Transcendental Style in Film

OZU
BRESSON
DREYER

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

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

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

Transcendental Style: A Primer

The notion of “transcendental style” in film is based on two premises: (1) there are spontaneous expressions of the Holy or transcendent in every culture, an idea developed and expanded in the writings of theologian Mircea Eliade. Eliade’s definition seems to be neither ineffable nor invisible itself. Transcendental style is first and foremost a style; it uses specific film techniques for specific purposes. Although, in the end, one can only postulate how transcendent style affects film, it is useful to describe what it seems to be in order to analyze and define the means which bring it to that end.

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

Although each of these film-makers has strong and identifiable personal and cultural traits, it is more important at this stage, to me, to discover how they are different than how they are similar. For both Ozu and Bresson, the path to transcendental awareness is inscrutable only of style. The characters played by Martin Lassale in Pickpocket and Ozu’s actors in Tokyo Story are the only reason for the difference to exist, yet it exists nonetheless. Disparity culminates in a decisive action, an action (such as crying) in which the character’s formal and structural consciousness are brought into a crystalline moment of the film’s dual nature, and the viewer must accept or reject the duality (the dual quality, I suppose, that the Holy can find expression in a factual world).

In the case of the form the film returns to the hard stylization of the everyday—but with a new purpose. The world is idealized once more, and now one understands that the transcendental is just beneath every realist surface. The three stages described correspond to three different styles of consciousness: “When I began to study Zen, mountains were mountains; when I thought I understood Zen, mountains were not mountains; but when I came to full knowledge of Zen, mountains were again mountains.”

As transcendental style takes effect over the time span of a feature-length motion picture, it must gradually root out audience empathy and replace it, in the terms of aesthetic Wilhelm Worringer, with abstraction. A film of transcendental style, like any film, begins as an experience, but it ends as an expression. The purpose of transcendental style is to make you emote, but to make you understand. The three stages of transcendental style are designed to gradually replace empathy with awareness.

Some Specific Instances

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

Pickpocket/ Tokyo Story

Ozu and Bresson are as far apart as East from West—seemingly. The juxtaposition of Pickpocket and Tokyo Story emphasizes the vast cultural differences between Bresson and Ozu; they had different views of human nature, freedom, death, suffering—most every metaphysi- cal correlate. In Pickpocket and Tokyo Story the most striking difference is Bresson and Ozu’s opposing attitudes toward the family in general, and the mother in particu- lar.

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

In Pickpocket, Michel’s mother is an encumbrance rather than an instrument. The family is part of the vail of tears the Bresson protagonist must pass through on route to enlightenment. Michel’s mother only appears briefly in Pickpocket, but it is clear that her maternal concerns stand in the way of Michel’s overwhelming Pas- sion: the desire to pickpocket, which is later replaced by the desire to love. Bresson’s protagonist stands in the tradition of the single redeemer: the lonely suffering in- dividual who, like Christ, Moses, or the saints, must inter- ceede between this world and the other. For Bresson, tran- scendence is individual rather than communal. Bresson believes in the solitary Christ, Calvary and resurrection; the only relation of a Bresson protagonist to his commu- nity is metaphorical and iconographic. Therefore Bresson, unlike Ozu, “goes through” his actors, draining them dry and dismissing them after one film.

But the similarities between East and West are more important than the differences. For both Ozu and Bresson, transcendent style is inscrutable only of style. The characters played by Martin Lassale in Pickpocket and Ozu’s actors in Tokyo Story are the only reason for the difference to exist, yet it exists nonetheless. Disparity culminates in a decisive action, an action (such as crying) in which the character’s formal and structural consciousness are brought into a crystalline moment of the film’s dual nature, and the viewer must accept or reject the duality (the dual quality, I suppose, that the Holy can find expression in a factual world).

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

Bresson and Dreyer’s Joan of Arc films were custom built for comparison. Both relate Joan of Arc’s trial in a relatively straightforward manner, both are interested in factual evidence, both are participating transcribes and historical minu- taie. And both are concerned with how Joan rises above, transcends if you will, history and corporeality. The difference between the two, I believe, is that The Passion of Joan of Arc is nothing more than Lincoln’s portrayal: the actual Joan of Arc is not a film-acted Joan of Arc; Dreyer is not a film-acted Joan of Arc. The two films are not alike, but they are not that unlike.

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

Joan to the edge of transcendance, then exhausts her spirit- ual drivers in Gothic frenzy. Like the Gothic artist, put the disparity to its limits, then push the artist into the Un- stated. Dreyer’s Joan is in constant, both spiritual and cinematic; she is spirituality trapped in corporeality, honesty in devienceness, visual simplicity in expressionism. Dreyer’s Joan is not extraneous to the world, but disparate, but instead exaggerates it and dwells on it.

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

The respective endings of The Passion of Joan of Arc and The Trial of Joan of Arc are telling. Dreyer plays it both ways: on one hand he ends his film with expressionistic riot and chaos as Joan burns, on the other, he returns to the stake and pans up toward the heavens.

Bresson does not use obvious camera techniques to “paint” the viewer’s gaze upwards. At the close of Bres- son’s film, the passive Joan is led to the stake, chained, and the tinder is set afire. The smoke clears and all that remains are Joan’s chains. Joan’s body is no longer there. For Bresson no editorial tech- niques are necessary; the viewer either accepts this deci- sive moment or he doesn’t. Joan’s style has done its work or it hasn’t: take it or leave it.

Diary of a Country Priest/ Comanche Station

Neither Budd Boetticher nor Roberto Rossellini is dis- cussed in Transcendental Style in Film, the book’s argu- ment is not extended to cover the works of these three film-makers. Both Boetticher and Rossellini, however, are valuable additions to the argument, and with a little space permitted me to give them justice in these brief notes. (I have written somewhat ancillary articles on Boettic- her and Rossellini, however, in Cinema Vol. VI, Nos. 2 and 3.)

No one has drawn the comparisons between Bresson’s "prison cycle" and Boetticher's Rawson westerns. The similarities are there, however, and are extremely nut- ingoing and thought-provoking.
Day of Wrath/Late Autumn

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

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

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

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

Late Autumn

Like any of Ozu's later films, shows Ozu at his purest and most refined. His films are structured between action and emptiness, indoors and outdoors, scene and coda. The conflicts are always explained indoors, usually in long, loquacious conversations.

Bresson says, "the mysterious hand which moves over the prison" (i.e., the transcendent). In A Man Escaped, Grace is personified by Jost, a young prisoner who is thrown in Fontaine's cell just as Fontaine is about to make his escape. Fontaine must decide whether to kill Jost or take him along—his choices, the latter, and learns later that he could not have escaped without the assistance of a second man. Fontaine was predestined to escape (by the title of the film), yet he would not have escaped had he not chosen of his free will to accept Jost. It is the paradox of salvation.

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

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

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

Ozu, on the other hand, is interested in his protagonist's, but enriches them. At the close of An Autumn Afternoon, Hiriya is not any nearer death, but, on the contrary, prepared to perceive life more deeply.

For Bresson in the West transcendence is a way of dying, for Ozu in the East transcendence is a way of living.