Transcendental Style Reconsidered: Absence, Presence, and a "Place Which Is Not-a-Place"

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IN THE WINTER OF 2016, the usual academic crowd of the Society of Cinema and Media Scholars annual conference witnessed an unusual sight: the personal appearance of renowned critic-turned-filmmaker Paul Schrader, there to respond to a panel, organized by Cristina Ruiz-Poveda and myself, on the reconsideration of his formative 1972 volume *Transcendental Style in Film: Ozu, Bresson, Dreyer*.[1] By Schrader's own admission, this experience led him to a process of "rethinking," in which he asked himself: "How did I come to write the book in the first place and how does its premise hold up after forty-five years?" (1). The result of such self-probing was the reissue of this seminal work two years later, with an extended new introduction where Schrader explains "what became of transcendental style" (1) in the intervening period since it was first theorized.

An important study in the scholarly field of film and spirituality, *Transcendental Style*'s lasting prominence may be attributed to Schrader's achievement in publishing his master's thesis as a book at the tender age of twenty-four or to his subsequent reputation as a premier filmmaker and close collaborator of Martin Scorsese. Yet a more decisive reason for the way this volume stood out over the years may arguably be found in the ambitiousness of its project: to comprehensively address cinema's "spiritual aspirations" (Pence 50), over and against the dominance of film studies' "iconoclastic approach," which interrogates the medium for its "ability to reveal and remake a thoroughly human-centered world" (Pence 33). Schrader was not the first to offer such a challenge. Interrogating the intersection of film and spirituality/religion was very much the vogue with several key theorists in post–World War II France—most notably André Bazin and his acolytes Amédée Ayfre and Henri Agel;[2] and in the United States, as Schrader himself attests, Susan Sontag paved the way for such discussions through her formative writing on Robert Bresson's "spiritual style."[3] For his part, Schrader's unique accomplishment was to take these scholarly efforts and give a clear and sweeping expression to a central claim that connected many of them: namely, that cinema's spirituality resided in form more than content, especially in the austere form of certain works where "sentimentality is eschewed in favor of filmic reality and transparence" (Nayar 38). Focusing on "the How, not the What" (Schrader 2), Schrader bypassed cultural and denominational differences in order to chart out a common stylistic ground of cinematic asceticism between West and East—or specifically, between cineastes Robert Bresson and Yasujirō Ozu—that is

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decisively "spiritual (related to the spirit as opposed to matter)" (2). This shared austere form—the "transcendental style"—could also be traced back to non-cinematic antecedents of religious or spiritual art, leading Schrader to make the ostentatious yet influential argument that this style is a universal expression of what he terms the Transcendent.

For decades, Schrader's paradigm went virtually unchallenged due to the paucity of similar interventions in a disciplinary environment hostile to discussing filmic spirituality and its aesthetic implications. In recent years, however, interest in cinema's spiritual aspirations was reinvigorated within film scholarship, and quite naturally, this growth evolved through a critique of Schrader's dominant model. By exposing the transcendental style as a limited definition disguised behind claims of perennialism, contemporary discussions have done much to surface the aesthetic diversity and cultural specificity of global cinema's attempts to engender spiritual experiences. They also, perhaps inadvertently, brought further attention to Schrader's original statements, by now regurgitated ad nauseam, and as a result created the conditions for their recent reprinting.

Tellingly, in his published reappraisal, Schrader does not discuss these challenges to the transcendental model, opting instead to present a narrative (and a diagram!) that situate it within the historical development of "slow cinema." Having been made aware of opposing views,[4] his disregard thus seems at the very least intentional and arguably unfortunate. The following pages aim to face this missed opportunity and its underlying disavowal head-on. In this capacity, I do not wish to extend preexisting critiques to the updated version of Schrader's monumental and monolithic account, regardless of their validity and significance. Rather, what I propose is to reconsider the transcendental model with the purpose of freeing it from the narrow confines to which it was imprisoned by contemporary critical efforts—and, through his recent omission, by Schrader himself. Indeed, what will be suggested here is that Schrader's original argumentation maintains an elusive quality, even as it attempts to prescribe an essentialist vision of spiritual aesthetics. This elusiveness, in turn, can be posited as an asset rather than a hindrance to current theory on cinema's spiritual dimension—for in attempting to set itself at the opposite pole from Schrader's theoretical model, this body of work also has unwittingly trapped itself in essentialist positions that do not befit the elusiveness of the spiritual-filmic experiences it wishes to describe.

The Transcendental Style Thought and Rethought: Absence versus Presence

As he tells it, Schrader did not initiate his book project "out of academic obligation or desire to publish," but because he "had a problem" and "was looking for an answer" (1). The problem had to do with a yearning to bridge the gap between his love for movies and his strict Calvinist upbringing, which denounced such worldly pleasures. This bridge, he gradually discovered, was one "of *style*, not content." By confronting certain techniques on the screen, the young Schrader could see how films may provoke a spiritual experience not unlike the one praised by the church. Also, through tracing a connection between formal strategies across a diverse cultural landscape, he could articulate a far-reaching definition of filmic spirituality that was "neither parochial nor Christian nor Western" (2), and hence did not tie him down to the denominational constraints of his childhood.

At the outset of his study, Schrader asserts the existence of the Transcendent, defined as a metaphysical agency that is "Wholly Other."[5] Although the Transcendent cannot be analyzed, he further argues, one *can* "describe the immanent and the manner in which it is transcended" (39). His focus therefore shifts to the realm of immanent acts and artifacts "which *express* the Transcendent in human reflection; man-made, man-organized, or man-selected works which are more expressive of the Wholly

Other than of their individual creators, works such as the Byzantine ikons or Zen gardens" (38). To the extent that they are true expressions of the universal Transcendent, these "transcendental" works, in Schrader's mind, all share "a general representative form" (40)—a universal *style*. He does not deny the existence of obvious differences between various transcendental artifacts, yet opts to relegate those differences to the secondary standing of cultural and personal inflections upon a common formal structure.

Though he touches upon non-filmic manifestations of this structure, Schrader's focus is understandably on how the latter can "create an alternate *film* reality—a transcendent one" (3). In translating the transcendental style into cinematic terms, he proceeds to compare three directors—Ozu, Bresson, and to a lesser extent, Carl Theodor Dreyer—who, though the products of different cultural and religious contexts, arguably display a similar use of "precise temporal means—camera angles, dialogue, editing—for predetermined transcendental ends." This shared aesthetic strategy, as the comparison appears to reveal, operates in "three distinct stages, and those stages can be studied both individually and as part of the larger whole" (36).

The first of these stages is the everyday. As Schrader explains it, the makers of transcendental film interrogate quotidian reality so as to expose through it traces of the Transcendent. In doing so, this cinematic form radically departs from classic film traditions: instead of exploiting the medium's expressive means to create a spectacular and compelling image of the world, it strips reality to its bare bones, providing "a meticulous representation of the dull, banal commonplaces of everyday living" (67). It is an austere stylization where, "given a selection of inflections, the choice is monotone; a choice of sounds, the choice is silence; a choice of actions, the choice is stillness" (67). With the expunging of what Bresson defined as "screens"—for Schrader the "emotional constructs" (89) that enable spectatorial identification—what remains is a certain factual coldness that "blocks the emotional and intellectual exits, preparing the viewer for the moment when he [*sic*] 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" (97).

The audience does not give up on its feelings so easily, however, and in spite of being "told . . . they are of no use," it still "seeks direction as to what role [those] feelings will play" (Schrader 70). In Schrader's mind, the transcendental style encourages this "mood of expectation" (70) through allowing "a strangely suspicious quality" to gradually emerge from within the everyday—a certain "unnatural density" (97) that is first attributed to human emotionality, yet at a certain point is revealed to be spiritual in kind.

The tension between this density and its cold surroundings, a "growing crack in the dull surface of everyday reality" (70), is what shapes the second stage of Schrader's model: disparity. The growth of disparity reaches its culmination in a "decisive action": "an incredible event within the banal reality which must by and large be taken on faith . . . a nonobjective emotional event within a factual, emotionless environment" (74). An example of this is found in the final scene of Bresson's *Pickpocket* (1959). As Schrader describes it,

> 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. . . . Michel's passion . . . creates a growing sense of disparity. Then in a somewhat abrupt ending, Michel is apprehended and imprisoned. . . . 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. (106)

The decisive action confronts the spectator with a decision: either accept or reject this "nonobjective emotional event" as gesturing toward the Transcendent. If the spectator chooses the path of rejection, then "he [*sic*] 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" (107); however, "if the viewer accepts the decisive action," then "he [*sic*] is willing to accept and appreciate an idea of life in which all emotions, however contradictory, have no power in themselves but are only part of a universal form which expresses the inner unity of every phenomenon" (77).

Onscreen, this realization is given a concrete image through stasis, which marks the third stage of Schrader's tripartite model. In his terminology, stasis comes in the form of "a still view of natural surroundings, and the strong implication of the unity of all existence" (80). The still view does not negotiate disparity but rather "freezes" it into a vision of "a '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" (108). According to Schrader, examples of this may be found in Ozu's "codas": seemingly irrelevant shots of everyday objects or outdoor landscapes that the Japanese filmmaker uses to punctuate (and puncture) the dramatic flow of his films. Each shot is paradoxically both a disruption and an integrant of the natural order, "a still life view which connotes Oneness" by "establish[ing] an image of a second reality which can stand beside the ordinary reality" (76). The endings of various Bresson films carry a similar effect: for instance, the charred stake in the finale of *The Trial of Joan of Arc* (1962), which Schrader regards as "still a physical entity" but "also the spiritual expression of Joan's martyrdom" (108); or the celebrated concluding moment of *Diary of a Country Priest* (1951), where the shadow of the cross materializes on a blank background, bringing the concrete and the abstract together into an ephemeral dialogue. Unlike the decisive action, such images do not function as an "open call for emotion" (105) on the side of the viewer; rather, their transcendental effect "transforms empathy into aesthetic appreciation, experience into expression, emotions into form" (77).

Schrader is adamant that although various films can and do include parts of the transcendental style, for this effect to take place, the three-stage progression must be followed religiously. This position is made evident through his discussion of Dreyer, who, unlike Bresson and Ozu, "never totally yielded to the transcendental style; he respected it, pioneered many of its techniques, gradually came to use it more and more, but was never willing to completely forsake the expressive, psychological techniques at which he was also expert" (135). Thus envisaged, his films may stylize the everyday through transcendental techniques, but he rarely directs these to a transcendental destination: Dreyer hedges his bets, grounding the decisive action in immanent corporeal reality and hence denying its potential spiritual valences. This leads Schrader to state that the Danish director remains "uncommitted to either psychology or spirituality, expressionism or transcendental style . . . [and] begets a similar lack of commitment in the spectator—stasis is not achieved" (125).

Although Dreyer is figured as regrettably caught between the spiritual and the psychological/physical, his films, especially later ones such as *Ordet* (1955), nevertheless make meaningful gestures toward the transcendental style. In contrast, many other films commonly seen as "spiritual" or "religious" are deemed by Schrader unworthy of the title, simply because they are antithetical to this style. The transcendental cinema of Ozu and Bresson follows a temporal progression from an *abundant* to a *sparse* image: it provides familiar narrative cues "to sustain audience interest" but gradually eliminates them, thereby "reject[ing] the empathetic rationale for that interest in

order to set up a new priority" (178). Works by other filmmakers, however, often purport to achieve a spiritual effect but "fail" to follow the same progression. Thus, a structural film of "extended stasis" such as Michael Snow's *Wavelength* (1967) is regarded as "oversparse" since it "does not allow the viewer to progress from abundant to sparse means. It requires too much of him [*sic*], demanding instant stasis, and drives him figuratively (and often literally) from the theater" (Schrader 183). On the other hand, a "conventional religious film" such as Cecil B. DeMille's *The Ten Commandments* (1956) is defined by Schrader as "overabundant" because it

> amplifies the abundant artistic means inherent to motion pictures: the viewer is aided and encouraged in his [*sic*] desire to identify and empathize with character, plot and setting. . . . A confrontation between the human and spiritual is avoided. The decisive action is not an unsettling stylistic shock, but the culmination of the abundant means used throughout the film. It fulfills the viewer's fantasy that spirituality can be achieved vicariously; it is the direct result of his identification. (181–82)

Schrader does not deny the possibility that, on the "spectrum of abundant artistic means leading to sparse artistic means," forms other than the one he advocates could "represent a greater mystery." Yet the comparison to overabundant and oversparse films convinces him that "at present, no film style can perform this crucial task as well as the transcendental style" (185).

Forty-five years later, Schrader's position seems to have remained largely unwavering. In retrospect, he defines transcendental style "as part of a larger movement, the movement away from narrative" (3). Specifically, he sees this style as feeding into "slow cinema," a trend that has come into its own on the world stage since the 1990s. The crux of slow cinema, in Schrader's formulation, is the foregrounding of time as a principal figure: as "the story—or at least its central component" (10). Films accomplish this task by "replac[ing] action with stillness, empathy with distance" (17), which inevitably propels spectators' attention toward time per se. As discussed previously, these techniques were already present in the transcendental style of Bresson and Ozu. Yet they were not taken to such extremes as in slow cinema, and the manipulation of time was not featured as the earlier films' primary focus. Giving time primacy, in Schrader's eyes, marked a shift that began after he wrote *Transcendental Style*, as evident in Andrei Tarkovsky's filmic experiments in "sculpting time" and Gilles Deleuze's subsequent theorization of the filmic "time-image." Inspired by those attempts, a variety of filmmakers increasingly started to "retard time [and] withhold the expected" (Schrader 11), applying this strategy for different effects and objectives. Of the resulting cinematic output, for Schrader only a small minority followed the path of transcendental stylistics: for example, such films as Alexander Sokurov's *Mother and Son* (1997), Carlos Reygadas's *Silent Light* (2007), Bruno Dumont's *Hadewijch* (2009), Jessica Hausner's *Lourdes* (2009), and Paweł Pawlikowski's *Ida* (2013). Other slow movies may have tried to emulate the transcendental style but failed to create its desired outcome—including those by Tarkovsky, which were arguably more about "the artist's self-apotheosis [than] about the Wholly Other" (25). The movement, in Schrader's understanding, developed by and large into three other directions that do not manifest transcendental commitments: the "surveillance camera," which focuses on a detailed exposition of concrete reality and may be an art cinema version of "overabundance" (25–28); the "art gallery," which moves cinema toward pure abstraction and resonates with Schrader's original categorization of "oversparseness" (28–30); and "the mandala" film of meditative experience, which seems to come closest to the transcendental idea, yet to which Schrader does not lend a similar spiritual aura (30–31).

These novel insights capitalize on what made *Transcendental Style* so impactful in the first place: Schrader's sensitive eye for the uses

of cinematic form and his ability to formulate broad generalizations that are as compelling as they are elegant. Yet the new introduction also sustains the weaknesses of the original volume, whose argumentation was unaccountably rigid and totalizing. Though Schrader opens up his theorization to a wider sphere of cinematic activity, the governing limits of discussion remain those of ascetic art cinema. This framework enables him to keep rushing through various cultural contexts, highlighting their commonalities over their differences, and, albeit with less verve, to further support certain aesthetic hierarchies, which seem to disclose in their core the relative arbitrariness of personal taste. Ultimately, what is diagrammed is a slow cinema monad where variants disperse like "errant electrons" around a narrative nucleus, and where the transcendental style occupies just "a bit of space" (Schrader 32–33); rare as it may be, however, this latter aesthetic form also remains the only instance where claims to filmic spirituality find their supposed validation.

As a new spin on an old paradigm, Schrader's rethinking does not offer much by way of a direct response to the various critiques leveled against his model in recent years. Of these, arguably the most vocal have been against the model's perennialism, which sidelines cultural contingency in favor of a universal formula that is very narrowly defined and given the standing of first principle. Rather than acquiesce to this absolutist rhetoric, critics have tended to expose its own repressed specificity. As Terry Lindvall, W. O. Williams, and Artie Terry phrase it, the book's argument is a reflection of "Schrader's Calvinist and even Gnostic sentiments, and an academic elitism that prefers spirituality as an intellectual or mystic insight" (208). Swayed by this particular background, the model's supporters thus "presume that transcendental is characterized by darkness, silence, stasis, and the like, because they are drawn a priori to those expressions of the Holy based upon their intrinsic religious sentiments, and they subsequently view the transcendental cinema expressions of all other cultures through those filters" (Lindvall et al. 208). In the face of such cultural narrowmindedness, scholarship has brought the weight of multiculturalism to bear, foregrounding spiritual forms and beliefs that do not adhere to Schrader's particular theological-aesthetic proclivities. More often than not, these forms and beliefs have exhibited a *via positiva* (way of affirmation) through their heightened sense of "immanence" and "presence," over and against a tendency toward "transcendence" and "absence" that supposedly characterizes the transcendental style as a *via negativa* (way of negation).

On this count, several critics have chastised Schrader for overextending the transcendental style into contexts where its "negation" does not properly fit. Claims such as these are popular in contemporary discussions of his (mis) representation of Ozu as a Zen master and emblem of an ascetic transcendental approach in the East.[6] Scholarly literature of recent years has noted how this perspective—figuring the Ozu film as cold, immobile, and transcendent like a Zen stone garden—ignores the lively *presence* of human existence and especially of human emotionality and playfulness within the Japanese director's work; or as one critic succinctly phrased it, Ozu does not provide his viewers "so much a contemplative, detached observation of a static, external world as an active rendezvous with the real, lived experiences of various characters and their surrounding society" (Joo 5). Most virulent in this line of inquiry has arguably been Mitsuhiro Yoshimoto, who accused Schrader's model of exemplifying American scholarship's wrongheaded view of Japan's cinema. In this erroneous view, according to Yoshimoto, "the Japanese are often presented as the homogenous, ahistorical collective essence called 'Japanese mind'" (10), which can be best understood as mirroring an austere and transcendentalist version of Zen Buddhism. To uphold such a position, he further asserts, Schrader and compatriot scholars had to ignore or misinterpret all in Japanese culture, and in Ozu's work as its alleged exemplification, that does not lend credence to their perspective. Accordingly and paradoxically, this

"Western perspective" becomes crucial "for the discernment of Ozu's transcendental style" (Yoshimoto 15), and perhaps for the discernment of transcendence in "Japaneseness" at large, as it remains unencumbered by endemic cultural determinants that distract Japanese spectators from the universal spiritual "truth" at their culture's core.

Other challenges have arrived in reference to cultural-spiritual contexts, both proximate to and distant from Schrader's Christian roots, which were ignored or dismissed within his volume for not being "transcendental."[7] Arguably the most sustained of these critiques has been Sheila Nayar's volume *The Sacred and the Cinema* (2012), where she focuses on the relationship between religious experience and film spectacle, especially with reference to Indian popular cinema. Nayar's main argument in this framework is that the transcendental form, put forth as the norm of spiritual cinema by Schrader and likeminded theorists, "owes much of its existence, epistemologically speaking, to the historical legacy of reading, writing and print" (95). This "alphabetically literate" episteme, typical to the West, has demanded the gradual development of "an ability to yield multiple solutions; to make nuanced judgments; and to deal with uncertainty and impose meaning" (57). Accordingly, the transcendental style responds to these demands by aspiring toward the enigmatic rather than the explicit and, as a result, by requiring spectators to actively engage in multiple and at times contradictory interpretations.

Though Nayar does not dismiss the spiritual effects of this literate cinematic form, she also does not see them as absolute, for they appear antithetical to the spiritual dynamic of cultures dominated by "an oral/aural way of knowing and of communicating and interpreting the world" (66). Whereas high literacy emphasizes the importance of the subject's "private, individualistic readings or engagement" (66), the oral episteme wishes to fortify communal relations and identity through a common language. Consequently, where within high literacy, fluidity of meaning is treasured, oral cultures would stress instead "the most economical and reliable means by which to transmit information" (67). This goal causes religious cinema in oral cultures to be "outwardly oriented" (66): that is, to take on a robust form, easily understandable and highly memorable.

Nayar's principal example, the "Indian mythologicals," exemplifies this tendency. These films locate all meaning within the image and require the spectators to consume rather than interpret it; moreover, they tend to lean heavily on miraculous spectacles full of special effects, thereby asserting "relations with the 'Wholly Other' [as] wholly material: tangible to the senses, augmented, and therefore, less likely to be misinterpreted—or, worse yet, forgotten" (70). The palpable presence of an immanent divinity in turn allows viewers to enter into an ocular and emotive communion with the screen ("darśan"), which is denied in the transcendental style, whose "silences and stillnesses, and similar sorts of 'distances'" push viewers "evermore from a *feeling* relationship with a film to a *thinking* relationship" (120). This thinking is what guarantees spiritual revelation for Schrader, because it releases the highly literate spectator from fully identifying with the visible immanent on screen; yet in oral cultures, identification with the screen's material presence is a necessary condition for the emergence of desired communal spiritual experiences vis-à-vis certain religious spectaculars. In Nayar's view, to deny the spirituality of films that represent the miraculous through an "overabundant" image, as Schrader inevitably does, is tantamount to deriding as fundamentally false the faith and tradition of those not highly literate. This position expresses personal preference and cultural bias—not universal axioms.

The Transcendental Style Reconsidered: Hiddenness, or "A Place Which Is Not-a-Place"

Read with the grain of its rhetoric, *Transcendental Style* thus seems a justified but also easy target for criticism during a period when grand narratives in film studies have been largely

replaced by more nuanced, tentative, and culturally sensitive inquiries. Indeed, in this day and age, we would be very hard pressed to absolve Schrader either of his biases or of the rigid and absolutist terminology with which he tries to disguise them. Yet does that mean we should also dismiss the transcendental model as lacking in explanatory power? By surfacing Schrader's essentialism, critics have arguably tended to overstress it, placing the transcendental style squarely in the rubric of absence, as a form dedicated to eliminating immanent reality in favor of an alleged beyond. Nevertheless, if read away from an absence-versus-presence binarism, and somewhat against the grain of Schrader's argumentative thrust, this model may be revealed as more proximate than opposite to its rival paradigms, and consequently as more serviceable to them in mapping out the fluid landscape of spiritual film aesthetics.

As a way of reconsidering *Transcendental Style*, let us look at another instance of criticism leveled against it. Though the oeuvre of Robert Bresson has often been seen as emblematic of the transcendentalist mode, Steven Shaviro has made a case for why we should interpret it as that of "a powerfully materialist filmmaker" (252). In his eyes, more than being suspicious toward reality, Bresson is obsessed with it—and especially corporeal reality, for he always foregrounds "the immediate actions and reactions of the flesh itself . . . the minutest details of bodily repose and movement" (242). This foregrounding occurs when Bresson strips the filmic image of its psychological depth and spectacular allure, but for Shaviro, such measures "should not be regarded merely, or primarily, as forms of negation, deprivation, and destruction" (248). Rather, "for Bresson emptying out implies a positive attainment, a new accession to and affirmation of the real" (248–49). It is in this sense that the cineaste's aesthetic demands "an *immanent* reading" (249). Accordingly, one should not see it as pointing toward a spiritual beyond. Instead, Bresson's particular vision reveals "the radical incompossibility of worldly and spiritual existence," where "everything is thrown back upon the everyday and upon the body" (249), now raised "to the utmost level of carnal intensity" (251).

Shaviro presents his model as a far stretch from Schrader's, which purportedly "describes Bresson's style in terms reminiscent of *negative theology* [and] argues that the films express the ineffable, the totally Other and Transcendent, by emptying out the everyday to the point . . . where the experience of privation leads to a radical rupture with phenomenal existence" (249, my emphasis). Yet this analogy between negative theology and the transcendental style misses out on the complexity of both by reducing them to a form of *quietism*—that is, to the demand for annihilation of self and world as the condition for mystical union with the Transcendent. Such reduction foregrounds the "negative" in negative theology, without recognizing that its *via negativa* does not necessarily relate to absolute transcendence so much as to dissolving differences between the immanent and the Transcendent, while allowing them to coexist in "a place which is not-a-place" (Fiddes).

Put concisely, negative or apophatic theology searches for divinity not by discerning what it is but by discarding that which it is not. This doctrine asserts the existence of a god that is transcendent to our known world. Yet at the same time, as Paul Fiddes explains, it does not see "the transcendence and 'otherness' of God from the world [as] absence, but [as] *a mode of presence* in which God cannot be confused with the world" (45, my emphasis). In this sense, for the apophatic mindset, God is not in radical transcendence but is not fully materialized within immanence either; God blurs the lines between transcendence and immanence, absence and presence, by maintaining a state of hiddenness within the world. This divinity has a "place" in reality, though one that, by all our normative accounts, is not really a place.

It may be easier to comprehend hiddenness in apophatic theology by regarding that which is hidden not as God per se but as God's wisdom, a dimension of divine personality "understood objectively as a body of knowledge

corresponding to the world [that] can only be observed by observing the whole world" (Fiddes 38). Fiddes supports this interpretation in his reading of the book of Job, where the eponymous protagonist asks: "But where shall wisdom be found? And where is the place of understanding?" The first of these questions, in Fiddes's view, divulges "a sense of elusiveness about naming the world" (36), which is derived from understanding that "the multiplicity and variety of the world order can never be completely mastered" (37). By this account, only God is truly wise, having the unlimited perspective from which to encompass all the world's variety and give it a name. Yet as the second question indicates, "divine wisdom is not characterized by an exclusive and absolute transcendence" (39): it is accessible and thus has a place, though one which respects its hiddenness. "However elusive it might be," Fiddes explains, we may

> have a relationship with wisdom, expressed through the image of "walking in the paths of wisdom" (Prov 8:22). While there is no path *to* wisdom as an object that can be simply found in a particular place, whether mined or purchased there, there are paths *of* wisdom; there are tracks through the complexity of life which wisdom treads, and it is possible to develop an approach to the world in sympathy with her movement. (49)

Such sympathy, by this theological view, permits the human subject to catch a glimpse not so much of divinity's transcendence, but of immanence through its perspective. Acquiring this elusive vision, in turn, pushes us to unravel boundaries and upset "rigid ideas as to what is 'inside' or 'outside' the reality established by language" (41).

Schrader's understanding of the transcendental style, as an aesthetic realization of negative theology, resonates with this notion of hidden divine wisdom. As such, he does not advocate absenting reality, like his critics often claim. Indeed, since "the Transcendent is beyond normal sense experience" (Schrader 37) and therefore cannot be approached or apprehended, immanence remains the only possible site/sight of the transcendental style's spiritual exploration. Yet this exploration is not meant to revalidate a limited definition of immanence as language sees it—of immanence as an object of finite knowledge, of a place. Rather, through the stylization of the everyday, this model aims to destabilize language's constricting hold on our perception and force us to be open to a more fluid vision of immanence as the "bare threshold of existence" (Schrader 67): a doorway not to the Transcendent but to the immanently existent seen through transcendent eyes. Hence, by transcending—or "bracketing out"[8]—our normative attitudes to the world onscreen, and specifically that which distinguishes present from absent, we see reality anew, as "a place which is not-a-place . . . that disturbs all attempts to establish either full presence or full absence" (Fiddes 40–41).

This disruption comes in the form of disparity, which is meant to prompt the audience to transcend its usual precepts by creating a conflict between them and what appears onscreen. Yet disparity still maintains a conceptual binary structure that delimits our intimacy with the "intermediate state" of hiddenness and as a result cannot be the transcendental style's true destination. Rather, in Schrader's formulation, it is but a summons for "the transcending mind" to move past even this basic structure and imagine conflicting parties to be "paradoxically one and the same" (76), suspended in a state of *coincidentia oppositorum*. As a "frozen view of life which does not resolve the disparity but transcends it" (75), stasis is the vision that this invitation ultimately elicits, producing a filmic image of a "place which is-not-place," where the world is accessed in its totality. Yet to maintain its essential open-endedness, this image must be complemented and completed by a mind that refuses to see it as entirely bounded and reducible. For Schrader such refusal cannot occur through spectators' emotional *identification* with the image, which is too constrictive; it occurs only through "their simultaneous *participation* in a larger form" (80, my emphasis).

"Participation" is a crucial term for Fiddes as well, which helps him elucidate how "the wise men of Israel" (48) confronted the world's infinite complexity, a divine wisdom that was essentially hidden from them. To participate in this wisdom, these men understood, was not to know it but to align oneself with its movements; consequently, there is "something open-ended about [participation], inviting a never-completed process of interpretation of the world" (Fiddes 49). Yet this was not the only approach to wisdom present in ancient Israel. In lieu of participation's almost unbearable openness, the sages also offered "to contract the span of wisdom to a smaller body of knowledge which could be mastered, namely the Torah" (50). Having wisdom "be identified with Torah" (49) made observance the preferred mode of devotion, rather than unrestricted exploration; but this act did not nullify the desire for the latter, which manifested in various ways within Judaic tradition, including in "a world of boundless interpretations of the Torah text itself" (51). A desire of this kind, in turn, is what the transcendental style asks to cultivate. In a sense, the stasis shot or moment is a form that, in Fiddes's terms, contracts the "multiplicity and *extent*" of wisdom "to a manageable span" (50). Yet based on the process of disparity, it also signals the possibility that such contraction undermines the basic hiddenness of wisdom and our ability to walk in its paths. To accept this possibility, in Schrader's formulation, is to participate in the stasis image rather than identify with it—or, in other words, to turn it from a "place" to a "place which is not-a-place." This participation, in the end, does not abolish immanence for the purpose of radical transcendence, but aims to touch upon the wisdom of the Transcendent in its hiddenness within the immanent, at a site where "absence" and "presence" intermingle and render each other obsolete.

The Transcendental Style Reformed?

As he was working on the reissue of *Transcendental Style*, Schrader also wrote and directed a new film: *First Reformed* (2017), the somber portrayal of a Protestant minister who questions his faith and morality after a fateful encounter with a melancholic environmentalist and his wife, a devoted parishioner. According to the filmmaker's own testimony, the movie was very much shaped by "the thinking in that book" (qtd. in Perry). Though the years have shifted the focus of Schrader's film career toward elements that "really aren't in the transcendental tool kit" such as "action, empathy, sexuality, violence" (qtd. in Perry), *First Reformed* gave him the opportunity to return to his spiritual roots. The result, his slowest film to date, emerged as an amalgamation of supposed spiritual cinema antecedents and Schrader's own past work. Or as he explained it: "I looked at the models. You have the main character from *Journal d'un curé de campagne* (1951). Then you have the setting of *Winter Light* (1963). Then I decided on the ending from *Ordet* (1955). I added a levitation scene from Tarkovsky, and then I tied it all together with the glue of *Taxi Driver*" (qtd. in Perry).

Schrader had already revisited transcendental cinema milestones in his earlier work, as with the "decision to attach the ending of *Pickpocket* to *American Gigolo* (1980) and *Light Sleeper* (1992)," but these were defined by him as "faux uses" of that style due to the films' reliance on "abundant means throughout" (Schrader 22). Though *First Reformed* permitted Schrader to finally "skate on that Bressonian ice" (qtd. in Perry), it is doubtful that he would define the film as transcendental, considering the fluid pastiche of his quotations, as well as the action-oriented "narrative drive of *Taxi Driver*" employed to rein them in (qtd. in Perry). Schrader's abnegation works well with the *via negativa* of his theoretical thinking. Nevertheless, through the power of personal confession, it forecloses on opportunities to test the potential inclusivity of this thinking—to see how a case could be made for the spiritual effects of *First Reformed* and other films that do not fit the transcendental mold, without having to shatter this mold in the process.

What I have suggested here is that by not succumbing to the rigidness that often characterizes Schrader's words, we may find room to develop a more malleable transcendental model that is unencumbered by a hierarchy of true-versus-faux, success-versus-failure. "Reforming" the transcendental style in this way allows us to capitalize on the wealth of insight provided in Schrader's volume and to create a broader canon of spiritual cinema, one which employs these transcendental techniques flexibly rather than dogmatically. Such efforts have already begun in scholarship,[9] yet their positioning is often accomplished through using a rather reductive version of Schrader's argument as a scapegoat. Much more can be achieved on this front, however, if *Transcendental Style* is read with greater sensitivity and generosity.

Generosity may seem particularly untenable when it comes to addressing the marginalization of "abundant" filmic and cultural traditions in light of Schrader's preferred asceticism. As previously noted, criticism against the volume's cultural hierarchies, wrapped up in perennialist garb, is well warranted; indeed, it is not only valid but necessary for scholarship to point out the dissimilarities between, say, Bresson's films and Indian mythological cinema, both in order to establish the existence of aesthetic alternatives to the transcendental style and to recover their spiritual importance. Nevertheless, there is also something lost when we interpret Schrader's move against abundance only through the lens of cultural bias. It may very well be that he abhors the spectacularly immanent, but this is not because the latter does not allow for an aesthetic experience based on abolishing immanence. In effect, what prompts Schrader's concern seems to be that such an aesthetic may blind us to that which hides *within* immanence and which affords a transcendental engagement. By painting the transcendental style as anti-immanent, critics therefore miss out on the potential link between this style's investment in the mystical beauty of immanence and the operation of an abundant cinema through spiritually inflected, spectacular images of "intensified reality" (Parciack 18). And in so doing, Schrader's detractors also tend to collapse their own alternative models onto a limited sense of immanence and to ignore the ways in which these aesthetic paradigms provide their audience with a taste of transcendence.

Ultimately, in spite of its tendency toward essentialism, *Transcendental Style in Film* exhibits an underlying attunement to elusiveness that merits emulation. This attunement may show us how an indeterminate "place which is not-a-place" plays an important role in various religious-aesthetic traditions that cannot be easily defined as "transcendental." It may also, to a greater degree than is found in contemporary scholarship, highlight the implications of a meeting between such traditions and cinema's particular ontology. Cinema, as Christian Metz once claimed, "is made present in the mode of absence" (44). Or maybe, detaching ourselves from Metz's psychoanalytic project, we could also safely say that cinema is made absent in the mode of presence. And perhaps such inversion is of little import, beyond the fact that it points to the possibility of treating film outside of the absent–present dichotomy, as a "place which is not-a-place." This definition does not invalidate other understandings of the medium. But it can explain how, for some who walk the paths of its alleged wisdom, cinema is uniquely capable, in Bazin's evocative phrasing, "to give significant expression to the world both concretely and in its essence" (7).

NOTES

This article grew out of a paper presented at the Society of Cinema and Media Scholars conference in Atlanta in March 2016. I wish to thank my panel partners Cris Ruiz-Poveda, Joe Kickasola, and of course, Paul Schrader for their input during and before that event. I also want to thank the students who took part in my Spiritual Film Aesthetics Seminar at Tel Aviv University for meaningful discussions that helped further my thinking. Finally, I want to thank my father Michael Chyutin, who didn't get a chance to read this article but knew what it was all about.

1. This panel has so far resulted in one published article: Ruiz-Poveda Vera, "Those Who Don't Remember."

2. See Andrew 242–53; Quicke; and Cardullo.

3. See Sontag, "Spiritual Style." See also Taylor.

4. Not only through my paper at the conference panel, but also through subsequent correspondence on an early draft of the new introduction.

5. Importantly, Schrader's position on spirituality in this volume is only vaguely theocentric, as he prefers the terms "Transcendent" and "Wholly Other" to more specifically theological categories. Here we can sense the influence of phenomenologists of religion such as Rudolf Otto, Mircea Eliade, and Gerardus van der Leeuw, who feature heavily in *Transcendental Style*. As Tim Murphy explains, these phenomenologists "reformulate[d] the Hegelian concept of *Geist*, or Spirit, into the less metaphysically aggressive concepts of 'Man' or 'consciousness,'" in a manner that permitted them to sidestep clear ontological claims about the existence of God while still allowing for the reality of a "metaphysical . . . expressive agent" (4). Yet even when its metaphysics is grounded in seemingly nontheistic—and even radically human—terms, the "intellectual structure" of such thinkers is "saturated by metaphysical-religious concepts" and therefore may be seen as theological or, perhaps more accurately, as ontotheological (Murphy 18). This ontotheological fluidity is made evident, in turn, by Schrader's choice of epigraph—a quote from van der Leeuw, which does not mention the volume's key term, the Transcendent, but rather God ("Religion and art are parallel lines which intersect only at infinity and meet in God").

6. See Boyers; Bordwell 26–29; Nornes; Davis.

7. See Lindvall et al.; De Luca.

8. The phenomenological term "bracketing out" has influenced several researches into spiritual film aesthetics, including work by Ayfre and Kickasola.

9. See Tybjerg; Efird; Chyutin, "Negotiating Judaism" and "Lifting the Veil."

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