of disparity (and few do), he does not have to reject it outright but can take an ironic attitude—which is essentially a wait-and-see attitude. Such a viewer can look at the disparity from an ironic distance, seeing its tensions and humor, and does not have to commit himself. Like the disparity which produces it, irony is a technique designed to hold the spectator in the theater until the final decisive action—which does demand commitment.

The decisive action is an incredible event within the ban structure. The prescript rules of everyday fall away; there is a blast of music, an overt symbol, and an open call for emotion. The act demands commitment by the viewer (the central character has already committed himself), and without commitment there can be no stasis.

In *Diary of a Country Priest* the decisive action is the priest's death, when his frail body falls from the frame and the camera holds on a blatant symbol: the shadow of the cross cast on a wall. In *A Man Escaped* it is the nocturnal escape, with its concomitant and all-important acceptance of grace in the person of Jost. In *Pickpocket* it is Michel's imprisonment and his inexplicable expression of love for Jeanne. In *The Trial of Joan of Arc* it is Joan's martyrdom, when the camera holds on the symbol of the charred stake, which is preceded by the inexplicable symbols of the flying dove and three ringing bells.

Before these decisive actions there have been “decisive moments” which anticipate the final act. In these moments, Sémolué writes, the “hero realizes that he is right to desire what he desires, and from then on identifies himself more and more with his passion.”⁴¹ (The final decisive action is more audience-oriented: the viewer must then face the dilemma of the protagonist.) As in Ozu's early codas, these decisive moments are characterized by a blast of music. In *A Man Escaped* each

interlude of Mozart's Mass in C Minor becomes a decisive moment. As in Ozu's codas, there is nothing on screen to properly receive such a burst of emotion-inducing music. On ten occasions Fontaine and his fellow prisoners rotely walk across the courtyard, emptying their slop buckets to the accompaniment of Mozart's Mass. "In *A Man Escaped* there was no direct relationship between image and music. But the music of Mozart gave the life in prison the value of ritual."⁴² Joan's regular walk back and forth from her cell, accompanied by overloud door-latchings, creates the same sort of coda in *The Trial of Joan of Arc*, as do the lyrical sequences of pickpocketing in *Pickpocket*. Each of these moments call for an unexpected emotional involvement and prefigure the final decisive action.

Pickpocket is the only film of the prison cycle which does not overtly discuss religious values, yet it is nonetheless a good example of the role of the decisive action within transcendental style. There is no invocation of the spiritual as in *Country Priest* and *Joan of Arc*, no debate of grace as in *A Man Escaped*, yet there is transcendental style, and the decisive action is the "miraculous" element within it. *Pickpocket* opens with the familiar everyday stylization: Michel is a pickpocket within a cold factual world. He displays no human feeling, either for his dying mother or for Jeanne, a family friend. He does, however, have a passion: pickpocketing. His obsession with pickpocketing goes beyond the normal interests of crime and questions of morality. In one of his discussions with the police inspector he contends that some men are above the law. "But how do they know who they are?" the inspector asks. "They ask themselves," Michel replies. Michel's passion, in the ways previously mentioned, creates a growing sense of disparity. Then, in a somewhat abrupt ending, Michel is apprehended and imprisoned. The police had been lying in wait at Longchamp for Michel for some time, and it is uncertain at the moment of his capture whether he was captured unaware or whether he willingly let himself be captured. In the final scene, Michel, who has led the "free" life of crime, is now in jail. Jeanne comes to visit him in prison and he, in a totally unexpected gesture, kisses her through the bars saying, "How long it has taken me to come to you." It is a "miraculous" event: the expression of love by an unfeeling man within an unfeeling environment, the transference of his passion from pickpocketing to Jeanne.

The decisive action forces the viewer into the confrontation with the Wholly Other he would normally avoid. He is faced with an explicable spiritual act within a cold environment, an act which now requests his participation and approval. Irony can no longer postpone his decision.



The decisive action in *Pickpocket*: "How long it has taken me to come to you."

It is a "miracle" which must be accepted or rejected.

The decisive action has a unique effect on the viewer, which may be hypothesized thus: the viewer's feelings have been consistently shunned throughout the film (everyday), yet he still has "strange" undefined feelings (disparity). The decisive action then demands an emotional commitment which the viewer gives instinctively, naturally (he wants to share Hirayama's tears, Michel's love). But having given that commitment, the viewer must now do one of two things: he can reject his feelings and refuse to take the film seriously, or he can accommodate his thinking to his feelings. If he chooses the latter, he will, having been given no emotional constructs by the director, have constructed his own "screen." He creates a translucent, mental screen through which he can cope with both his feelings and the film. This screen may be very simple. In the case of *Pickpocket* it could be that people such as Michel and Jeanne have spirits which have deep spiritual connections, and they need no earthly rationale for their love. In *Diary of a Country Priest* it could be that there is such a thing as the Holy Agony, and the tormented priest was its victim. Bresson uses the viewer's own natural defenses, his protective mechanism, to cause him, of his own free will, to come to the identical decision Bresson had predetermined for him.

Bresson calls this the moment of "transformation": "There must, at a certain moment, be a transformation; if not, there is no art."⁴³ At the

moment of transformation all the stripped, flat images, dialogue, camerawork, and sound effects unite to create a new screen, the one formed by the spectator: "I have noticed that the flatter the image is, the less it expresses, the more easily it is transformed in contact with other images. . . . It is necessary for the images to have something in common, to participate in a sort of union."⁴⁴

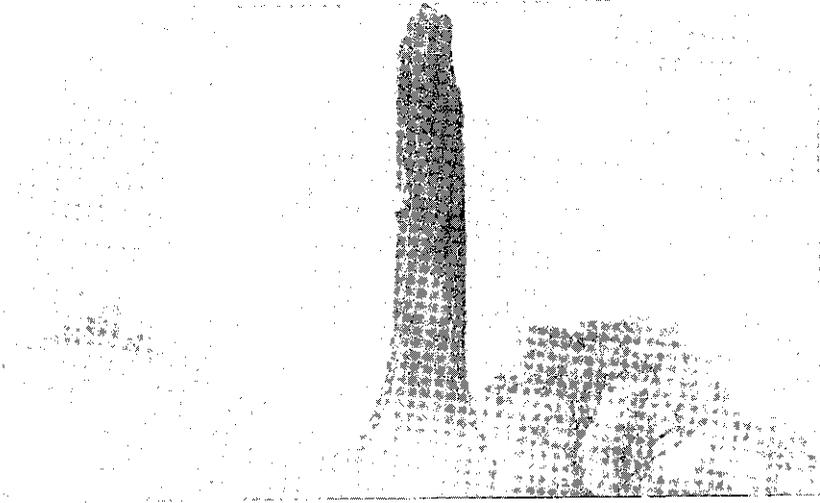
Music, as opposed to sound effects, is one of the vital elements of this transformation: "I use music as a means of transformation of what is on the screen."⁴⁵ Music, properly used, "can transport us into a region that is no longer simply terrestrial, but rather cosmic, I would even say divine."⁴⁶ Music, the "miraculous" event, and the overt symbol are components of the decisive action, which can effect a "transformation" in the spectator's mind.

This "transformation" does not resolve *disparity*, it accepts it. Disparity is the paradox of the spiritual existing within the physical, and it cannot be "resolved" by any earthly logic or human emotions. It must, as the decisive action makes inescapably clear, be accepted or rejected. If the viewer accepts the decisive action (and disparity), he accepts through his mental construct a view of life which can encompass both. On screen this is represented by stasis.

TRANSCENDENTAL STYLE: STASIS

Stasis is the quiescent, frozen, or hieratic scene which succeeds the decisive action and closes the film. It is a still re-view of the external world intended to suggest the oneness of all things. In *Diary of a Country Priest* it is the shadow of the cross, in *A Man Escaped* it is the long shot of the darkened street with Fontaine and Jost receding in the distance, in *Pickpocket* it is Michel's imprisoned face, in *The Trial of Joan of Arc* it is the charred stump of the stake.

This static view represents the "new" world in which the spiritual and the physical can coexist, still in tension and unresolved, but as part of a larger scheme in which all phenomena are more or less expressive of a larger reality—the Transcendent. In stasis, the viewer is able to crossinterpret between what seemed to be contradictions: he can read deep emotion into the inexpressive faces and cold environment, and he can read factuality into the inexplicable spiritual actions. The charred stake in *Joan of Arc* is still a physical entity, but it is also the spiritual expression of Joan's martyrdom. In short it is—as we shall see—an icon.



Stasis: the final shot of *The Trial of Joan of Arc*. "The charred stake in *Joan of Arc* is still a physical entity, but it is also the spiritual expression of Joan's martyrdom. In short, it is an icon."

The term "transcendent" may seem to some an exaggerated description of the effect of Bresson's stasis, and although Bresson never nails down his intentions to any specific term, it seems quite clear that the Transcendent is what he has in mind: "In *A Man Escaped* I tried to make the audience feel these extraordinary currents which existed in the German prisons of the Resistance, the presence of something or someone unseen; a hand that directs all."⁴⁷ And again, "I would like in my films to be able to render perceptible to an audience a feeling of a man's soul and also the presence of something superior to man which can be called God."⁴⁸ Whether that "something superior" is called "extraordinary currents," "the invisible hand," or "God," it transcends immanent experience and may be called, if only for practical purposes, the Transcendent.

The moment the viewer creates his own screen, the moment he accepts disparity, Bresson has accomplished not only the task of the artist, but the task of the evangelist and iconographer as well. The evangelist is theoretically a man who evokes a conversion not by his own sophistry but by bringing the listener into contact with the divine. The transcendental style, neither magical nor ineffable in its techniques, hopes similarly to bring the viewer into contact with that transcendent ground of being—into stasis.

But just “how” does this come about? Why is it possible for a viewer, at one point, to “accept” disparity? These questions are very tricky and to some degree unanswerable. It has, I think, something fundamentally to do with the fact that disparity is an emotional experience (an “emotional strain”), whereas stasis is an expression of the Transcendent. It is not really possible to “accept” an emotional strain (or else it would no longer be a strain), but it is possible to accept an expression which includes tensional elements. And for this reason the above questions must be in the final account unanswerable. It is possible to postulate how the human emotions react to upsetting experience, but no one has ever given a satisfactory account of how the human psyche perceives a form of artistic expression.

How does experience turn to expression and return to experience? All the aestheticians who adhere to an expression theory of art have addressed themselves to this question in one way or another, and I have nothing unique to add to their debate. (In fact, the concept of transcendental style is more useful if seen from within the context of preexisting aesthetic systems; it can be thought of as form, symbol, or expression.) John Dewey, who studied the experience-expression-experience puzzle in depth, felt that emotions served to catalyze aesthetic expression: “In the development of an expressive act, the emotion operates like a magnet drawing to itself appropriate material: appropriate because it has an experienced emotional affinity for the state of mind already moving.”⁴⁹ Emotions are vehicles through which the artist must act; he teases and trains the emotions until they are transformed into an expression “distinctively aesthetic.”

This is pretty much, I think, the way transcendental style works. Through everyday and disparity it concurrently flaunts and tantalizes the emotions, placing the viewer under a growing emotional strain which culminates in the decisive action. Man’s natural impulse for emotional stability abets the transcendental style in its effort to achieve stasis. The emotions are active; in a desire to comprehend the disparity they continually attempt to outflank the everyday. The decisive action is a carefully planned cul-de-sac for this emotional activity. It simultaneously appeals to the emotions and makes the viewer aware of their futility. This necessitates a conscious, aesthetic solution to an emotionally irresolvable dilemma. Once that aesthetic perception is made, transcendental style is no longer an experience but an expression. The emotions have proved unreliable and the mind somehow recognizes this. This purging of the emotions permits the aesthetic facility of the psyche to

operate. And it can recognize transcendental style for what it is—a form designed to express the Transcendent. Then, after the expression is complete and the work of art has finished its task, the viewer can return to a life of experience, feeling the “new” emotions which result from aesthetic participation.

One can never fully answer “how” stasis is achieved. Critical method has pursued the ineffable as far as it can; Roger Fry’s “gulf of mysticism” yawns wide open. If transcendental style really is a hierophany, if there really is a Transcendent, then the critic can never fully comprehend how it operates in art. He can recognize the Transcendent, he can study those methods which brought him to that realization, but that actual “why” of that realization is a mystery. Bresson’s protagonists cannot reveal those reasons: Bresson’s characters, Ayfre writes, “even in their most extreme confidences, never reveal anything but their mystery—like God himself.” Bresson cannot reveal it: Ayfre continues, “these are people whose ultimate secret is not only beyond the viewer, but beyond Bresson himself.”⁵⁰ The final “why” of transcendental style is a mystery even to its creator: “I wanted to show this miracle: an invisible hand over the prison, directing what happens and causing such and such a thing to succeed for one and not for another . . . the film is a mystery.”⁵¹ If successful, Bresson would probably be willing, like the traditional religious artist, to give co-credit to the divine. A spiritual artist can predict how an audience will react to a specific form, whether it be the mass or transcendental style, but at the moment of stasis, when art merges with mysticism, he can only, in Sontag’s words, “be patient and as empty as possible.”⁵² “The audience must feel that I go toward the unknown, that I do not know what will happen when I arrive.”⁵³

In a successful work of art human experience is transformed into human expression, both personal and cultural; in a successful transcendental work of art the human forms of expression are transcended by a universal form of expression. The static view at the close of Ozu’s and Bresson’s films is a microcosm for the transcendental style itself: a frozen form which expresses the Transcendent—a movie hierophany.

PRETEXTS

Until stasis the influence of personality and culture are for Bresson, as for Ozu, pervasive. Bresson calls the subject matter a “pretext” for the form, but until the form is fully achieved in stasis, the “pretexts” weigh

heavily on the viewer's mind. Form is the operative element in Bresson's films, but it operates through personality and culture and is necessarily influenced by them. Transcendental style is as much influenced by Bresson's cultural traditions as it is by Zen culture. Transcendental style is a common formalistic solution to similar problems in individual cultures, and before a viewer can appreciate the solution he must experience the problems.

The remainder of this chapter on Bresson will consider some of the "pretexts" of Bresson's work: his personality, his cultural traditions— theological, aesthetic, and artistic—and his synthesis of those traditions. It is easier for a Western viewer to recognize Bresson's use of culture than Ozu's. He may find the moods of the *furyu* indistinguishable, but he knows or easily understands the nuances of Western theology and aesthetics. In each case Ozu and Bresson utilize their parochial characteristics, reducing them to their common element: form.

BRESSON AND HIS PERSONALITY

Considered by itself Bresson's "personality" can be misleading. To some of Bresson's critics, both admirers and detractors, he is not only the consummate stylist but also the consummate oddball: morbid, hermetic, eccentric, obsessed with theological dilemmas in an age of social action. He is a cultural reactionary and an artistic revolutionary—and the secret to this paradox lies somewhere within his curious inner logic. Considered solely in terms of his personality, Bresson becomes an obsessive religious fanatic, a tortured, brooding, Romantic figure who because of religious training, prisoner-of-war experiences, or guilt obsession is forced to live out his neuroses on screen.

This confusion results because Bresson, unlike Ozu, has become alienated from his contemporary culture. His immediate culture has had virtually no influence on his work. Bresson's asceticism is certainly at odds with the movie tradition which has zealously celebrated every aspect of the physical. And his concern for spirituality, free will, predestination, and grace is only an oblique comment on contemporary French society. Bresson is today what Ozu will be in the Japan of the near future, an artist alienated from his cultural environment.

But Bresson is not simply a displaced person, a suicidal neurotic, or an eccentric genius; he is also, and more importantly, a representative of a different and older culture which may not be immediately obvious to

the modern viewer but is not irrelevant either. This older culture had a well-grounded theology and aesthetic which provided not only for the role of the individual artist, but also for the function of art in a universal, multicultural sphere. Seen from these traditions, Bresson is not neurotic or eccentric, but a self-conscious artist who has assigned himself a near-impossible task: to update an older aesthetic into a contemporary form.

In the light of this older culture, Bresson's "personality" is not unique or important. Both Ozu and Bresson were soldiers, but of the two only Bresson utilized his war experiences (as a prisoner) in his films, not just because he was different from Ozu, but because the prison metaphor is inherent to his theological tradition. Bresson may be a suicidal, hermetic person, but these are also characteristics of the culture he works from within.

The more a critic realizes Bresson's theological and aesthetic underpinnings, the further he shies away from a purely psychological interpretation of Bresson's "personality." Bresson's personality, like those of his characters, becomes increasingly identified with his passion (or in Coomaraswamy's terms, his "thesis"). At the close of *Country Priest* the priest "gives up" his body, metamorphosing into the image of the cross; in a similar manner it may be said that Bresson's personality is enveloped by transcendental style. There are many precedents in religious art for such an approach; religious artists were often required to live out the virtues they portrayed. The Stoglav Council of 1551 decreed that the Russian iconographer should "be pure and decorous."⁵⁴ Fra Angelico, in his only recorded statement, wrote, "Art requires much calm and to paint the things of Christ one must live with Christ."⁵⁵ More recently Jacques Maritain stated, "Christian work would have the artist, as man, a saint."⁵⁶ If Bresson desires to create saints in art, tradition holds, he must become "saintly" himself, submitting his personality to the transcendent passion. In the context of his theological and aesthetic culture Bresson's personality has little value. Like the country priest's it is vain, neurotic, morbid. It only has value to the extent that it can transcend itself.

There is, however, another way one can speak of Bresson's personality (without, as was previously stated, resorting to a Jungian definition), and that is as his personal contribution to the culture from which he operates, his peculiar synthesis of his theological and artistic traditions. This will be considered in a later section.

THE THEOLOGICAL TRADITION:
THE PRISON METAPHOR

The prison metaphor is endemic to Western thought. Western theories, whether theological, psychological, or political, are inevitably couched in terms of freedom and restraint. On the theological level, the prison metaphor is linked to the fundamental body/soul dichotomy, a linkage which is made by the wellsprings of Western thought: both Plato and the Scriptures. Shortly before his death Socrates describes his body as the "soul's prison."⁵⁷ To St. Paul the body of sin is prison; he is a man in "captivity to the law of sin which is in my members. O wretched man that I am! Who shall deliver me from the body of this death" (Rom. 7:23-24). (In Christianity, however, there is redemption, after which the body becomes "the temple of the Holy" [I Cor. 6:19] and Paul becomes the "prisoner of the Lord" [Eph. 4:1].) The prison metaphor in Christianity is summed up by Calvin's statement that at death "the soul is freed from the prison house of the body."⁵⁸

On one level the prison metaphor is a relatively straightforward representation of the body/soul conflict. His characters gradually relinquish their bodies, much in the same way Fontaine escapes prison step by step. The prison house of the body is the last impediment to the soul's emancipation. Joan of Arc puts her faith in Christ and St. Michael half hoping, half expecting that they will come to her aid, "even if by a miracle." But when she realizes that the "miracle" of her escape will in fact be her martyrdom, she retracts her false confession and chooses death, stating, "I'd rather die than endure this suffering." The night before her execution she is given communion and questioned by Brother Isambart. "Do you believe that this is the body of Christ?" he asks. "Yes, and the only one who can deliver me," she replies. "Don't you have hope in the Lord?" Isambart asks a short time later, and Joan replies, "Yes, and with God's help I shall be in Paradise." Joan's deliverance becomes her death, and her escape from prison is the escape from her body.

As the body becomes identified with the prison, there is a natural tendency toward self-mortification. The country priest mortifies his body and at the moment of death surrenders himself into the hands of God. In *Pickpocket* the metaphor is reversed; Michel's prison is crime, his freedom is in jail. His is also a self-mortification, but it does not lead to death. Fontaine is the only one of Bresson's prison cycle protagonists who does not actively persecute himself, although his habits are rather ascetic. The freedom of his body coincides with the freedom of his soul,

and this unique occurrence is the result of grace, a theme which Bresson handles in depth in *A Man Escaped*.

Intertwined with the abjuration of the body in Bresson's films is the vexing problem of suicide: If the body enslaves the soul, why not destroy the body and be free? St. Ambrose stated the case quite clearly: "Let us die, if we may leave, or if we be denied leave, yet let us die. God cannot be offended with this, when we use it for a remedy,"⁵⁹ and Augustine and Aquinas rushed to counter the argument. Marvin Zeman, in an essay on suicide in Bresson's films, has demonstrated that Bresson, particularly in his later films, has come to associate himself with a radical wing of Christianity (including, among others, St. Ambrose, John Donne, George Bernanos) which regards suicide as a positive good.⁶⁰

In the prison cycle the natural suicidal extension of the prison metaphor is already evident. Both the country priest and Joan "give up" their lives (as Christ did on the cross) but do not die by their own hand. A suicide in *Country Priest* presents St. Ambrose's case, a case which grows stronger in *Au hasard Balthazar*, *Mouchette*, and *Une Femme douce*: the countess has been contemplating suicide, but lacks the courage. The country priest in a long dark night of the soul brings her to a faith in God, whereupon she commits suicide. The implication is clear: the countess, having found salvation, was now "free" to die. Upon learning of her suicide the priest himself feels the temptation of suicide, although he has already chosen a more subtle course.

The prison metaphor gains in complexity and depth as Bresson extends it to the theological paradox of predestination and free will. The body/soul conflict is a dichotomy for Bresson: he prefers the soul to the body, even to the point of death; whereas the predestination/free will conflict is a paradox, it cannot be resolved by death but has to be accepted on faith. Predestination/free will is a complex and contradictory concept, and Bresson's prison metaphor adapts to this complexity. Predestinarianism, as taught to varying degrees by Augustine, Aquinas, Calvin, and Jansen, holds that man, having been previously chosen by God, is now able to choose God of his own free will. Man becomes "free" by "choosing" the predetermined will of God. God is Truth, the Truth makes you free, and freedom is choosing God. It's a neat jungle of logic which seems quite preposterous from the outside; yet from the inside, accepting certain theological givens, it is the natural thing to do.

Bresson's prison metaphor allows for this complexity. In his films man's "freedom" consists of being a "prisoner of the Lord" rather than a prisoner of the flesh. Joan of Arc seemingly chooses martyrdom of her

own free will, yet the film also repeatedly emphasizes that her fate is predetermined. The opening shot with its reading of Joan's postmortem readmission into the Church and such declamatory statements as "She will die" and "Don't forget, she must burn" leave no question as to the outcome. The only tension, as in predestinarianism, is whether or not she will choose her predestined fate. In *Diary of a Country Priest* the priest realizes he is a "prisoner of the Holy Agony" yet his agony only comes to culmination when he escapes from that other prison, the body. In *Pick-pocket* Michel chooses freedom by imprisonment; in *A Man Escaped* Fontaine chooses freedom by escape: they are the opposite sides of the predestination/free will paradox. Each finds true freedom through the acceptance of a predestined grace, within or without bars.

Bresson's treatment of the prison metaphor justifies his often rather vogueish labeling as a "Jansenist." Once asked if Fontaine was predestined Bresson replied, "Aren't we all."⁶¹ Bresson predestines his characters by foretelling the outcome of their lives; the drama is whether or not the character (or the viewer) will accept his predestined fate. Bresson treats his viewers in the same way a Jansenist God treats his minions: "You must leave the spectator free. And at the same time you must make yourself loved by him. You must make him love the way in which you render things. That is to say: show him things in the order and the way that you love to see them and to feel them; make him feel them, in presenting them to him, as you see them and feel them yourself, and this while leaving him a great freedom, while making him free."⁶²

Bresson hopes to make the viewer so free (by leaving him uncommitted during everyday and disparity) that the viewer will be forced to make Bresson's predetermined decision (during the decisive action). On the surface Bresson leaves the spectator totally free; his transcendence, Bazin points out, "is something each of us is free to refuse."⁶³ But once the viewer makes the commitment, once he accepts the "presence of something superior," then he surrenders his "freedom" and joins in that jungle of predestinarian logic. Once on the inside, the arguments leveled from the outside are of little avail.

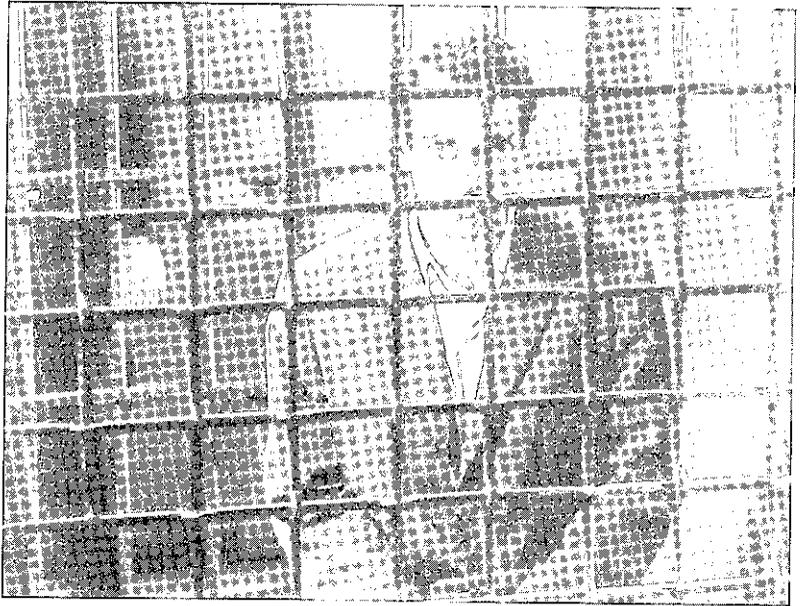
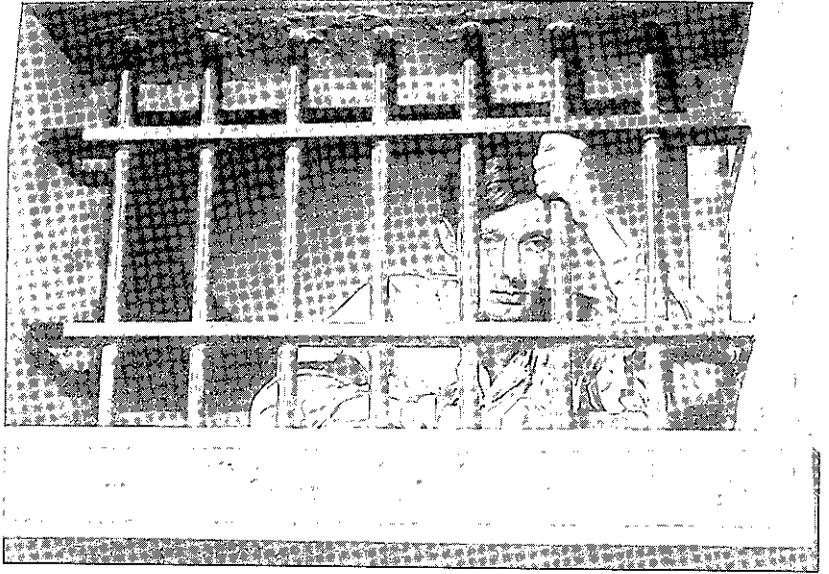
The mysterious, conciliatory element in the predestination/free will paradox is grace. Grace is the catalyst for religious commitment because, as Jansen writes, "of the nature of a good work which is such that no created thing can achieve this effect without the aid of Grace."⁶⁴ Unlike Calvinism, Jansenism holds that "common" grace is nonuniversal; it is a special gift and not everyone can receive it. The comings and goings of grace are unpredictable; one must know both how to recognize it and

how to receive it. "In Jansenism, there is perhaps this, which is an impression that I have as well: it is that our lives are made at once of predestination—Jansenism, then—and of *hasard*, chance."⁶⁵

The "chance" of grace is the theme of *A Man Escaped* whose subtitle, "*Le Vent souffle où il veut*" ("the wind bloweth where it listeth," from Jesus's conversation with Nicodemus, John 3:8), expresses the unpredictability of grace. In *A Man Escaped* a prisoner-priest writes out the subtitle/text for Fontaine. Fontaine reads these words to himself as his friend Orsini is being executed for an unsuccessful escape attempt (long shot of Fontaine in his cell window, "close-up" of interior narration and of the firing squad's gunshots). Later Fontaine realizes that Orsini's death has made it possible for him to escape. His aging neighbor, Blanchet, says, "Orsini had to show you how." "How strange it is," Fontaine replies. Blanchet counters that it is not strange, and Fontaine replies that it is strange that Blanchet should say that. Earlier in the film Fontaine and the priest have a similar conversation when a Bible mysteriously appears in the priest's pocket. "It's a miracle," Fontaine says. "I was lucky," the priest replies. Grace is making itself manifest in Fontaine's life, and he is as yet only dimly aware of it.

The crucial manifestation of grace in *A Man Escaped* occurs when Fontaine, the night before his planned escape, is without warning given a cell-mate, a boy named Jost. Fontaine must then decide whether to kill Jost or take him along, and he chooses the latter. Only later, while in the process of escaping, does Fontaine realize that it takes two men to scale the prison wall, that without Jost his escape would have been a failure. It was Fontaine's acceptance of Jost and the *hasard* of grace which allowed him to escape, even though it had been predetermined from the beginning of the film (by the title) that he would escape.

In Bresson's films grace allows the protagonist to accept the paradox of predestination and free will, and Ayfre quotes Augustine to demonstrate Bresson's orthodoxy at this point: "the freedom of the will is not void through Grace, but is thereby established."⁶⁶ But it is not enough for grace to be present, man must choose to receive it. Man must *choose* that which has been predestined. Because Fontaine has previously willed to escape he can correctly accept the intervention of grace through Jost. Because Joan wills to believe her voices ("How did you know that it was an angel's voice?" she is asked; "Because I had the will to believe it," she replies) she can realize grace in death. At the close of *Pickpocket* Michel comes to an acceptance of grace in the person of Jeanne, and he says to her through the bars, "How long it has taken me to come to



The beginning of *A Man Escaped* and the end of *Pickpocket*: “Imprisonment is the dominant metaphor in Bresson’s films, but it is a two-faced metaphor: his protagonists are both escaping from prison of one sort and surrendering to a prison of another.”

you." The culminant statement of grace is by the country priest, whose dying words are "all is grace." If one accepts transcendental style, then all is grace, because it is grace which allows the protagonist and the viewer to be both captive and free.

Given this theological backdrop, Bresson's "pretexts" must necessarily be different than Ozu's. In Bresson's films, as in Christian theology, transcendence is an escape from the prison of the body, an "escape" which makes one simultaneously "free from sin" and a "prisoner of the Lord." Consequently, the awareness of the Transcendent can only come after some degree of self-mortification, whether it be a foregoing of the "sins of the flesh" or death itself. Prison is the dominant metaphor of Bresson's films, but it is a two-faced metaphor: his characters are both escaping from a prison of one sort and surrendering to a prison of another. And the prison his protagonists ultimately escape is the most confining prison of all, the body. In a sense, Bresson "mortified" his actors; he not only killed them fictionally, but also artistically, refusing to use an actor in more than one film.* The actor had been "worn out"; in the next film there was a new (but similar) actor who had to be mortified.

In contrast, Ozu did not feel the need to compare the tension between man and nature, soul and body, to that between a prisoner and a prison. Self-mortification had little place in his films. There were no chains, bars, persecutions, self-flagellations. The "new body" was available on earth; his characters did not need to undergo the death of the old body. Ozu used a "family of actors whom he did not "kill off" but put through the same tensions in film after film. For Ozu grace was neither limited nor unpredictable, but easily available to all. The awareness of the Transcendent was for Ozu a way of living, not, as for Bresson, a way of dying.

THE AESTHETIC TRADITION: SCHOLASTICISM

Bresson's theology, his formulation of the problems of body and soul, predestination and free will, grace and redemption, seems obviously Jansenist, but to infer from this, as some critics have, that his aesthetic and artistic influences were also Jansenist is incorrect. Jansenism, like Calvinism, had little feeling for aesthetics or art in general, and almost

* When asked if he would use Claude Laydu, the priest in *Country Priest*, again Bresson replied, "No. How can I? For *Journal* I robbed him of what I needed to make the film. How could I rob him twice?" (quoted in Marjorie Greene, "Robert Bresson," *Film Quarterly* 13, no. 3 [Spring 1960], p. 7).

none for the "visual arts" in particular. Certain art forms were favored by Jansenism and Calvinism (church music and architecture), and there were maverick "Calvinist" artists (Donne, Revius, Rembrandt), but neither of these sects developed a positive aesthetic or promoted any movement in art. "Images" had little place in their logical theology,* a theology which could lead, in its excesses, to iconoclasm. Jansenism could give Bresson some of its leanness and asceticism, but it certainly would have had no sympathy for a work of art which sought to express the Transcendent in a nonsectarian manner through images—particularly if that work of art considered its religious subject matter a "pretext." Bresson, the artist, received no aid or comfort from Jansenism; he had to look elsewhere for his aesthetics.

Bresson's immediate culture was also unable to provide the aesthetics Jansenism lacked. There has been little sympathy in modern culture in general, and cinema in particular, for the spiritual problems which troubled Bresson. There has been, of course, a twentieth-century revival of interest in the relations between form and inner meaning in the contemporary arts, and Bresson has been on the forefront of this. But in cinema this has been to a substantial degree Bresson's creation, not his "tradition."

There have been, however, several traditions in Western art which correspond remarkably to both Bresson's theological problems and his artistic solutions. And although one can never be certain where Bresson got his aesthetics, some preliminary research reveals that although he is alienated, he is not *sui generis*, and his particular approach is part of a long, though presently dormant in film, artistic tradition.

Ananda Coomaraswamy writes:

It should be remembered that "European art" is of two very different kinds, one Christian and scholastic, the other post-Renaissance and personal. It will be evident enough from our essay on Eckhart, and might have been made equally clear through a study of St. Thomas and his sources, that there was a time when Europe and Asia could and did actually understand each other very well.⁶⁷

The Scholastic tradition, of which Dr. Coomaraswamy writes, would have appreciated the films of Ozu and Bresson. Ozu and Bresson have

* "At the rationalizing stage of religion," Herbert Read points out, "when religion becomes more than anything else an affair of philosophical concepts and of individual mediation, then there is bound to grow up a feeling that religion can dispense with such materialistic representations as works of art" (*Art and Society* [New York: Schocken Books, 1966], p. 50).

little in common theologically or culturally, but they both share in the legacy of Scholasticism, the last major pre-Renaissance aesthetic.

Neither St. Thomas nor any of the Schoolmen wrote a specific treatise on aesthetics, but in *Art and Scholasticism* Jacques Maritain extrapolates a Scholastic definition of art as an "intellectual virtue,"⁶⁸ a definition which corresponds quite closely to Coomaraswamy's definition of Asian art as "a delight of the reason."⁶⁹ "Art seems to be nothing other than a certain ordination of reason," Aquinas wrote, "by which human acts reach a determined end through determined means."⁷⁰ Art for both the Scholastic theologian and Asian artist sought an idea (beauty, nature) which was both in the world and transcended it.

The Scholastic aesthetic provides a common meeting place for East and West, and by extension, for Ozu and Bresson. It was a primitive aesthetic which had become traditional, gathering to itself a rationalized organon of thought while retaining its ultimate respect for mystery. Ideal portraiture changed: the primitive totem became a disembodied idea, but it was only a change in degree. Whether totem or idea, the end of art was mystery, and not bound by any rationalized, humanized, or secularized concepts of life. All art, like all theology and scripture, are (to use Augustine's word) "vain"; they are the means to an end, but not to be confused with the end. The artist too is a means, and his end is not himself. This aesthetic leads naturally enough to an art form, which, Coomaraswamy writes, could be either abstract or anthropomorphic, but was not sentimentalized or humanized. Bresson's use of unsentimentalized form, his pursuit of "mystery" certainly seems part of this tradition, and would explain his stylistic, although not theological, affinities with Ozu.

The Scholastic aesthetic is also appropriate for Bresson's art because it allows a place for the intellectual formulation of ideas within the form. Logic was not opposed to mystery but just another means to appreciate it. The Schoolmen "attempted a task not yet clearly envisaged by their forerunners and ruefully to be abandoned by their successors, the mystics and the nominalists: the task of writing a permanent peace treaty between faith and reason."⁷¹ This aesthetic, which could serve both faith and reason in East and West, can also serve the seemingly contradictory qualities of Bresson's film-making.

Scholasticism, Erwin Panofsky has demonstrated, found its clearest expression in Gothic architecture. The Schoolmen define Gothic architecture by its mathematical unity rather than its later expressionist facade. Like St. Thomas's *Summa Theologiae* the Gothic world sought

to create clarity through organization, synthesis through form. It represented, Panofsky writes, an "acceptance and ultimate reconciliation of contradictory possibilities."⁷² On this level one could draw certain obvious parallels between Gothic architecture and Bresson's films. Both enclosed theological paradoxes within a larger form, both favored the anonymity of the artist, both sought to evoke the final "mystery."

The Gothic cathedral may be an appropriate aesthetic metaphor for Bresson's films, but in artistic practice its delicate coalition between faith and reason began to break down, more and more producing not spiritual stasis but sensual disparity. Gothic architecture, which quite literally forced faith and reason to remain under the same roof, eventually cracked under its internal strain, and its previously calm rational aesthetic became exaggerated, yielding to contorted lines and distorted figures. Artistically, Bresson's films bear more resemblance to Byzantine portraiture, an art form which lived out an aesthetic similar to Scholasticism before there was the need to create an aesthetic.

THE ARTISTIC TRADITION: BYZANTINE ICONOGRAPHY

There undoubtedly are many major and minor artistic traditions which have influenced Bresson in one way or another, but the most important, I think, is Byzantine iconography. It has been a common thread in Western and Oriental art and influenced the Scholastic aesthetic; it serves to further strengthen the link between Bresson, Ozu, and the universal form of representation.

Like Oriental art, Byzantine iconography was an art of fixed ends, and those ends were spiritual and ideal rather than human and sentimental. The work of art was the means to an ineffable end: "The adoration of the icon," St. Basil stated, "passes to the prototype, that is to say to the Holy person represented."⁷³

To achieve these ends Byzantine art was anonymous and impersonal. Some icons were described as pictures "made without hands," formed, rather, by miraculous contact with the original. To enforce anonymity Late Byzantine mosaicists were enjoined by ecclesiastical fiat to make their representations of Christ conform to certain requirements. This rule, one scholar wrote, "was designed to promote, not the artistic merit of the mosaic, but the honor of Christ; and since the majesty of Christ was the transcendent idea, of which the mosaic was the material image, this rule actually helped to draw the attention of both the mosaicist and the spectator to the right quarter."⁷⁴ Individual influence was, of course, discern-

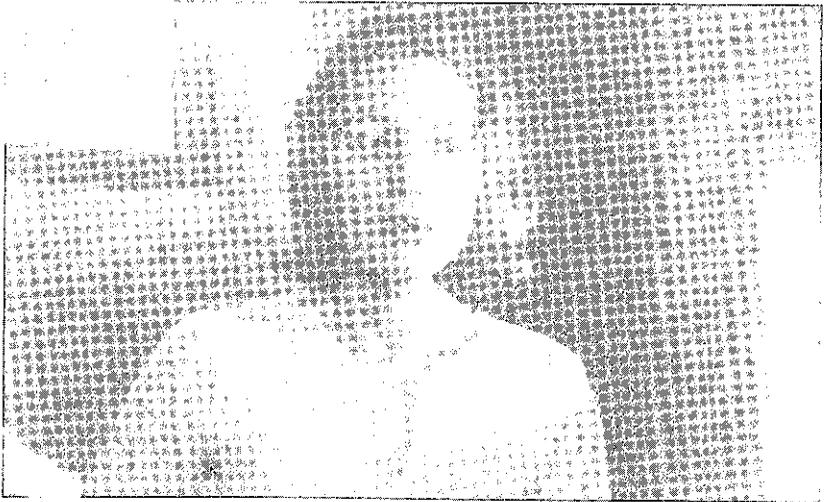
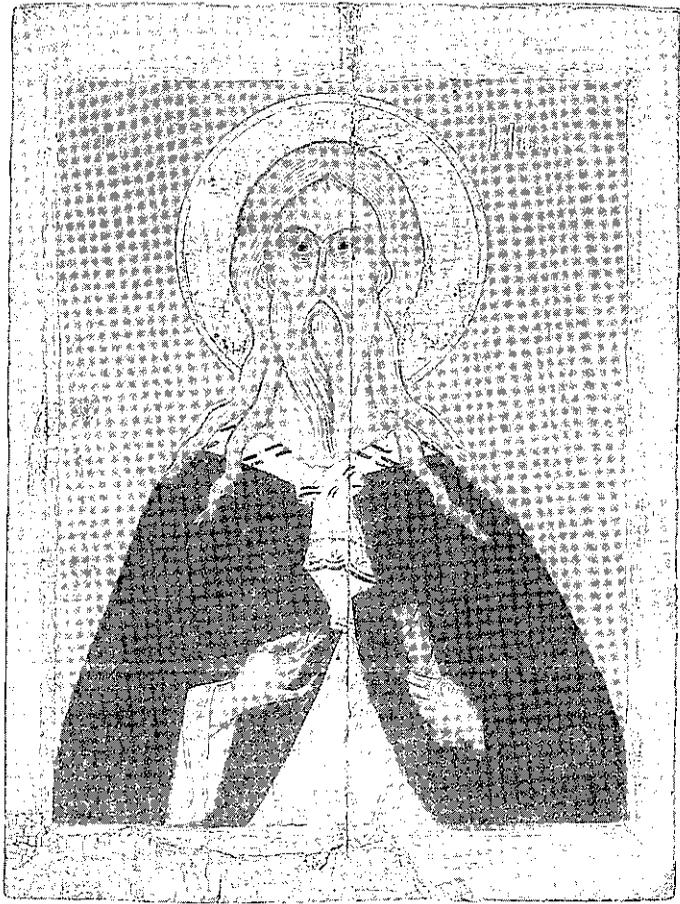
ible, but not peremptory; artists came and went, Byzantine iconography stayed.

Byzantine iconography was a function of the liturgy. The spectator's attitude toward the icon was the same as his attitude toward the mass. The individual became absorbed into the collective order, the collective order hardened into a form, and the form expressed the Transcendent. Consequently, the icons became stylized, rigid, hierarchical, further and further apart from the world of verisimilitude and sensation. "In the Byzantine era Christian iconography had, slowly but surely, climbed away from the alluring world of the senses, soaring ever higher into a region of theological symbolism and, through its images, carrying man's imagination to the transcendent realm where images hovered between God and man."⁷⁵

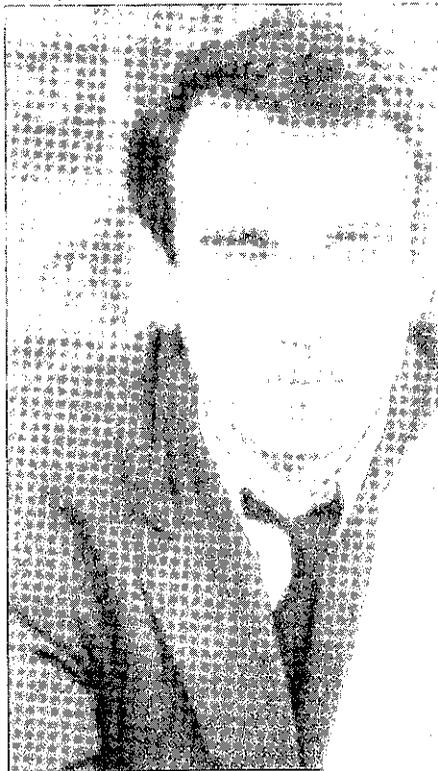
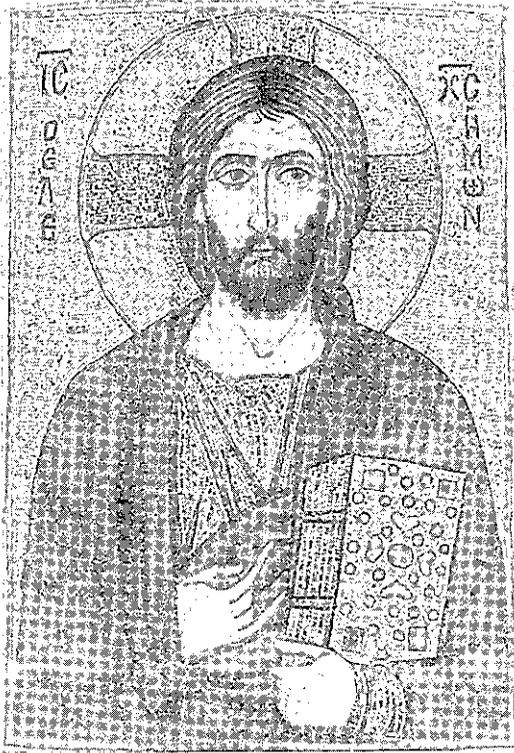
The Schoolmen were influenced, primarily through the writings of the Neoplatonists, by Byzantine iconography and its attitudes toward art. Aquinas's artistic contemporaries, the Late Byzantine and Romanesque painters, may have been aesthetically influenced by Scholasticism but they were artistically stimulated by the Byzantine techniques they saw in imported icons and in the work of refugees from the Iconoclastic controversies. Byzantine iconography has been a continuous influence on European art. Long after the decline of Byzantium, its art molded painters like Cimabue, Duccio, Cavallini, and Giotto; affected Quattrocento painters like Mantegna; and was the basis of Carolingian, Northumbrian, and Ottonian art. Byzantine art often functioned in this manner, breathing fresh Eastern life into stagnating, rationalistic Western theories. Byzantine iconography may be seen to affect Bresson's films in the way it affected European art until as late as the sixteenth century (and in some cases, such as Rouault and Derain, until the present); it brings the force of specific, hieratic, "spiritual" techniques to a rationalized organon.

Bresson uses methods of representation very similar to those employed by Byzantine painters and mosaicists, and for some of the same reasons. Barthélémy Amengual has already noted, in passing, the similarities between Bresson's films and Byzantine art. In both, he writes, there is the "dialectic of concrete and abstract . . . the proximity, almost the identity, of the sensual and the spiritual, of emotion and idea, of static body and mobile mind."⁷⁶ The analogy can be carried even further; there are technical as well as theoretical similarities between Bresson's films and Byzantine iconography.

Frontality, nonexpressive faces, hieratic postures, symmetric compositions, and two-dimensionality are common to both. The Byzantine mosaicist constructed the nonexpressive face because God himself was



Elijah from a fourteenth-century Novgorod icon; Florence Carrez as Joan of Arc; Martin Lassalle in *Pickpocket*. "The long forehead, the lean features, the closed lips, the blank stare, the flat light, these all identify Bresson's protagonist as objects suitable for veneration."



beyond all expression; similarly, Bresson uses the nonexpressive face to “deprejudice” the viewer’s attitudes toward the Transcendent. Bresson’s statement about taking a steam iron to the image, “flattening it out,” could have been written by the Stoglav Council which prohibited the “sensuality of heretics” in iconic portraiture.⁷⁷ Frontality in iconography was designed, Agathias wrote, so that “the man looking at the ikon directs his mind to a higher contemplation. No longer has he a confused veneration.”⁷⁸ Bresson uses frontality to create a respectful, noncommitted attitude within the viewer which can result in a stasis very similar to that evoked by a religious icon.

The long forehead, the lean features, the closed lips, the blank stare, the frontal view, the flat light, the uncluttered background, the stationary camera, these identify Bresson’s protagonists as objects suitable for veneration. When Michel’s cold face stares into the camera in scene after scene in *Pickpocket*, Bresson is using his face—only one part of Bresson’s complex film-making—like a Byzantine face painted high on a temple wall. It can simultaneously evoke sense of distance (its imposing, hieratic quality) and a strange sensuousness (the hard-chiseled stern face amid a vast mosaic or environmental panorama). And when Bresson brings the rest of his film-making abilities to bear on that face, it takes its rightful place in the liturgy. Just before the priest collapses in fatigue on a barren hillock, almost enveloped by gray dusk and dark barren trees, there is a long shot in Bresson’s *Country Priest* which creates a composition familiar to Byzantine wall paintings, such as the Ascension mosaic at St. Sophia: an agonized, lonely, full figure set against an empty environment, his head hung to the left, wrapped in body-obscuring robes, about to succumb to the spiritual weight he must bear.

It is possible, but not profitable, to continue this analogy between Bresson’s faces and compositions and Byzantine mosaics and paintings. One might draw comparisons to the Christ types in Byzantine portraiture, Christ the Pantocrator, Christ the King of Kings, Christ the Merciful, Christ the Suffering, and so forth, or one might compare the “three-circle” method of Byzantine painting to Bresson’s lighting. But such comparisons would overextend the value of the analogy. Motion pictures are so different from mosaics that any 1:1 comparison would be inaccurate. Bresson’s films are more than filmic adaptations of Byzantine icons, just as Ozu’s films are more than screen versions of *sumi-e* paintings.

To mold his modern-day saints Bresson draws on the specific techniques of the long-standing tradition of Byzantine art. These techniques not only produce certain desired, tried-and-true audience reactions, but

they also link Bresson's work to a method of representation which has its roots in the East and has been successfully adapted to dozens of cultures. Unlike his other artistic traditions, Byzantine iconography ties Bresson to a universal form which has been used by many artists, among them Yasujiro Ozu. The common historical aesthetic and artistic traditions shared by Bresson and Ozu, even though seemingly remote, set the stage for their contemporary stylistic union.

A SYNTHESIS OF TRADITION: IMAGO DEI

Bresson is a man of (at least) three traditions. Although it is possible to delineate each of these traditions and analyze them separately, in the course of his films these traditions must necessarily join and disjoin, forming more or less lasting syntheses. The necessity of cultural syntheses was not so evident in the study of Ozu's films because, although several subtraditions were noticeable (such as light comedy), it seemed (at least to this Western mind) that he, by and large, adhered to one overriding tradition, Zen, with all its "theological," aesthetic, and artistic implications.

One of the most interesting of Bresson's syntheses is his depiction of the Image of God. *Imago Dei* is the pivotal concept in any discussion of Christian art, and Bresson's handling of it demonstrates how he applied Byzantine concepts of portraiture to Jansenist theology. The very fact that an artist should become involved in the Image of God controversy is determined, van der Leeuw contends, by the fact that he thinks historically and transcendently.⁷⁹ In Christianity and the West the Transcendent is fixed in a single person, the Redeemer, both God and man, and how to portray that person must be the crucial question of religious art.

Historically, there have been two interpretations of *Imago Dei*, the Eastern Orthodox and the Protestant, with the Roman Church straddling the area in between. Both start from a common point: the original unity of God and man when God created man in his image (Gen. 1:26, 27). One camp, which is exemplified by the Protestant churches, takes as its text Exodus 20:3 which prohibits any graven image. The unity had been shattered by the Fall; sin-dominated man could not possibly depict the Holy. This view was expressed as early as the second century by Clement of Alexandria: "It has been plainly forbidden us to practice deceptive art; for the prophet says, 'Thou shalt not make the likeness of anything that is in Heaven, or in the earth beneath.'"⁸⁰ This notion has enjoyed continuous favor, being articulated by the eighth-century



Ascension mosaic at St. Sophia and Claude Laydu in *Diary of a Country Priest*: “An agonized, lonely full figure set against an empty environment, his head hung to the left, wrapped in body-obscuring robes, and about to succumb to the spiritual weight he must bear.”

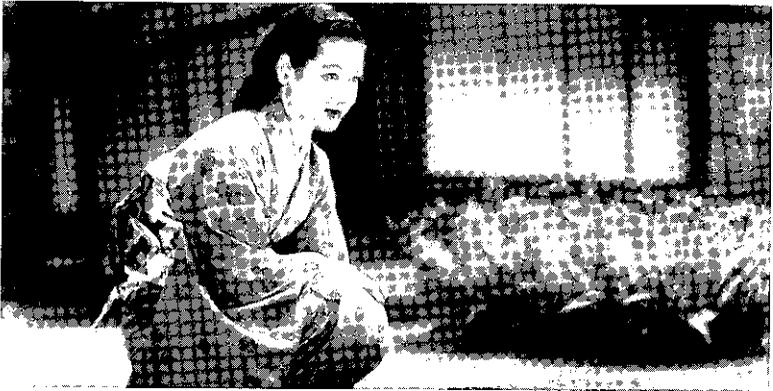
Iconoclasts, espoused to more moderate degrees by Anselm, Luther, and Calvin, and it assumed its most virulent form when Cromwell’s Puritans smashed England’s religious statuary. The Protestants have taken a theoretical stand against religious images of any sort (although in practice certain images have been tolerated), whereas the Roman Church continues to permit images so long as they are not worshipped or venerated.

On the other hand, the Eastern Church takes as its proof text *Philippians 2:6*, which emphasizes the incarnation, the fact that God came down “taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of a man.” The Eastern view holds that as Christ is the image of God, so he can be worshipped through images. The Synod of Trullo (692) legalized this position, decreeing that “from now on icons should show . . . Christ



our God in His human shape . . . so that we may be reminded of his incarnate life."⁸¹ The Western Church saw in images (to the extent that they were permitted) only instruction, education, and edification; the Eastern Church, on the other hand, saw in images mysteries which effect salvation. The Eastern Church not only allowed images but prescribed the form they should take. *

Viewed from the Roman or Protestant (which would also include the Jansenist) position, Bresson engages in the heresy of Eastern iconography. The *Imago Dei* dilemma comes up in *The Trial of Joan of Arc*. The inquisitor asks Joan if her followers had made any images of her. This is a crucial question: the Roman Church is trying to convict her for the Eastern heresy of images. If Joan permits her followers to venerate images of her she is committing a double sin: blasphemy (setting herself up against God) and the creation of graven images. Joan answers with typical ambiguity, "I saw one." Bresson, with his own ambiguity, is admitting the iconographic heresy into the theology of the Western Church. Joan was not only a saint in the Roman Catholic sense (she was later canonized)—that is, a person whose life offers edification to those who contemplate and emulate it—but she was also, Bresson suggests, an image in the Eastern sense—an icon to be venerated. And Bresson goes on to posit an even more insidious heresy—that Joan is a spiritual



Transcendence in East and West, Ozu's *Late Spring* and Bresson's *The Trial of Joan of Arc*: "For Ozu, the awareness of the transcendent was a way of living; for Bresson, a way of dying."

icon in a Godless universe, that she should be venerated for her ability to transcend herself, thereby expressing an undefined "Transcendent" which is not any specific "God."

Bresson cannot be tied down to any one heresy; he is a heretic all his own. His techniques of portraiture come from Byzantium; his theology of predestination, free will, and grace from Jansenism; his aesthetics from Scholasticism. To each tradition he brings the virtues of the other, and to cinema he brings the virtues of all three. Perhaps this is why no religious denomination has ever embraced Bresson's seemingly religious films; they haven't figured out what sort of heretic he is yet.

BEYOND PRETEXTS

From this baffling maze of traditions and subtraditions, some perhaps more or less real than I have postulated, Bresson forges what could be called *his* tradition—a curious amalgamation of Western skeletons. Yet this synthesis is only a "pretext," the cultural elements Bresson finds easiest to work with. It seems only natural for the elements of Bresson's historical traditions to coalesce, for they must prepare to meet a formidable opponent: the "new" sensual, individualistic art of cinema, which with *its* traditions has tried to squash the spiritual qualities out of art. The resulting conflict pits the two traditions against each other in a bizarre time-machine manner: Scholastic aesthetic against movie aesthetic, ideal portraiture against individual portraiture, spiritual refine-



ment against dramatic development. (The implications of the expression of the spiritual occurring on film, of course, are somewhat involved and will be considered in the Conclusion.) Out of this struggle comes a new form: transcendental style. It is the old aesthetic in the new medium. The aesthetic is familiar, but the style is new.

On the surface there would seem little to link Ozu and Bresson; neither of them could make films in the other's country without experiencing "culture shock." They shared an ancient Christian/Oriental aesthetic heritage which had fallen into general disrepair, especially in motion pictures. But their common desire to express the Transcendent on film made that link crucial; each took the old aesthetic principles into a new art form. The aesthetic was the same, the medium was the same, and not surprisingly, the resultant style was remarkably similar.

Transcendental style, like Byzantine art, is a universal form because it can accommodate different artists and different cultures within a common structure. Byzantine art could reach from England and France to the Far East; transcendental style can reach to wherever men make movies. The differences which seem so culturally unbridgeable can both

function within transcendental style: frontality can be both Pantocrator hierarchism or it can be Zen “politeness”; disparity can be both alienation between man and nature and man and God; stasis can both be a quiescent view of nature and the symbolic icon. Transcendental style can express the endemic metaphors of each culture: it is like the mountain which is a mountain, doesn’t seem to be a mountain, then is a mountain again; it is also like the prison in which man is involuntarily enclosed, yet from which through a dark night of the soul he can escape, choosing instead to enter a “new” prison. In sum, transcendental style can adapt to both cultures because it expresses the Transcendent, which knows no culture. It is not a metaphor which is restricted to its antecedents; it is a form which is universally appreciable.

At the moment of stasis the “pretexts” fall away, the Way of Introspection and the Way of Unifying Vision yield to each other. At such a moment (if it is fortunate enough to occur) the transcendental style in films is unified with the transcendental style in any art, mosaics, painting, flower-arranging, tea ceremony, liturgy. At this point the function of religious art is complete; it may now fade back into experience. The wind blows where it will; it doesn’t matter once all is grace.

III. Dreyer

This essay has sought to track down a transcendental style—a universal form, which is used by different film-makers in divergent cultures in order to express the Wholly Other. This search has led to two directors who, although as culturally alien as two men are likely to be, used similar techniques for similar reasons. Yasujiro Ozu and Robert Bresson seemingly have contrasting conceptions of all of man's fundamental dilemmas: his attitudes concerning nature, death, the body, love, grace; yet they share a common element: the need to express that Other in form, which for them means film form.

Ayfre writes, "The style of transcendence does not allow wavering or half-measures—to attempt it without complete mastery is to invite disaster."* If this were so, this study of transcendental style might well

* Ayfre continues, "A lack of rigor in style, incertainties in inspiration, condescension and bad faith toward the audience, are enough to deprive many works of any truly sacred meaning" (*Cinéma et la foi chrétienne* [Paris: Librairie Arthème Fayard, 1960], p. 87). Ayfre's definition of the "style of transcendence" differs from the definition of transcendental style used in this essay, not in the final result of that style ("the Invisible is evoked rather than represented" [ibid., p. 85]) but in description of the techniques which lead up to the final result. Ayfre, as far as I can tell, defines the "style of transcendence" by its end result, its intentions, its inner theology, its tone, but not by its specific techniques. His "definition" is, by and large, a description of the films which evoke the desired end, primarily the films of Bresson and Dreyer. It is not a definition of a distinct style. He does mention certain stylistic elements in these films, "the meticulous selection of highly concrete details," "liturgical purity," "the Holy Face," "extreme stylization," "an undecipherable