



STUDIES *in*
THEOLOGY
and the ARTS

SEEING IS **BELIEVING**

THE
REVELATION
OF GOD
THROUGH
FILM

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FOREWORD BY
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Revelation Through Film

The news sent a shockwave through the film community: Martin Scorsese had labeled Marvel movies as “not cinema.” The fêted director of *Raging Bull* (1980) and *The Irishman* (2019) likened Hollywood’s most financially successful franchise to the cheap thrills of an amusement park.¹ In a follow-up op-ed for *The New York Times*, he clarified his position; his beef was less with Marvel films themselves than with the industry that has embraced them so wholeheartedly, effectively sounding a death knell for the future of lower budget films in Hollywood.² Francis Ford Coppola, Scorsese’s fellow American New Wave auteur, was less guarded in his criticism, calling the films “despicable.”³ Coming at the end of a decade in which Marvel dominated the box office, their disapproving remarks sparked a backlash from fans—and the filmmakers behind them.⁴ When the critics are as revered as these two elder statesmen, next-generation directors are bound to become defensive about their work.

But what, according to Scorsese, is the quality of “real” cinema that Marvel movies lack? In a word, *revelation*. “For me, for the filmmakers I came to love and respect, for my friends who started making movies around the same time that I did,” writes Scorsese, “cinema was about revelation—aesthetic, emotional and spiritual revelation.”⁵ Scorsese’s op-ed may not be emphatically theological, but it does nevertheless seem to imply that he is open to the

¹Nick De Semlyen, “The *Irishman* Week: Empire’s Martin Scorsese Interview,” *Empire*, November 6, 2019, www.empireonline.com/movies/features/irishman-week-martin-scorsese-interview/.

²Martin Scorsese, “Martin Scorsese: I Said Marvel Movies Aren’t Cinema. Let Me Explain,” *The New York Times*, November 4, 2019, www.nytimes.com/2019/11/04/opinion/martin-scorsese-marvel.html.

³Catherine Shoard, “Francis Ford Coppola: Scorsese Was Being Kind—Marvel Movies Are Despicable,” *The New York Times*, October 21, 2019, www.theguardian.com/film/2019/oct/21/francis-ford-coppola-scorsese-was-being-kind-marvel-movies-are-despicable.

⁴Shoard, “Francis Ford Coppola.”

⁵Scorsese, “I Said Marvel Movies Aren’t Cinema.”

possibility of divine revelation through film. But not everyone is so enthusiastic about the revelatory possibilities of cinema. Indeed, Scorsese has been on the receiving end of what could be construed as the polar opposite sort of religious engagement with film: boycott. Upon the release of his *The Last Temptation of Christ* (1988), conservative evangelical groups sought to deprive the film of an audience by demanding that the studio cease production, picketing outside the studio, coordinating large-scale mailouts to churches criticizing the film, calling for citywide bans on its screening, and vandalizing cinemas and, in one instance, a film print.⁶

In fact, there is considerable variation in theological responses to film, which Robert K. Johnston has organized into the following typological categories: avoidance, caution, dialogue, appropriation, and divine encounter.⁷ *Avoidance* entails a posture of condemnation of film, historically with respect to the medium itself.⁸ *Caution* seeks to engage rather than avoid, albeit with a substantial dose of circumspection.

Dialogue charts a *via media*, understanding that arriving at truth is a dialectical process, each side of the dialogue allowed to truly speak and be heard.⁹ *Appropriation* pushes beyond dialogue by acknowledging that the film may contribute something unique and positive, and this approach goes hand-in-hand with seeing film viewing as a quasi-religious activity.

Others go further still, holding that seeing a film may be the occasion for *divine encounter*. Theologian Craig Detweiler is a prominent example of this camp: “The best movies are revelatory in nature; they do not just talk about God and ultimate questions but become an occasion for the hidden God to communicate through the big screen. Cinema is a *locus theologicus*, a place for divine revelation.”¹⁰

⁶Tom Pollard, *Sex and Violence: The Hollywood Censorship Wars* (Boulder, CO: Paradigm, 2009), 162.

⁷Robert K. Johnston, *Reel Spirituality: Theology and Film in Dialogue*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2006), 55-79.

⁸The mid-twentieth-century evangelicalism in which my mother was raised, for example, frowned on cinemagoing. But this was not unusual for the time nor limited to New Zealand.

⁹For example, New Testament scholar Robert Jewett employs “dialogue in the prophetic mode” by letting the writings of Paul and the films of American culture mutually inform their respective interpretations. See Robert Jewett, *Saint Paul at the Movies: The Apostle’s Dialogue with American Culture*, 1st ed. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1993), 7.

¹⁰Craig Detweiler, *Into the Dark: Seeing the Sacred in the Top Films of the 21st Century*, Cultural Exegesis (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2008), 42.

Detweiler has no qualms about naming these filmic experiences as general revelation. Gareth Higgins writes, “Film can transport you to . . . a ‘thin place,’ where the line between harsh reality and the transcendent is so subtly blurred for a moment, or if you’re lucky, moments, you find it difficult to tell the difference.”¹¹ Higgins, an Irish writer, explains that the Celtic concept of so-called thin places is possible because, quoting David Dark, “there isn’t a secular molecule in the universe.”¹² For those of this persuasion, watching a movie—something that others treat cautiously or avoid entirely—may become a moment of revelation, even a conversion experience.¹³

It is with this final category that my interests lie.¹⁴ Other approaches have their merits, and the sheer diversity of movies available probably requires flexibility and the willingness to adopt different approaches as required. But if this assertion that certain movies may actually help usher the viewer into an encounter with the divine is correct, then this is surely the most theologically compelling dimension of cinema—and that is precisely where we will focus our attention.

THE CASE FOR REVELATION THROUGH FILM

But does this *really* happen? Could it be that film-mediated revelation is something dreamed up by ivory tower theologians with little connection to lived experience? The work of Jonathan Brant speaks to this question with something rarely seen in the field of theology and film: empirical data.¹⁵ There are good reasons for the dearth of such data, not least the fact that revelation can be neither proven nor disproven empirically. God can’t be observed under a microscope. But Brant’s aims are far more modest; he wishes only to demonstrate

¹¹Gareth Higgins, *How Movies Helped Save My Soul: Finding Spiritual Fingerprints in Culturally Significant Films* (Lake Mary, FL: Relevant Books, 2003), xviii.

¹²Higgins, *How Movies Helped Save My Soul*, xix.

¹³For example, see Kathie Lee Gifford and Kate Shellnutt, “Kathie Lee Gifford: How Billy Graham Led Me to Christ,” *Christianity Today*, 2016, www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2016/march/kathie-lee-gifford-how-billy-graham-led-me-to-christ.html.

¹⁴I do not expect to adhere to it exclusively, since these typological categories are all highly fluid, with many commentators drawing on several or all types as appropriate. See Johnston, *Reel Spirituality*. The boundaries between divine encounter and appropriation are especially porous. Since divine encounter comes only if and when God wills, advocates of this type often move effortlessly between this and appropriation. So divine encounter could be seen as a kind of “appropriation plus.”

¹⁵For an example of another empirical study, see A. C. Van Hell, “Widening the Screen: Orthodox Protestant Film Viewers in The Netherlands and the Appropriation of Meaning in Relation to Their Religious Identity,” *Vrije Universiteit*, 2016, <http://dare.uvu.vu.nl/handle/1871/54466>.

the *possibility* of revelation by analyzing the experiences of nonprofessional viewers.¹⁶ To that end, he undertook qualitative research among Latin American filmgoers, seeking to address “the glaring lack of audience data that undermines the religion-film discourse’s efforts to speak meaningfully of the potential religious impact of films upon their viewers.”¹⁷

The genesis of the study lies in Brant’s prior experience as a pastoral worker in Uruguay, during which time “a troubling question arose as to whether urban young people, many of whom were almost completely alienated from the natural environment, were left without access to the *general revelation* that Christians normally associate with the beauty of the created order.”¹⁸ Brant thus conducted surveys and interviews among film festival attendees and cinema patrons in Montevideo, Uruguay, to determine whether these filmgoers had had revelatory experiences in response to movies like that described by the influential theologian Paul Tillich. Tillich famously claimed an experience of revelation upon seeing the painting *Madonna with Singing Angels* by Sandro Botticelli, one that would profoundly shape his theology of culture:

Gazing up at it, I felt a state approaching ecstasy. In the beauty of the painting there was Beauty itself. It shone through the colours of the paint as the light of day shines through the stained-glass windows of a medieval church. As I stood there, bathed in the beauty its painter had envisioned so long ago, something of the divine source of all things came through to me. I turned away shaken. That moment has affected my whole life, given me the keys for the interpretation of human existence, brought vital joy and spiritual truth. I compare it with what is usually called revelation in the language of religion.¹⁹

Brant takes this experience as paradigmatic, adopting it as a yardstick against which to gauge his research subjects’ filmgoing experiences. Revelation happens, argued Tillich, when there is a breakthrough from the surface form of an artwork to reveal the religious substance underneath.²⁰ For Tillich, the subject matter of the piece is irrelevant, since the surface is penetrated,

¹⁶Jonathan Brant, *Paul Tillich and the Possibility of Revelation Through Film* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 8, ebook.

¹⁷Brant, *Paul Tillich*, 8.

¹⁸Brant, *Paul Tillich*, 6; emphasis original.

¹⁹Paul Tillich, *On Art and Architecture*, ed. John Dillenberger and Jane Dillenberger (New York: Crossroad, 1987), 234-35. Cited in Brant, *Paul Tillich*, 52.

²⁰Brant, *Paul Tillich*, 56.

enabling encounter with the underlying Absolute. The content of revelation is therefore less important than its impact, its healing or salvific effect. Revelation is not about information, but rather transformation.²¹ In describing revelation, Tillich prefers the term *event*, over and against *experience*, because it has both objective and subjective components. The revelation event occurs when elements in objective reality align with elements of the subjective mind.²²

Brant wants to know if filmgoers recognize their own experience in Tillich's. Brant thus applies six parameters of Tillich's theology of revelation to the experiences of the participants' reported experiences: (1) the individual (i.e., viewer) on a quest for meaning and wholeness; (2) the artwork (i.e., film) that enables access to the substratum of meaning and power undergirding all of life; (3) the "event" of revelation (occasioned by a film viewing) in which the individual's existential quest and the artwork's meaning are united; (4) the revelatory content, comprised of an effable experience of the "ground of being" (God, approximately speaking) in which the artwork serves as the occasion; (5) the effect(s) of healing or "salvation," broadly conceived, in the life of the individual; and (6) the individual's existential involvement with Jesus as Christ, the criterion of all revelation, regardless of whether it is interpreted as such by the individual.²³

So what were Brant's findings? The study revealed that a number of respondents reported experiences congruent with Tillich's account. This congruence does not *prove* that revelation has occurred, as if such a thing were possible, but it does demonstrate that filmgoers have experiences that could be interpreted as such. For example, one Catholic participant, Augusto, says, "It's not that God speaks through a film but yes, I believe he takes advantage of that opportunity in order to . . . in order to question us and in order to . . . make us see things that . . . or in order to ask us, or in order to . . . I don't know, return things to us. . . . As I said to you, the ways of God are, are strange."²⁴

A nonreligious participant, Lucilda, says,

I have felt those experiences in the cinema. Uhm, well yes, occasionally, I'd say . . . I'd say it's as if the film transmits to me, I'd say, and . . . it's as if I'm completely

²¹Brant, *Paul Tillich*, 10, 73.

²²Brant, *Paul Tillich*, 67-68.

²³Brant, *Paul Tillich*, 183-205.

²⁴Brant, *Paul Tillich*, 203.

and absolutely immersed and it's something beyond [*mas alla*—which often has superstitious or mystical connotations] that which . . . uhm . . . look, beyond that which I am as pure rationality, no? But it's not something that I can . . .²⁵

Lucilda trails off at this point, struggling to articulate the experience. When Samuel, an atheist, recounts similar film-watching experiences, he likewise frequently falls silent and leaves sentences unfinished, “particularly when he is about to name what it is that he encounters in these [possibly revelatory] moments.”²⁶ Despite his initial misgivings, by the interview's end, Samuel is happy to describe these experiences as revelatory, even if he does not elaborate or identify the agent of that revelation.²⁷ Indeed, Brant explains that Tillich's account of revelation allows for the possibility that an atheist may experience revelation, since the revelation is an ineffable first-order experience, the description of which is merely a second-order activity.²⁸ In other words, a nonbeliever could have an experience of revelation, yet describe or interpret it without recourse to religious or theistic language.

As a qualitative research project, Brant seeks insights into revelatory experience through thick description, and is thus “not overly concerned with the numbers of respondents contacted, questionnaires completed, or interviews recorded.”²⁹ Instead of figures and statistics, this qualitative approach yields a wealth of data about the nature of alleged revelatory experiences with which Brant was able to substantiate some aspects of Tillich's account and challenge others. An example of the latter is the way his data calls into question Tillich's belief that the subject matter of the artwork is of no consequence. Brant grants that, for some participants, the effect of the event itself was of greater significance than any noetic content communicated. Nevertheless, the data suggests that the subject matter is often crucial to the revelation event (Brant thus suggests that the religious content of Tillich's beloved Botticelli is perhaps not as incidental as he insisted).³⁰ The data also reveals some aspects of revelation overlooked by Tillich such as, for instance, the fact that revelation is also communal and cumulative. The aggregate impact of cinemagoing over a long

²⁵Brant, *Paul Tillich*, 203.

²⁶Brant, *Paul Tillich*, 186.

²⁷Brant, *Paul Tillich*, 183-88.

²⁸Brant, *Paul Tillich*, 202.

²⁹Brant, *Paul Tillich*, 219.

³⁰Brant, *Paul Tillich*, 231-32.

period of time was for many participants greater than the impact made by any individual film.³¹

One pertinent aspect of Brant's research is the emergence of two categories of revelatory experience: a cognitive type and a mystical type (see table 1.1). The cognitive type is associated with the discursive aspects of the film, gradual onset, effability, and intellectual engagement. The mystical type is associated with the aesthetic aspects of the film, immediate onset, ineffability, and emotional engagement. Tillich's Botticelli experience is clearly of the mystical type, and so one way to read the data is to conclude that the conceptual net cast by Brant's questionnaire has caught not only truly revelatory experience (mystical type), but also nonrevelatory experience (cognitive type). But, instead, Brant reads these cognitive type experiences as also genuinely revelatory, because they have a high level of congruence with Tillich's account, have transformative power, and were identified by some participants as being of divine origin.³² We needn't sharply distinguish between the two types for the purposes of this book, but instead simply note that both types are potentially revelatory.

Table 1.1. Comparison of cognitive-type and mystical-type experiences

	Cognitive Type	Mystical Type
Pertinent filmic aspects	discursive	aesthetic
Speed of onset	gradual	immediate
Effability	effable	ineffable
Type of engagement	intellectual	emotional

An issue of particular importance for this project is whether or not film form has any bearing on revelation. Is there something about the *film itself* that might lend itself to revelatory experience? Theological discussion about cinema has rarely gone down that route, but Brant's research speaks to the matter, as his study bears out the subjective and objective aspects of revelation. For example, participants' individual histories often significantly shaped their experiences of revelation through film. Films were sometimes identified as revelatory insofar as they depicted a historical situation the participant had

³¹Brant, *Paul Tillich*, 211.

³²Brant, *Paul Tillich*, 171-79, 91-92.

lived through or if they were set in locations familiar to the participant.³³ Tillich's account is illuminating at this point. He holds that revelation happens when "the subjective constellation of revelation" (e.g., an individual's narrative) comes into alignment with "the objective constellation of revelation" (e.g., resources of the artwork).³⁴ The individual is on a personal quest, even if only unconsciously.³⁵ What that viewer brings to the encounter, therefore, matters. In a manner of speaking, it could be the making or the breaking of revelation (remembering, of course, that God is the generative agent of revelation). In fact, Brant even observes a correlation between the style of film and the type of experience it typically elicits: realism tends to elicit cognitive-type revelation; formalism tends to elicit mystical-type revelation.³⁶

The recognition of an objective component to revelation is important. When it comes to revelation, there *is* something significant about the film itself. This need not always be the case; even kitsch may sometimes be revelatory.³⁷ Nevertheless, the qualities—and, indeed, *quality*—of a movie usually have some bearing on the outcome. If we set aside film and even the arts for a moment, we see that the same principle applies to revelation through nature. People will sense God's presence more often while watching a sunset than while seeing a decaying possum corpse; more often while pondering the infinities of space than while thinking about a backache; more often while holding a newborn baby than while massaging a slab of raw ribeye. There is no manufacturing of revelation. It strikes whenever and wherever God so chooses. Yet both experience and common sense tell us that certain things are more likely to serve as its occasion.

Brant's research clearly suggests that Tillich is not alone. Several participants related experiences occurring in the context of the cinema that could be described as potentially revelatory.³⁸ Brant thus concludes his study by saying,

³³Brant, *Paul Tillich*, 179-81.

³⁴Brant, *Paul Tillich*, 190.

³⁵Brant, *Paul Tillich*, 188.

³⁶Brant, *Paul Tillich*, 191.

³⁷Sheila J. Nayar, "Reconfiguring the 'Genuinely' Religious Film: The Oral Contours of the Overabundant Epic," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 78, no. 1 (2010): 101-2, <https://doi.org/10.1093/jaarel/lfp086>.

³⁸Brant's methodology is rigorous, applying a stringent set of criteria to "weed out" any experiences less likely to be genuinely revelatory. A broader conceptual net would likely have yielded many more purportedly revelatory experiences in response to film.

“It is my hope that the experiences that were so graciously shared by the interview respondents might be recognized as examples of the possibility of revelation through film, that is of the possibility of the inbreaking of the Spirit of God into the human world in healing, shaking, and even saving power.”³⁹

This conclusion is modest, a reflection of the inherent limitations of this type of data in investigating the mysterious workings of the divine. Although film-mediated revelation is not provable, according to Brant’s study, it is *plausible*. The data reveals that experiences akin to Tillich’s Botticelli experience are not uncommon. At least one reviewer has noted that this is hardly earth-shattering news,⁴⁰ but I think this assessment underestimates the value of the findings. The study adds empirical weight to claims that otherwise tend toward the vague and idiosyncratic. Brant demonstrates that the experience of film-mediated revelation is more than a solipsistic fiction dreamed up by academics or by those possessed by an overzealous mysticism. Experiences regarded as revelatory *actually* happen for ordinary filmgoers.

TRANSCENDENTAL STYLE IN FILM

Aesthetics for ascetics. We may be satisfied that, yes, viewers do indeed report film-mediated revelation, making divine encounter through cinema a genuine possibility. And since revelation involves an objective component and not solely a subjective one, we may consider what, if anything, film form contributes to these purportedly revelatory experiences of cinemagoers. My focus in this book will be primarily on images. Is there something about the way a movie is lit, edited, framed, or composed that is especially conducive to revelatory experience?

A similar question, albeit articulated differently, lies behind Paul Schrader’s seminal articulation of transcendental style, a cinematic aesthetic he claims “has been used by various artists in diverse cultures to express the Holy.”⁴¹ Schrader’s theory warrants close examination, not only because of its monumental influence, but also because it is an account of film form with respect to revelation (or, at least, something close to it). My project is more expressly

³⁹Brant, *Paul Tillich*, 234–35.

⁴⁰Steve Nolan, “Paul Tillich and the Possibility of Revelation Through Film: A Theoretical Account Grounded by Empirical Research into the Experiences of Filmgoers,” *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 29, no. 1 (2014): 172, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13537903.2014.864834>.

⁴¹Paul Schrader, *Transcendental Style in Film: Ozu, Bresson, Dreyer* (New York: Da Capo, 1988), 3.

theological than Schrader's, yet he is a useful sparring partner through which to explore the stylistic dimensions of films that regularly occasion claims of revelatory experience.

Schrader, a scholar-turned-filmmaker, explains that his interest in transcendental style stemmed from his own experience as a viewer:

In certain films, I sensed a kind of link between my past [Christian upbringing] and my present [film career], between the sacred and the profane, between the spiritual life of the Christian and the commercial life of a film. But that link was not content; it was style . . . spirituality and art are not connected by the "what"; they're connected by the "how."⁴²

The "how" he refers to is cinematic style. For Schrader, truly religious cinema is defined by form. "Although transcendental style . . . strives towards the ineffable and the invisible," he writes, "it is neither ineffable nor invisible itself. Transcendental style uses precise temporal means—camera angles, dialogue, editing—for predetermined transcendental ends."⁴³

It might be too much to say that Schrader claims transcendental style mediates *revelation* as such. As a work of film scholarship rather than theology, the theological implications of transcendental style are not spelled out for us. Nevertheless, Schrader seems to envisage a viewer experience akin to revelation, or at the very least, conducive to it. Transcendental style is a cinematic form that "expresses the Transcendent," enables the viewer to "perceive the Transcendent, and then experience transcendence."⁴⁴ Schrader acknowledges that transcendence has been understood by other thinkers variously as mere psychological projection and as caused by an external Other, but he doesn't himself take a clear position.⁴⁵ The experiences Schrader envisages may be, to use phenomenologist Jean-Luc Marion's concept, a "saturated" phenomenon, in which something is so overwhelmingly rich it defies objectification, in excess of the subject's ability to grasp.⁴⁶ Regardless of Schrader's

⁴²Paul Schrader and Joseph Kickasola, "Paul Schrader on Revisiting Transcendental Style in Film (TIFF 2017)," in *TIFF Originals* (December 20, 2017), www.youtube.com/watch?v=m4F8I8OVmUU.

⁴³Schrader, *Transcendental Style in Film*, 3-4.

⁴⁴Schrader, *Transcendental Style in Film*, 51-52.

⁴⁵Schrader, *Transcendental Style in Film*, 5-6.

⁴⁶Jean-Luc Marion, *In Excess: Studies of Saturated Phenomena* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2002); Christina M. Gschwandtner, "Might Nature Be Interpreted as a 'Saturated Phenomenon?'," in *Interpreting Nature: The Emerging Field of Environmental Hermeneutics* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2014).

precise theology on this point, he clearly has in mind the experiential dimension that often accompanies claims of revelation, or transcendence, which Johnston equates with divine encounter and refers to as “‘Transcendence’ with a capital T.”⁴⁷ Indeed, Schrader’s theory comes close enough to suggesting revelation that Johnston considers it under the rubric of divine encounter.⁴⁸ As film scholar David Desser says, “Transcendental style is not dependent on showing us characters . . . who have achieved grace or transcendence, but rather with letting us *experience* the Transcendent through the film’s style.”⁴⁹

Before explaining precisely what transcendental style is, let’s look at what it is *not*. Transcendental cinema is a world away from the movies that normally grab the attention of the religious mainstream. Biblical movies, for example, often generate excitement—or disappointment—among Christians. There seems to be an underlying assumption that the best way to depict the “spiritual” on film is to adapt scriptural narratives for the screen. This stems from a low view of general revelation; the only way a film may be considered revelatory is to take *special* revelation and turn that into a movie. We’ll explore this further in the next chapter.⁵⁰

It’s no small irony then that orthodoxy in film studies holds biblical epics to be among the *least* likely films to occasion revelatory experience.⁵¹ Writing at a time when big-budget religious epics were already an established Hollywood staple, Schrader argued that truly religious films are the very antithesis of religious epics. Consider, for example, how Schrader describes a scene of theophany in Cecil B. DeMille’s biblical epic *The Ten Commandments* (1956):

In the title scene Moses is on Mount Sinai and God is off-screen to the right. After some premonitory thundering, God literally pitches the commandments, one by one, onto the screen and the awaiting blank tablets. The commandments first appear as small whirling fireballs accompanied by the sound of a rushing

⁴⁷Johnston, *Reel Spirituality*, 242.

⁴⁸Johnston, *Reel Spirituality*, 76-78.

⁴⁹David Desser, “Transcendental Style in *Tender Mercies*,” *Religious Communication Today* 8 (1985): 22.

⁵⁰So absolute is this belief that these films are apparently granted a “free pass” by the same sensitive Christian viewers who might ordinarily oppose transgressive content—for example, the gory violence of *The Passion of the Christ* (Mel Gibson, 2004), considered to be among the most violent Hollywood films ever made.

⁵¹Ann Hardy, *Film, Spirituality and Hierophany: The Contemporary Search for Meaning* (Alister Hardy Religious Experience Research Centre, 2002), 7-8.

wind, and then quickly—building in size all the while—zip across and collide with the blank tablets. Puff! the smoke clears, and the tablet is clearly inscribed.⁵²

For Schrader, the scene is bathetic—and pathetic. The problem with these types of movies, he argues, is their reliance on spectacle for their spiritual potency. They may thrill or terrify or emotionally engage an audience, but they lack the ability to facilitate an experience of transcendence. This on-the-nose type of religious film was parodied in the Coen brothers' *Hail, Caesar!* (Ethan Coen, Joel Coen, 2016), a movie set in golden-era Hollywood. In the film, filmmakers watch dailies of a forthcoming biblical epic, in which Saul of Tarsus encounters the risen Christ. It cuts suddenly from the actor Baird Whitlock's (George Clooney) face to a title card that reads "Divine presence to be shot." Later, as he beholds Christ on the cross, Whitlock struggles to alight upon the right awestruck facial expression. This prompts the director to bark, "Squint at the grandeur!" Beneath the trademark Coen brothers' humor is a profound point: using Hollywood spectacle to portray God on screen is absurd.

Enough with the preliminaries—what *is* transcendental style? Transcendentalism takes a minimalist approach, employing plain, unflashy production values, resulting in a decidedly austere look and feel. Religious subject matter is optional; the religious element in transcendental style is a matter of form, not content.⁵³ It is the very antithesis of the blockbuster Hollywood religious epic, yet a more authentically religious aesthetic. According to Schrader, transcendental films achieve this through a three-stage filmic structure: (1) the everyday, (2) disparity, and (3) stasis.⁵⁴

The everyday. This first stage consists of creating a sense of the everyday, the banal details of ordinary existence. Ostensibly a depiction of "real" life, it is in fact highly stylized. After all, real life *does* have moments of genuine drama—all strenuously avoided by the transcendental filmmaker in her depiction of the everyday. The strategy at this stage is simple: minimize the dramatic and maximize the mundane. To that end, the camera is kept static and a narrow range of camera angles employed. Editing is functional, repetitive, predictable. Pacing is slow, if not downright ponderous. Story beats are subtle, lacking the drama of more conventional cinema. Music is minimal, if not absent entirely.

⁵²Schrader, *Transcendental Style in Film*, 163.

⁵³Schrader, *Transcendental Style in Film*, 4.

⁵⁴Schrader, *Transcendental Style in Film*, 39-53.

Performances are subdued to the point that “acting” becomes almost a misnomer. The aggregate effect of these techniques is an ascetic aesthetic.⁵⁵ The everyday is, however, only a means, not an end. Were it an end in itself, it would be essentially nihilistic.⁵⁶ Instead, the everyday is preparatory, a quasi-ritualistic way of priming “reality for the intrusion of the Transcendent.”⁵⁷

Disparity. The second stage involves tampering with the rigorously constructed everyday, thereby creating “a crack in the dull surface of the everyday.”⁵⁸ Specifically, it involves inserting a moment of emotional expression into what is otherwise an unemotional environment. In classical style, such a demonstrative display would be unremarkable. But in transcendental style, virtually any emotional expression is thrown into sharp relief by its drab context. And so there’s a disparity between the cold, indifferent environment of the film and the sensitive, impassioned character(s), prompting us to wonder, “If the environment is unfeeling, where do man’s feelings come from?”⁵⁹—cognitive dissonance that demands resolution. As moments of disparity accumulate throughout the film, what starts out as solely affective gradually takes on a spiritual dimension.⁶⁰ Disparity gradually chips away at the everyday façade, and the resulting tension culminates in a climactic moment of disparity, which Schrader terms *decisive action*.⁶¹

Stasis. This ultimate instance of disparity leads immediately into the third step of transcendental style, in which the tension between the everyday and disparity is finally resolved. But I use “resolved” only loosely, since resolution in transcendental style doesn’t entail either side of the tension triumphing over the other. Instead, both the everyday and disparity are simply accepted, yet seen, somewhat ineffably, as complementary and interconnected. In other words, their incongruity is *transcended*. How? Most typically by ending the film with a static shot, though no ordinary static shot will do. The image must somehow place the film’s conflict into a wider context: a well-chosen still life; a static coda of nature; intercutting a still shot with something more dynamic;

⁵⁵Schrader, *Transcendental Style in Film*, 39-42.

⁵⁶Schrader, *Transcendental Style in Film*, 42.

⁵⁷Schrader, *Transcendental Style in Film*, 39.

⁵⁸Schrader, *Transcendental Style in Film*, 42.

⁵⁹Schrader, *Transcendental Style in Film*, 43.

⁶⁰Schrader, *Transcendental Style in Film*, 43.

⁶¹Schrader, *Transcendental Style in Film*, 46.

zooming or tracking back to reveal the subject against its broader backdrop—techniques that convey an attitude of quiescence.⁶² “Frozen motion . . . establishes an image of a second reality which can stand beside the ordinary reality; it represents the Wholly Other.”⁶³

Abundant and sparse means. At a more fundamental level, transcendental style can be understood as a particular handling of what Schrader, borrowing language first used by Jacques Maritain, calls *abundant means* and *sparse means*.⁶⁴ Abundant means in art are those techniques that are “sensual, emotional, humanistic, individualistic . . . characterized by soft lines, realistic portraiture, three-dimensionality, experimentation; they encourage empathy.” Sparse means, on the other hand, are those techniques that are “cold, formalistic, hieratic. They are characterized by abstraction, stylized portraiture, two-dimensionality, rigidity; they encourage respect and appreciation.”⁶⁵ Abundant means are inherently interesting and thus tend to grab and hold the viewer’s attention, whereas sparse means are comparatively dull.

Transcendental style may use both abundant and sparse means, but in terms of spirituality, Schrader argues the latter is superior: “Sparse means . . . are necessarily closer to the Holy.”⁶⁶ Similarly, he writes, “The ratio of abundant and sparse means can be a measure of the ‘spirituality’ of a work of art. The more a work of art can successfully incorporate sparse means within an abundant society, the nearer it approaches its transcendental ‘end.’”⁶⁷ Elsewhere, Schrader has described sparse means as “withholding techniques,” because the director withholds expected and desired features.⁶⁸ Conventional films rely on abundance for their appeal; indeed, the Hollywood blockbuster has become synonymous with hyperabundance, as each new mega-budget popcorn movie seeks to out-Hollywood earlier efforts by turning the dial way up on special effects, computer-generated imagery, dramatic plotlines, fast cuts, a star-studded cast, and so on. This type of film may thrill, intrigue, amuse, frighten, and titillate. But like its baptized cousin, the biblical epic, it is not

⁶²Schrader, *Transcendental Style in Film*, 49–52.

⁶³Schrader, *Transcendental Style in Film*, 49.

⁶⁴Schrader, *Transcendental Style in Film*, 154–55.

⁶⁵Schrader, *Transcendental Style in Film*, 155.

⁶⁶Schrader, *Transcendental Style in Film*, 154.

⁶⁷Schrader, *Transcendental Style in Film*, 155.

⁶⁸Schrader and Kickasola, “Paul Schrader on Revisiting Transcendental Style.”

ordinarily expected to be spiritually resonant. And, unlike other art forms, cinema has been steeped in abundance since its inception. Abundance is its “mother tongue,” while it has had to learn sparseness.⁶⁹ Crafting a film in transcendental style requires not only striking the right balance between abundant and sparse means, but also progressively tipping the scales toward sparseness as the film progresses.⁷⁰ By the transcendental film’s end, abundant means have been dispensed with entirely, leaving only sparse means—so sparse we are left with total stillness (stasis).

Getting the balance of abundance and sparseness right is important. For Schrader, religious epics are “overabundant” and some experimental films are “oversparse,” and thus fall short of being transcendental.⁷¹ That said, films may effectively use elements of the transcendental style without committing to it exclusively.⁷² In fact, Schrader chose Dreyer as one of his three principal subjects precisely because he used transcendentalism only partially. That transcendental style can be employed to varying degrees has allowed critics to argue, for instance, that *Tender Mercies* (Bruce Beresford, 1983)⁷³ is more transcendental than *Places in the Heart* (Robert Benton, 1984),⁷⁴ though the latter too demonstrates modest use of transcendental elements.⁷⁵ Compromised use of transcendental style means that the style is more operative in the cinema of today than might initially appear to be the case.

Transcendental style in contemporary film: Tamasese, Dardenne, Reygadas. After starting out as a film scholar, Schrader went on to become a celebrated screenwriter and director. As such, some scholars have sought to interpret Schrader’s own films through the lens of transcendental style.⁷⁶ While Schrader acknowledges the influence of transcendentalists like Bresson

⁶⁹Schrader, *Transcendental Style in Film*, 158–59.

⁷⁰Schrader, *Transcendental Style in Film*, 159.

⁷¹Schrader, *Transcendental Style in Film*, 162–67.

⁷²Schrader, *Transcendental Style in Film*, 10.

⁷³Ranked #49, “Top 100 Films—2020,” *Arts & Faith*, 2020, accessed January 3, 2022, <http://artsandfaith.com/index.php?/films/&do=year&id=8&page=2>.

⁷⁴Ranked #95, “Top 100 Films—2020,” *Arts & Faith*, 2020, accessed January 3, 2022, <http://artsandfaith.com/index.php?/films/&do=year&id=8&page=4>.

⁷⁵Richard Engnell, “The Spiritual Potential of Otherness in Film: The Interplay of Scene and Narrative,” *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 12, no. 3 (1995): 258, <https://doi.org/10.1080/15295039509366936>.

⁷⁶For example, see Bill Nichols. “American Gigolo: Transcendental Style and Narrative Form,” *Film Quarterly* 34 (1981): 8–13.

and admits the possibility of having employed transcendental style subconsciously,⁷⁷ he claims to never have consciously sought to use in his own films the aesthetic he identified and made famous—that is, until he released *First Reformed* (Paul Schrader, 2017).⁷⁸ For the first time in his storied career, Schrader intentionally employed transcendental style in one of his own films.⁷⁹

But we need not look only to *First Reformed* to find recent examples of transcendental style. Though Schrader wrote *Transcendental Style in Film* in the 1970s, transcendental style is alive and well in contemporary film even outside his own work. Indeed, Schrader wrote an updated introduction for an anniversary edition of his book in which he equates transcendental style with the contemporary genre of slow cinema.⁸⁰ When Schrader originally penned his work on transcendental style, he concentrated on its chief exponents at the time: Yasujiro Ozu, Robert Bresson, and, to a lesser extent, Carl Theodor Dreyer. All three are undisputed master auteurs, their films still essential viewing for modern-day cinéastes. But appreciating these films in terms of their transcendental qualities is a challenge for some contemporary viewers, since the hierophanous effect is potentially undermined by techniques that feel foreign and alienating. Granted, feeling foreign and alienating is the point. Distancing is partly how transcendental style apparently works, but it seems to me that these techniques may be less spiritually potent for modern audiences. Rather than repeat Schrader's analyses of the classical transcendentalists then, let's examine more recent films that employ and update the style, like *The Orator* (Tusi Tamasese, 2011), *The Son* (Jean-Pierre Dardenne and Luc Dardenne, 2002),⁸¹ and *Silent Light* (Carlos Reygadas, 2007). Note, therefore, that the following films are my examples, not Schrader's.⁸² We have much to learn from Ozu, Bresson, and Dreyer, but also much from this contemporary transcendental triumvirate of Tamasese, the Dardenne brothers, and Reygadas.

⁷⁷Schrader provides a brief response to Nichols's transcendental analysis in Nichols, "American Gigolo," 13.

⁷⁸Ranked #11, "Top 100 Films—2020," *Arts & Faith*, 2020, accessed January 3, 2022, <http://artsandfaith.com/index.php?/films/&do=year&id=8>.

⁷⁹Schrader and Kickasola, "Paul Schrader on Revisiting Transcendental Style."

⁸⁰Paul Schrader, *Transcendental Style in Film: Ozu, Bresson, Dreyer*, vol. 1 (Oakland: University of California Press, 2018), chap. 1, ebook.

⁸¹Ranked #8, "Top 100 Films," *Arts & Faith*, 2011, accessed January 3, 2022, <https://imagejournal.org/top-100-films/>.

⁸²Schrader has, however, subsequently cited *Silent Light* as an example of transcendental style. Schrader and Kickasola, "Paul Schrader on Revisiting Transcendental Style."

Examining how these films both adhere to and deviate from classical transcendentalism will give greater insight into how the style is meant to work.



Figure 1.1. A rare display of emotion in *The Orator* marks this moment as the decisive action

The first ever Samoan-language feature film (a Samoa-New Zealand coproduction), written and directed by the Samoan Tamasese and set entirely in Samoa, *The Orator* tells the story of a taro farmer, Sailsi (Fa’afiaula Sagote), stigmatized for his dwarfism, who finds his voice and reclaims his late father’s chiefly status through an oratorical *tour de force* that secures his right to bury his deceased wife, Vaaiga (Tausili Pushparaj), on family land. Schrader’s concept of the everyday is operative here, and is created through languid pacing, unmotivated shots, and muted performances. Disparity too is apparent, culminating at the film’s climax in Sailsi’s decisive action of exhorting Vaaiga’s family to return her body to him and bestow forgiveness upon her—and, in his only bluntly expressive moment, he cries (fig. 1.1). The film’s penultimate scene is one of stasis, as Sailsi’s tearful plea cuts to a shot of Sailsi and Vaaiga’s daughter, Litia (Salamasina Mataia), sitting on a bus with Vaaiga’s wrapped body on the floor. Sailsi’s request is granted, but the juxtaposition in a single image of polar opposites—life and death, happiness and sadness—elicits the transcendental effect identified by Schrader.⁸³

⁸³Historian Valerie Bichard’s observation that “Tamasese does not appear to be interested in delivering an answer or solution to everyday problems” suggests a complexity to the film’s ending that goes beyond a simple happy/sad binary. Valerie Bichard, “O Le Tulafale/The Orator,” review of *The Orator*,

Critics have noted *The Orator's* similarities to the work of transcendental master Ozu, with both, for instance, sharing a predilection for long-takes.⁸⁴ Tamasese consciously drew upon Ozu in designing the film's look: "The style that I was most attracted to was Japanese, like [that of Yasujiro] Ozu. . . . It's very similar to the master, Ozu. I was trying to find a style that would suit how I wanted to tell the story."⁸⁵ Nowhere is Ozu's influence on the *The Orator* more apparent than in the interior *fale* (house) shots. These evoke Ozu's *tatami* mat shots and interior scenes, which give Ozu's films the feeling that "the ends of the earth are no more distant than outside the house."⁸⁶ Tamasese's debt to Ozu is also apparent in the acting. Ozu (and Bresson) employed what Schrader calls *nonexpressive* performances,⁸⁷ which Tamasese too has sought. Though Sagote is a nonprofessional actor—taro farming is his day job⁸⁸—his nondemonstrative performance isn't due to a lack of skill;⁸⁹ it's simply consistent with transcendental style.

Despite Ozu's influence, *The Orator* breaks with transcendental style in a number of ways. Far from creating the dull surface required by the everyday, the spare visual techniques accentuate the beauty, natural and cultural, of the film's setting. There are enough cinematic flourishes, such as the "un-Ozu" use of dollies and pans, to suggest that Tamasese is seeking to maintain viewer interest rather than frustrate it as rigorous transcendentalism would dictate.⁹⁰ The final scene, too, ever so slightly deviates from the style, with Saili sitting peacefully on Vaaiga's grave on his own land while holding her newborn granddaughter as her daughter sweeps. The shot tracks back into the *fale* to show the characters in their larger natural context—a transcendental technique⁹¹—but the ending is moderately uplifting. Saili has found his voice, Vaaiga has been

Journal of Pacific History 48, February 19, 2013, <https://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00223344.2013.769291>.

⁸⁴Martin Rumsby, "The Ocean Is Our Prairie," *Millennium Film Journal*, no. 61 (2015).

⁸⁵Richard Gray, "The Other Side of Paradise: Tusi Tamasese on 'The Orator,'" *Metro Magazine: Media & Education Magazine*, 2012, 32.

⁸⁶Joseph L. Anderson and Donald Richie, *The Japanese Film*, ed. Donald Richie (New York: Grove Press, 1960), 359; cited in Schrader, *Transcendental Style in Film*, 19.

⁸⁷Schrader, *Transcendental Style in Film*, 66.

⁸⁸Helen Barlow, "Tusi Tamasese: A Voice from Samoa," *NZ Herald* (New Zealand), September 8, 2011, www.nzherald.co.nz/entertainment/news/article.cfm?c_id=150119&objectid=10750044.

⁸⁹Sagote was a finalist for the top acting award at the Asia Pacific Screen Awards. *New Zealand Film Commission Annual Report 2011–2012*, 9, www.nzfilm.co.nz/sites/default/files/NZFC_Annual_Report_2011-2012.pdf.

⁹⁰Schrader, *Transcendental Style in Film*, 63–64.

⁹¹Schrader, *Transcendental Style in Film*, 52.

forgiven, her body buried on his land, and the next generation is thriving. In the final analysis, the commonalities between *The Orator* and transcendental style boil down mostly to emotional restraint and an unhurried pace.

While *The Orator* is far more picturesque than classic transcendental films, the same can't be said of *The Son*, a film of "almost punishing restraint."⁹² The bleak aesthetic that earned directors and brothers Jean-Pierre and Luc Dardenne the moniker "the brothers Grim" is fully realized in this story of a carpentry teacher of at-risk youth who accepts into his class the adolescent murderer of his young son, keeping his identity as the victim's father a secret from the apprentice.⁹³ The Dardenne brothers are frequently likened to the transcendentalist *par excellence* Bresson, and his influence is plain to see. Their Palme d'Or-winning *The Child* (2005)⁹⁴ draws heavily on Bresson's *Pickpocket* (1959), particularly in its final prison visitation scene. Nevertheless, they differ substantially from their fellow Francophone in other respects.⁹⁵ While Bresson's camerawork is static,⁹⁶ the Dardennes' is mobile, "frantic, desperate, vertiginous."⁹⁷ They have carried the use of handheld cameras over from documentary, on which they cut their teeth, to their fictional films, using closeup, tightly framed shots.⁹⁸ Reviewers have made much of the fact that we spend an inordinate amount of screen time looking at the nape of protagonist Olivier's (Olivier Gourmet) neck, shot as it is largely over his shoulder.⁹⁹ The film is set entirely in unphotogenic locations using naturalistic lighting (fig. 1.2). Exterior scenes are shot in grimy, decaying urban environments against uniformly overcast skies. Despite its departure from Bresson's stillness, however, it more effectively constructs the everyday for modern viewers reared on *cinéma vérité*, not to mention "am-cam" news footage and YouTube videos. Contemporary audiences equate handheld photography with documentary realism.

⁹²Erica Abeel, "The Son (Le Fils)," review of *The Son*, Buying & Booking Guide, 2003.

⁹³Justin Chang, "Nothing but the Truth," *Variety*, 2014, 63.

⁹⁴Ranked #46, "Top 100 Films," *Arts & Faith*, 2011, accessed January 3, 2022, <https://imagejournal.org/top-100-films/>.

⁹⁵Chang, "Nothing but the Truth," 62.

⁹⁶Schrader, *Transcendental Style in Film*, 67.

⁹⁷Richard Locke, "Realism with a Heart: The Dardenne Brothers Bring an Idiosyncratic Sympathy to Their Portrayals of Belgian Lowlifes," *The American Scholar* 83, no. 2 (2014): 90.

⁹⁸Locke, "Realism with a Heart," 90-91.

⁹⁹Abeel, "The Son (Le Fils)."



Figure 1.2. The bleak naturalism of *The Son* is an example of the everyday

Like Bresson, the Dardennes employ nonexpressive acting:¹⁰⁰ “We don’t ask [our actors] to express, we don’t want them to emote, we don’t want them to act.”¹⁰¹ Critic Erica Abeel quips that Gourmet’s performance is “remarkable for its complete absence of, well, acting.”¹⁰² (Like *The Orator*’s Sagote, Gourmet’s poker-faced performance nevertheless earned industry accolades, including the supreme acting award at Cannes.)¹⁰³ What we know of Olivier, we know by what he *does*—sprinting, hiding, spying. The look and the performances of the film consistently thwart typical audience strategies of engagement, precisely as transcendental style dictates.¹⁰⁴ The ambience is thus so affectively stifling that when moments of disparity occur—such as when Olivier’s ex-wife, Magali (Isabella Soupart) rages and then faints on learning of his acquaintance with their son’s killer—the contrast between the film’s superficial indifference and the characters’ depth of pain is striking. This is exactly the sort of tension for which Schrader lauded Bresson, but which may be lost on many present-day viewers of Bresson’s films.

The film’s decisive action comes when Olivier pins his apprentice Francis (Morgan Marinne) to the ground with his hand around his throat, about to

¹⁰⁰Schrader, *Transcendental Style in Film*, 65-67.

¹⁰¹Robert Sklar, “The Terrible Lightness of Social Marginality: An Interview with Jean-Pierre and Luc Dardenne,” *Cineaste* 31, no. 2 (2006): 20.

¹⁰²Abeel, “The Son (Le Fils).”

¹⁰³Joan M. West and Dennis West, “Taking the Measure of Human Relationships: An Interview with Jean-Pierre Dardenne and Luc Dardenne,” *Cineaste* 28, no. 3 (2003): 14.

¹⁰⁴Schrader, *Transcendental Style in Film*, 63-64.

snuff out his life the way this boy had done to Olivier's son five years prior. But he allows his fury to subside and, in a poignant act of mercy, releases Francis. The final scene has Francis return to Olivier and, without either uttering a word, resume assisting Olivier in loading a trailer with timber. Stasis is achieved since the film's tension is "resolved" more by acceptance than by triumph. Yet it is a more hopeful form of stasis than Schrader expects of transcendental films; Olivier has forgiven the unforgiveable.



Figure 1.3. The opening image of the sunrise in *Silent Light* is frequently cited for its dazzling beauty

Pacing is the first thing the viewer notices about *Silent Light*, a film about an adulterous relationship in a Mennonite community in Mexico. The opening shot, a pan from the sky to the horizon as night turns to day, is well over five minutes in duration (fig. 1.3). After the opening shot, the languid pace continues. Indeed, that the very next image immediately following the sunrise is of a ticking clock suggests that this film is well aware of its unconventional relationship with time. We then watch a Mennonite family in silent prayer for several minutes, presented as a series of long-takes. Breakfast follows and, once finished, the family vacates, leaving husband and father, Johan (Cornelio Wall), alone. Johan is framed in a midshot that lasts over three minutes, still and expressionless until he begins to sob uncontrollably. A sudden expression of buried emotion interrupts the quotidian façade, disparity amid the everyday as transcendental style stipulates.

Reygadas consciously draws extensively and overtly from Dreyer's *Ordet* (1955),¹⁰⁵ which Schrader considers to be the Danish auteur's most transcendental

¹⁰⁵Jonathan Romney, "Carlos Reygadas: *Silent Light*," *Sight and Sound* 17, no. 7 (2007).

film. *Silent Light*'s debt to *Ordet* is seen most clearly in the decisive action wherein Johan's deceased wife Esther (Miriam Toews) is brought back to life. For Schrader, the resurrection moment in *Ordet* is the perfect example of decisive action, yet he argues that the ending falls short of true stasis.¹⁰⁶ *Silent Light*'s ending is a purer expression of stasis, because of the remarkable lack of celebration in response to the miracle, as if this were an ordinary event (fig. 1.4). This imbues the moment with a pronounced air of mystery, truer to the spirit of transcendental style. From here, the camera begins its movement away from the room where the resurrected Esther lies, across landscapes until it comes to the place where the film began. The final shot is a long-take of the sunset, a mirror image of the opening, bringing the film full circle. Like Ozu, Reygadas contrasts the vicissitudes of human life with the constancy of the setting sun and the natural world.



Figure 1.4. The stoic response to Esther's resurrection contributes to stasis in *Silent Light*

Other transcendental elements are on display in *Silent Light*. "Actors are coached to stare into space for long moments before delivering stiff dialogue with unnatural solemnity," says reviewer Kirk Honeycutt.¹⁰⁷ Like Bresson and the Dardenne brothers, Reygadas favors amateur actors, casting actual Chihuahuense Mennonites.¹⁰⁸ The film also employs a staple technique of transcendental cinema: frontality, in which subjects are framed front-on in symmetrical composition, evocative of religious iconography. Schrader himself has identified *Silent Light* as transcendental.¹⁰⁹ But for all its transcendental

¹⁰⁶Schrader, *Transcendental Style in Film*, 132-38.

¹⁰⁷Kirk Honeycutt, "Silent Light," *Hollywood Reporter* 399 (2007).

¹⁰⁸William Johnson, "Between Daylight and Darkness: *Forever* and *Silent Light*," *Film Quarterly* 61, no. 3 (2008): 21, <https://doi.org/10.1525/fq.2008.61.3.18>.

¹⁰⁹Schrader and Kickasola, "Paul Schrader on Revisiting Transcendental Style."

credentials, the film defies neat categorization. Critics have rightly noted its austerity, yet, paradoxically, it has an inescapably sumptuous quality.¹¹⁰ Those long, lingering takes seem calculated to let us *drink in* the scene, inviting us to luxuriate in the undeniably lovely images. The camera tracks toward Johan as he weeps, visually eliciting our sympathy. Lens flare dances across the screen as Johan and Marianne kiss passionately in closeup (fig. 1.5), making palpable the sunshine and warmth of the moment. Delightful children bathe in a pool, actual Mennonite youngsters who do not need to “act” to convey joy. The dawn-dusk bookends are breathtaking. Simply put, it’s too beautiful to be transcendental in the strict classical sense. Though literally an everyday occurrence, the rising and setting sun is anything but mundane when viewed through Reygadas’s camera. Like his muse Dreyer, Reygadas has blended transcendental style with more expressive approaches.¹¹¹ We will explore *Silent Light*, and its cinematic predecessor, *Ordet*, in far greater detail in chapter four.



Figure 1.5. Backlighting and lens flare call attention to the presence of sunlight, as if the illicit union were divinely blessed

Critique of transcendental style. As these contemporary films demonstrate, transcendental style has enjoyed remarkable staying power. *Transcendental Style in Film* remains an important exploration of film form with respect to the Transcendent. But it has at least two limitations. First, transcendental style is not nearly as universal as Schrader claims, being just one of a number of possible cinematic styles potentially capable of facilitating transcendence. Though Schrader grants that some partially transcendental films may be successful, he

¹¹⁰Honeycutt, “Silent Light.”

¹¹¹Schrader, *Transcendental Style in Film*, 113-14.

apparently considers them successful only to the extent they employ the style.¹¹² Dreyer's films, for instance, are always an alloy of transcendental and other styles, which Schrader claims is why they are only ever partially successful at the transcendental level. Dreyer himself thought the religious power of his films stemmed from their expressionist elements. Schrader disagrees. He believes expressionism is incapable of rising above the psychological; only transcendental style is up to the task.¹¹³

But transcendental style does not have the monopoly on transcendence. *Tender Mercies*, with its Ozuesque narrative ellipses and "retrospectivity" (chronologically ambiguous scene transitions), looks in many ways to be a clear-cut example of transcendental filmmaking.¹¹⁴ But communication scholar Richard Engnell argues that it tinkers with the transcendental formula by giving us an ending that expands and indeed *improves* upon mere stasis: "*Tender Mercies* goes beyond the frozen, largely empty unity of transcendental stasis. . . . This form of transcendence is not frozen or static, but dynamic. The viewer goes beyond acceptance to a hope that is grounded in something certain yet beyond what can be known."¹¹⁵ Engnell's point suggests the spiritual weight of a film is not determined purely by fidelity to Schrader's approach.

Much of what animates Schrader's theory then is his belief in the universality of transcendental style, an aesthetic supposedly versatile enough to encompass the symbolism of diverse religious and cultural traditions, thereby acting as a kind of cinematic *lingua franca* with respect to the spiritual potential of film. Indeed, the very first lines of the book read,

In recent years film has developed a transcendental style, a style which has been used by various artists in diverse cultures to express the Holy. Just as anthropologists at the turn of the century discovered that artisans in unrelated cultures had found similar ways to express similar spiritual emotions, so, in cinema, unrelated film-makers have created a consensus of transcendental style.¹¹⁶

Later, he writes, "Transcendental style, like Byzantine art, is a universal form because it can accommodate different artists and different cultures within a

¹¹²Schrader, *Transcendental Style in Film*, 112.

¹¹³Schrader, *Transcendental Style in Film*, 118.

¹¹⁴Desser, "Transcendental Style in *Tender Mercies*," 25-26.

¹¹⁵Engnell, "Spiritual Potential," 258.

¹¹⁶Schrader, *Transcendental Style in Film*, 3.

common structure . . . transcendental style can adapt to both cultures because it expresses the Transcendent, which knows no culture.”¹¹⁷ The style may be found across various cultural boundaries, but Schrader seems to think it somehow stands above culture.

The persistent claims of universality strike me as improbable. What he takes to be universal is in fact every bit as culturally conditioned as any other. The most persuasive voice on this front is film and literature scholar Sheila Nayar. Nayar has convincingly argued that the scholarly preference for sparse means in cinema stems from the unconscious cultural privileging of literacy over orality. Despite the critical tendency to treat abundance as kitsch—recall the negative assessments of Hollywood’s religious epics above—films of this type often serve for lay audiences as the occasion for hierophany. Nayar cites, for example, a widely attested incident at a 1975 screening of a low-budget Indian movie depicting various Hindu deities in which audiences prostrated themselves in the theater, showering the screen with flower petals.¹¹⁸ One man’s trash really is another man’s treasure.

But the difference in reception cannot simply be chalked up to good taste versus bad. According to Nayar, a viewer’s reception is rooted partly in her episteme, the way of knowing osmosed from the cultural context. Orality fosters a predilection for abundant means, the kind embraced by both Bollywood and Hollywood. Such means are not restricted to the spoken word *per se* but extend to characteristics that tend to accompany speech as opposed to writing, namely techniques and traits that aid comprehension and that have a collective orientation: spectacle, repetition, narrative closure, agonistic action, and a nonpsychological disposition, to name just a few. Plus, storytelling in oral cultures tends toward upholding, not challenging, the status quo:

In the epistemically oral realm, where story functions largely to *conserve* cultural meaning accumulated over the ages, participants are less inclined to “play” indiscriminately with that meaning. For similar reasons, we find that iconography amplified; amplification mitigates any chance of misinterpretation in the transmission of meaning, which a culture that relies on communication as a form of safeguarded memory cannot tolerate.¹¹⁹

¹¹⁷Schrader, *Transcendental Style in Film*, 107-8.

¹¹⁸Nayar, “Reconfiguring the ‘Genuinely’ Religious Film,” 102-3.

¹¹⁹Nayar, “Reconfiguring the ‘Genuinely’ Religious Film,” 108; emphasis original.

Not only so, but the spectacle typical of religious epics flows out of the epistemic context in which their source material was birthed. Films based on the Old Testament, for instance, tend toward overabundance precisely because the Old Testament itself does likewise, incubated as it was in an oral culture.¹²⁰ So when film scholars dismiss overabundant religious films as kitsch, they betray their bias toward high literacy. They associate divine encounter with silence and solitude because those are precisely the conditions in which they usually read and write.¹²¹ We must conclude then, against Schrader, that there is not a transcendental style, but *styles*. As Nayar points out, “Surely the ineffably mysterious is mysterious enough to be ineffable in multiple ways.”¹²²

Critiques of transcendental style have come from other quarters too, which brings me to the second major shortcoming of Schrader’s analysis of transcendental style. According to Terry Lindvall, W. O. Williams, and Artie Terry, there is a gnostic strain in Schrader, informed by his Calvinist heritage, that is “unduly weighted toward denial of the sensate.”¹²³ For Schrader, the “enemy of transcendence is immanence.”¹²⁴ Addressing Bresson’s prison motif, Schrader writes, “On the theological level, the prison metaphor is linked to the fundamental body/soul dichotomy, a linkage which is made by the well-springs of Western thought: both Plato *and the scriptures*. To St. Paul the body of sin is prison.”¹²⁵ Such a dualism is certainly Platonic, but it is not biblical. At the center of the Christian Scriptures stands the divine incarnation and bodily resurrection. Orthodox Christianity is inescapably corporeal. Granted, Schrader’s dualistic interpretation is a common reading of the Bible—but it is a regrettable *misreading*. He writes, “Disparity is the paradox of the spiritual existing within the physical.”¹²⁶ The fact he sees the coexistence of the spiritual and physical as a paradox—indeed, a paradox crying out for resolution—betrays his implicit gnosticism. Without the assumption that the physical and spiritual are fundamentally incompatible, there is no disparity, and

¹²⁰Nayar, “Reconfiguring the ‘Genuinely’ Religious Film,” 111.

¹²¹Nayar, “Reconfiguring the ‘Genuinely’ Religious Film,” 121.

¹²²Nayar, “Reconfiguring the ‘Genuinely’ Religious Film,” 103.

¹²³Terry R. Lindvall, W. O. Williams, and Artie Terry, “Spectacular Transcendence: Abundant Means in the Cinematic Representation of African American Christianity,” *Howard Journal of Communications* 7, no. 3 (1996): 206.

¹²⁴Schrader, *Transcendental Style in Film*, 11.

¹²⁵Schrader, *Transcendental Style in Film*, 88; emphasis mine.

¹²⁶Schrader, *Transcendental Style in Film*, 82.

transcendental style falls flat. Schrader's theological lenses lead him to misconstrue how transcendental style actually "works," at least some of the time.

It may be, therefore, that the transcendental style functions according to Schrader's explanation only when the viewer shares his dualistic assumptions. If you see the physical world as somehow at odds with the spiritual, then you'll be looking for a film to transcend its materiality in order to attain the spiritual. Those who embrace human embodiment, on the other hand, are less inclined to perceive disparity, because they reject the notion that only negation of the physical can pave the way for the spiritual. Lindvall, Williams, and Terry look to African American expressions of Christianity as a counterexample. In answer to Schrader's everyday-disparity-stasis model, they suggest that cinematic representations of famously exuberant African American religion evidence a spectacular-charisma-renewal pattern. The result is hierophany via abundant means, a "spectacular transcendence." But while this pattern is evident in Black cinema, Lindvall et al. argue that Schrader's blindspot is essentially anthropological and theological, rather than cultural: "A persuasive case should be made that Schrader's neglect is not even about race—it is about the expression of the Body."¹²⁷

As the studies of Nayar and Lindvall et al. demonstrate, there are multiple ways to mediate transcendence through cinema. This isn't to say that the transcendental style is entirely wrongheaded. On the contrary, it remains an illuminating account of the spiritual in film. Contemporary transcendentalists, like the Dardenne brothers, show there is genuine power in sparse means. The problem I see in Schrader's account is less in the what as in the why. *Why* do transcendental films have a religious quality? For Schrader, the answer lies in the transcendence of the mundane material world, which is antithetical to the spiritual. The everyday is nothing more than a mere foil for disparity, at which point a sense of the sacred is first intimated. This implicit denigration of the physical is not only theologically unpalatable, it doesn't do justice to how a good many films realize their spiritual power.

The everyday and spiritual realism. According to Schrader, genuinely religious cinema portrays "real" life as a flat, mundane reality requiring transcendence. But, as countless mystics and ordinary saints have discovered, quotidian

¹²⁷Lindvall, Williams, and Terry, "Spectacular Transcendence," 18.

life can be the locus for divine encounter. Could it be that rather than being relegated to the role of mere foil, the everyday may itself mediate the divine? This seems to me to be closer to how transcendental films often actually function religiously. In his essay *Film as Hierophany*, religious studies scholar Michael Bird detailed a cinematic style he terms *spiritual realism*. For Bird, cinema may become the occasion for hierophany, a “disclosure of the transcendent or sacred precisely through the material of reality.”¹²⁸ For this reason, hierophany is “particularly valuable for those explorations that begin with the everyday raw material of existence,” the same raw material from which film is fashioned.¹²⁹ First, Bird uses the work of Tillich and phenomenologist Mikel Dufrenne to detail the relationship between material reality as embodied by culture and the transcendent. As discussed above, Tillich argued that reality may become transparent to ultimate reality that undergirds it, which he termed *belief-ful realism*.¹³⁰ In this view, we perceive the reality of God not by looking away from our earthly existence, but rather *at* it. Material reality thus becomes a window onto the holy. Bird draws a comparison between belief-ful realism and Dufrenne’s notion of “sensuous realism,” in which an aesthetic object enables the spectator to advance beyond mere reflection to corporeal feeling, enabled to perceive “a *Real* that underlies the *real*.”¹³¹ For Tillich and Dufrenne, close examination of the physical yields the depth that lies beneath.

Second, Bird examines the work of influential film theorists André Bazin and Siegfried Kracauer, who independently argued that the true strength of cinema lies in its relationship to reality.¹³² Bazin was influenced by French phenomenologists.¹³³ Against the previously dominant “formative” school of thought, which held that a film attains the status of art only insofar as it transforms reality, Bazin championed realism as cinema’s true strength.¹³⁴ He noted that painting is inescapably subjective. The viewer knows that the painting has been reproduced by human hand. Photography, by contrast, is

¹²⁸Michael S. Bird, “Film as Hierophany,” in *Religion in Film* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1982), 3.

¹²⁹Bird, “Film as Hierophany,” 3.

¹³⁰Bird, “Film as Hierophany,” 5-7.

¹³¹Bird, “Film as Hierophany,” 8; emphasis original.

¹³²Bird, “Film as Hierophany,” 9-13.

¹³³Andrew Quicke, “Phenomenology and Film: An Examination of a Religious Approach to Film Theory by Henri Agel and Amédée Ayfre,” *Journal of Media and Religion* 4, no. 4 (2005).

¹³⁴Bird, “Film as Hierophany,” 9-14.

mechanically reproduced, untainted by human intervention, lending it an air of objectivity.¹³⁵ Thus, Bazin creatively contrasts the frame of a painting with the border of a film image. The ornate frame of a painting establishes the painting's discontinuity with reality, whereas the edge of a film frame is akin to "a piece of masking" that suggests the cinematic image is continuous with reality itself: "The frame is centripetal, the screen centrifugal."¹³⁶ Similarly, film scholar Siegfried Kracauer posited that film's essence is its ability to capture physical reality, "to explore this texture of everyday life":¹³⁷

Film renders visible what we did not, or perhaps even could not, see before its advent. It effectively assists us in discovering the material world with its psycho-physical correspondences. We literally redeem this world from its dormant state, its state of virtual nonexistence, by endeavoring to experience it through the camera. . . . The cinema can be defined as a medium particularly equipped to promote the redemption of physical reality. Its imagery permits us, for the first time, to take away with us the objects and occurrences that comprise the flow of life.¹³⁸

For Kracauer, the problem with the modern world is that it has fallen prey to abstraction. The solution is film.¹³⁹ It is no coincidence that Kracauer resorts to religious language to describe cinema's peculiar power, namely physicality's "redemption." For him, film is a microscope on daily life and thus he finds the world not void, but rather infused with the sacred.

Third, Bird turns to two of Bazin's disciples: Amédée Ayfre and Henri Agel. Ayfre and Agel, both devout Christians, used Bazin's spiritually inflected thought to focus specifically on cinema as the vehicle for transcendence. Bird explains:

Ayfre suggests that there is a cinematic approach to the sacred that discloses not only at surface appearances but also its inner strivings that point to its depth. "Genuinely" religious films . . . are those in which the cinematographic recording of reality does not exhaust reality but rather evokes in the viewer the sense of its ineffable mystery.¹⁴⁰

¹³⁵ André Bazin, *What Is Cinema?*, ed. Hugh Gray, Jean Renoir, and François Truffaut (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 12-13.

¹³⁶ Bazin, *What Is Cinema?*, 165-66.

¹³⁷ Siegfried Kracauer, *Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997), 304.

¹³⁸ Kracauer, *Theory of Film*, 300.

¹³⁹ Kracauer, *Theory of Film*, 285-96.

¹⁴⁰ Bird, "Film as Hierophany," 14.

For thinkers like Ayfre and Agel, cinema may help us perceive the “holy within the real,” which happens when cinema turns its attention to reality in such a way that the sacred is perceptible therein.¹⁴¹

Religious film scholar Andrew Quicke notes that, because these Franco-phone theorists’ work remains untranslated into English, they are known to Anglophone audiences mostly through their influence on Schrader.¹⁴² Quicke thus draws a close association between Schrader and these earlier French thinkers. But there is a significant difference between transcendental style and spiritual realism, at least as it is articulated by Bird. While Schrader views ordinary physical life as being at cross-purposes with spiritual existence, Bird sees materiality as a portal to the sacred. In spiritual realism, “cinema becomes not so much a voice of the artist but rather a diaphragm which is sensitive to the speech of the cosmos waiting to be heard.”¹⁴³ The difference between transcendental style and spiritual realism is, in part, theological. And perhaps this difference is the reason Agel could find the experience of watching *The Passion of Joan of Arc* (Carl Theodor Dreyer, 1928)¹⁴⁴ transcendent, while Schrader could only dismiss it as being too expressionist to be capable of such.¹⁴⁵

Bird seems to imply that cinema may achieve transcendence through a quasi-documentary approach to reality. I am less convinced on this particular point, since contemporary cinema has yielded spiritually resonant works that depart from realism to some extent and yet, in doing so, accentuate the sacred quality of reality. *The Tree of Life* (Terrence Malick, 2011),¹⁴⁶ for example, features computer-generated imagery of dinosaurs and protozoa (not to mention a levitating person and a highly symbolic birth sequence), but seems capable of revealing a sense of the holy by virtue of its sensuousness. We might call this *sacramental style*, since it is an aesthetic in which the physical need not be transcended; rather, here creation may be the mediator of divine sacramentality (it’s surely no coincidence that Schrader has expressed puzzlement about the

¹⁴¹Bird, “Film as Hierophany,” 13.

¹⁴²Quicke, “Phenomenology and Film,” 247.

¹⁴³Bird, “Film as Hierophany,” 13, 20.

¹⁴⁴Ranked #1, “Top 100 Films,” *Arts & Faith*, 2011, accessed January 3, 2022, <https://imagejournal.org/top-100-films/>.

¹⁴⁵Bird, “Film as Hierophany,” 15.

¹⁴⁶Ranked #3, “Top 100 Films—2020,” *Arts & Faith*, accessed January 3, 2022, <http://artsandfaith.com/index.php?/films/&do=year&id=8&page=2>.

religious appeal of Malick, dismissing it as “pantheist mumbo-jumbo”).¹⁴⁷ Again, Nayar is helpful in helping us understand how it is that such an abundant film, which explicitly departs from reality at times, may still hold religious power for some audiences. Apart from this minor quibble with Bird, his notion of spiritual realism may often be a more accurate and theologically robust account of how certain films function religiously than transcendental style. The close scrutiny of our world afforded us by this sort of cinema may lead us to exclaim, like Jacob, that “surely the LORD is in this place . . . How awesome is this place!” (Gen 28:16-17).

Spiritual realism often takes the form of a focus on the quotidian. Film scholar Ann Hardy has called this type of filmic representation of daily life *meditative style*, which lacks any gnostic sense that mundane existence must be transcended in order to be religiously meaningful.¹⁴⁸ This sort of slow-paced, closely shot film mesmerizes and entrances, opening us to a sense of the sacred. On screen, the ordinary objects, settings, and actions that make up our unremarkable lives are “redeemed,” taking on a beauty and meaning mostly invisible to us in the warp and woof of lived experience. Despite the directors’ respective debts to the classical transcendentalists, perhaps the dazzling *Silent Light* and even the grim *The Son* owe their spiritual power as much to meditative style as they do to transcendental style. Indeed, Reygadas takes an expressly Kracauerian position, stating that

cinema is the art of reality, the medium in which reality’s beauty is captured, where you can film marble or a face, or record someone’s voice, a sunset, the innate beauty of what you’re contemplating . . . take Cornelio Wall’s wrinkles, his tone of voice in *Silent Light*. These are things I didn’t imagine before, I only allowed my camera to absorb them. . . . The camera is a funnel taking in reality.¹⁴⁹

Though superficially a textbook example of transcendental style, the opening sequence of *Silent Light* that culminates in Johan’s tears is in actuality deep perception and deep contemplation of the world. It isn’t just disparity that strikes us as sacred here—it is the everyday too. Perhaps the power of the everyday that Schrader highlights is due not to its being mundane, but rather its capacity to reveal the extraordinary quality of ordinary reality. This is why

¹⁴⁷Schrader and Kickasola, “Paul Schrader on Revisiting Transcendental Style.”

¹⁴⁸Hardy, *Film, Spirituality and Hierophany*, 12.

¹⁴⁹Carlos Reygadas, José Castillo, and Camino Detorrela, “Carlos Reygadas,” *BOMB*, no. 111 (2010): 74-75.

Silent Light opens with a long-take of a sunrise so rhapsodic that, as film and literature scholar Roy Anker notes, what on paper would seem unbearably pretentious in fact won over a good many reviewers.¹⁵⁰ The film is austere, yet also abundant. The camera reveals the abundance of ordinary existence that we routinely overlook. Transcendentalism is not entirely absent, as even here we find traces of it, particularly in its narrative structure and acting. Roy Anker notes how the nonexpressive acting prods viewers to “ponder the mysteries of the soul and its embodiedness, and especially the depths that lie beyond expression.”¹⁵¹ Elements of transcendental style coexist with meditative style.

Even *American Beauty* (Sam Mendes, 1999) similarly blends such styles.¹⁵² Ricky obsessively films his life as a form of meditation, tapping into film’s hierophanous potential, his grainy footage of real life paradoxically more authentically beautiful than the luxuriant imagery of Lester’s sexual fantasies.¹⁵³ Meanwhile, the film’s ending exhibits stasis, in which the contented expression on the face of the freshly murdered Lester is met by Ricky’s quizzical gaze, paradoxically uniting death and beauty. Hardy concludes that

the ambiguous resonance of this sequence suggests that Schrader’s theory of transcendental style as a description of the means by [which] hierophany can be melded with a parable-like form of narrative retains considerable explanatory power. But at the same time, the fact that *American Beauty* is, relatively speaking, embedded in abundance and irony, reinforces claims that there is more work to be done on examining the nature of representations of transcendence in popular, post-modern, as opposed to elitist and modernist film.¹⁵⁴

Hardy is right: transcendental style does indeed have explanatory power. But, taken alone, it does not explain enough, because many films that resonate spiritually with audiences are steeped in abundance. For many viewers, abundance holds more potential for transcendence than sparseness. Transcendental style works to frustrate viewer affect and thwart emotional identification with characters—quite the opposite aim to that of mainstream styles.

¹⁵⁰Roy Anker, “Dazzle Gradually,” *Books & Culture*, 2009, 22.

¹⁵¹Anker, “Dazzle Gradually.”

¹⁵²Hardy, *Film, Spirituality and Hierophany*, 19–20.

¹⁵³Johnston, *Useless Beauty*, 66–68.

¹⁵⁴Hardy, *Film, Spirituality and Hierophany*, 19–20.

Schrader writes, “For the many who require no more from sacred art than emotional experience, [religious epic] films are sufficient.”¹⁵⁵ The implication is clear: there is little room for emotion in transcendental style.

The problem is that affect is often closely intertwined with revelatory experience. Recall that Brant identified two types of potentially revelatory experience: cognitive type and mystical type. The type of experience reported by the participants in Brant’s study sometimes correlated with the degree of immediacy of the experience. Those participants who described the onset of the purportedly revelatory experience as gradual had a tendency to emphasize its intellectual component, whereas those who described it as immediate were slightly more likely to emphasize its emotional component.¹⁵⁶ Nevertheless, most participants interpreted their experiences as significantly engaging intellect *and* emotion.

We cannot, therefore, think of revelatory experience solely in terms of reason, as if it were always simply a cognitive process. Allegedly revelatory experience is often bound up with intense emotion. We see this, for example, in Kutter Callaway’s analysis of lay viewers’ online responses to *Moulin Rouge!* (Baz Luhrmann, 2001), specifically its music. Callaway identifies a three-stage pattern in which these viewers relate their affective responses to spirituality: (1) They describe the intensely emotional quality of the experience; (2) they recognize their affective response in terms of the physiological changes they experience (e.g., crying, tingling); and (3) they often use religiously inflected language to describe the significance of the experience.¹⁵⁷ It seems there is a profound connection between affect and experiences we interpret as revelatory. You would be hard-pressed to find a film more abundant than *Moulin Rouge!*, but it is precisely its abundance that gives it its power to facilitate “‘Transcendence’ with a capital T.”¹⁵⁸ As the work of Nayar and Lindvall et al. have shown, there are ways to mediate the transcendent through cinema that diverge from Schrader’s transcendental style, styles that embrace abundance.

For that reason, this book covers a diverse range of films, both sparse and abundant. We’ll look at *Ordet*, which Schrader identifies as *almost* exemplary

¹⁵⁵Schrader, *Transcendental Style in Film*, 163-64.

¹⁵⁶Brant, *Paul Tillich*, 172.

¹⁵⁷Callaway, *Scoring Transcendence*, chap. 4.

¹⁵⁸Johnston, *Reel Spirituality*, 242.

of the style, and *Silent Light*, which as we have already discussed, mixes elements of transcendental but also meditative (or sacramental) style. We'll analyze *2001: A Space Odyssey*, a far cry from transcendental style yet employing sparse amid abundant means. And we'll explore *Magnolia* too, which is "hyperabundant," to co-opt Nayar's term. This selection of films reflects my conviction that a range of film styles may elicit claims of revelatory experience. I will invoke transcendental style where appropriate, because of its enduring explanatory power, but only with the qualifier that I reject any implied spirit-matter dualism. As such, my understanding of how the style functions (at least some of the time) differs from that of Schrader and aligns more neatly with the spiritual realism of Michael Bird.

Scorsese is not alone in finding cinema to be a haven of revelation. Claims of divine revelation are indeed elicited by films—and, I have been arguing, by a more diverse array of films than has sometimes been accounted for by scholars. Sparse means remain important in the discussion of religious cinema, but abundant means are just as relevant. Ironically—though, in the light of our discussion above, not surprisingly—the evidence suggests even Scorsese's disfavored Marvel movies may function in this capacity for some viewers.¹⁵⁹ Perhaps it is the revelatory possibilities of cinema that have led Scorsese to remark elsewhere, "I believe there is a spirituality in films, even if it's not one which can supplant faith. . . . They fulfill a spiritual need that people have to share a common memory."¹⁶⁰ The "spirituality" he speaks of is not reducible to religious subject matter; it is inextricably linked to form and to the experience of film viewing itself.

¹⁵⁹For example, some audiences have understood their response to Marvel's *Black Panther* (Ryan Coogler, 2018) as a religious experience. See Laurel Zwissler, "Black Panther as Spirit Trip," *Journal of Religion & Film* 22, no. 1 (2018).

¹⁶⁰Martin Scorsese and Michael Henry Wilson, *A Personal Journey with Martin Scorsese Through American Movies* (Hyperion Books, 1997), 166. Cited in the epigraph of Clive Marsh and Gaye Ortiz, eds., *Explorations in Theology and Film: Movies and Meaning* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1998).

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