Transcendence in Film: Some Thoughts

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Several years ago I was assigned to write article on film for the Christmas issue of a small arts magazine. It ended up being about what I found inspirational in certain films. In the contrarian spirit every academic has toward that season of good cheer, what with grading late papers, final exams, and attending another MLA convention, I called the article "Screen Angels," dismissed all the popular angel films I could think of, and put forward examples of inspiration from films few readers had seen. As it turned out no readers saw the article either because the magazine never published the Christmas--or any other--issue.

In addressing the spiritual or the transcendent in film, you have to confront screenwriter and director Paul Schrader's *The Transcendental Style in Film*, an impressive1972 study that uses Ozu, Bresson, and Dreyer to define a structure or style. His study, in turn, led me to consider that aesthetic equivalent to the spiritual--the sublime, memorably defined by Longinus, modified in the18th century by Edmund Burke. I was then led to consider G. E. Moore's ideas on beauty, and my own thoughts on the leavening effects of human comedy .

Towards an Aesthetics of Transcendence in Film

Paul Schrader defines three representations of the **transcendent in art:** 1) the divine itself; 2) human actions that express the divine, "hierophanies"; 3) the human experience of transcendence. Most modern art, including film--including most "religious" film--, attempts to depict the second and third types. [In one sequence, Gibson's *Passion* attempts the first.]

Literary attempts are confronted with a contradiction: to render into words that which is thought to be beyond words. Dante certainly articulated this struggle, particularly in *Paradiso.* A scene from *Shadowlands* (1983) sets up the parallel problem for film.

It occurs during the **honeymoon trip** of C.S. and Joy Davidman Lewis, a trip delayed while Joy underwent painful radiation treatments for cancer. The trip is taken during what both know to be a temporary recovery. They have found a "golden valley," the inspiration for a picture that hung in Lewis' room when he was a child. They walk in a sunlit green valley, until they are forced to find shelter by a sudden shower. Lewis is happy just to be there with her, a happiness that is objectified by the bright leaves that dance with rain drops. Joy, however, reminds him her immediate future is uncertain, that death is coming. This awareness "doesn't spoil [the scene]," she tells Lewis; "it makes it real."

In a medium where light and darkness create images, the honeymoon scene in the rain typifies film's dilemma in portraying their belief in a transcendent reality. What is shown of this life cannot be so vivid or picturesque as to overshadow the hoped-for "real life" beyond; yet the real life-to-come must be glimpsed through the happiness and pain of this onscreen life. What's heard and seen, of light and imagery, of colors and shadows, of dialogue and events has to create the sense of the unheard and unseen.

Schrader reminds us that if film art seeks "to maximize the mystery of existence...[by avoiding] conventional interpretations of reality" (10). Transformed or transcendent reality is best achieved, he argues, through three techniques:

1) attention to the "everyday," a meticulous representation of the quotidian, to establish a *material* level, a "monotone" of ordinary life into which the transcendent can intrude (39). Imagery, shot selection, editing should adhere to traditional methods so as not to call attention to film technique; the camera is a window, not an inquiring eye.

2) "Disparity: an actual or potential disunity between man and his environment which culminates in a decisive action" (42). The break or a turning point calls into question whether the everyday is the sum total of reality by an intrusion of the "fabulous" (43). It may be an outpouring of feeling that comes "suddenly and unexpectedly and is not derived from the empirically observed environment" (44). Where, the viewer asks, does human feeling come from? Suddenly, a "human density" unbalances or unaccountably intrudes into the established everyday norms of behavior and imagery. This moment can be comic or ironic, a human gesture that reveals fallibility, spontenaiety, or emotion in the midst of the ordinary.

The danger here, of course, is that if the change does not "surprise convincingly," if it does not, upon reflection, seem to grow out of some logic of development, psychological or otherwise, the audience might well become confused or perceive manipulation rather than mystery.

3) Stasis: "a frozen view of life which does not resolve the disparity but transcends it" (49). While the film can have catharsis, the purpose of the "T style" is to evoke feeling **and** integrate it into a higher form. Stasis often means a static shot, a pull back into the long view or fixed focus on a representational shape (vase, cross) till it almost becomes a still photograph or picture. Schrader notices the tendency in some films to make faces almost objects of static veneration [like Byzantine icons], by shooting them straight on, eye level, with minimal expression so that we "read into" them another reality, beyond "character" or mere personality (99-100).

Paul Schrader takes an ascetic, recognizably Catholic approach, as defined in his book by Jacques Maritain: there are abundant means and the sparse means to good works, including good art works. The former are concerned with practicality, physical goods and sensual feelings (the means of the soldier, laborer, businessman); the second, to be preferred, are less visible, more destitute, less materialistic--"they are the pure means for the virtue of the spirit." The world "will recover its youth only through poverty of the spirit" (JM on 154).

In modern times, realism has been the enemy of spiritualism in art. When "perspective" entered into art, that was the "original sin of Renaissance painting" (155). As a moving point of view with advanced optical capabilities, the camera discovers the macrocosm and the microcosms contained within. Agreeing with early theorists of realistic film, such as Sigfreid Kracauer, Schrader argues that film naturally redeems, even canonizes, the human, the sensual and the profane (155). A transcendent stylist should seek to deny film's inherent tendency to show abundant detail; in Schrader's three-step process, the film will record the monotonously detailed or abundant everyday reality only to reduce it to sparsity, to the spiritual through some disparity or disruption (159).

As was the case for Bertold Brecht, in creating his alienation effects in drama, the film-maker should avoid overuse of the tools of film designed to create empathy or identification--i.e. she must stylize the everyday to the point where it is unreceptive to empathy (161). Disparity, when it enters, makes the viewer aware of the contrast between abundance and sparsity; if done well, that contrast can suggest different worlds.

Religious films, with openly inspirational intentions, tend to use abundant means and create a primarily emotional (empathetic) experience through spectacle, through impressive scenic and ingenious technical effects. The result may be satisfactory for many, as are the arena spectaculars in "super churches," but it does not represent the higher way. Applying this ascetic standard, Schrader marginalizes most religious films, from the De Mille sword-and-sandal epics to *A Man Called Peter*. To which, I say "Amen."

But while I like his ascetics of the higher way, I **want to broaden his transcendent** style to a more evangelical or emotional experience, if it can be done without giving way completely to the gush of mob emotion, the sort of thing to be found equally in *The Ten Commandments* and*Triumph of the Will*. I think it can be done by going back to Aristotle, Longinus and G.E. Moore.

[Michael Bird's "Film as Hierophany," written ten years later (with debts to Schrader acknowledged) for the collection entitled *Religion in Film* stimulated me to apply Classical and Neoclassical aesthetics to film.]

First, let me observe that Schrader's three steps bear a striking resemblance to classical tragic **form as defined by Aristotle,** realized and modified in performances since then, and generalized later by Francis Ferguson in *The Idea of the Theatre*. There is the ground of reality, the conflicts which arise, leading to agon or passion, a turning point, and some sort of resolution, satisfactory in its adherence to probability and the moral world of the play. Catharsis occurs for the protagonist, together with a recognition, raising his or her suffering to a level beyond the pathos of merely human pain. Closer to Schrader are Ferguson's three steps of tragedy: purpose, passion, and perception.

Longinus builds upon Aristotle, it seems to me, by fashioning his "sublime" in literature from catharsis: emphasizing its suddenness, its overwhelming impact upon the audience, while carefully acknowledging the importance of Aristotelian causality in this impact. The amazement that "takes the reader out of himself" (4), while itself an instant, is the result of the whole work; it is a cumulative impact of plot.

Longinus lists a number of **elements of power** capable of producing the sublime or eloquent: a high mindedness in content, strong emotion, figures of speech, nobility of diction, and a distinguished style (10-11).

Not surprisingly, given this list, his major exemplars tend to come from epics and tragedy. Two particular tactics productive of the sublime seem quite cinematic. What Longinus calls "**amplification**" involves passages or scenes that pause or cease and are renewed with more power, "increasing the effect at every step" (19). This acceleration of effect can occur through a grounding in physical facts or body, emotional intensification, elaboration through style, rearrangement of subject matter, and, as in music, the return to main theme or repetition with gathering force. War or sports films often show their grounding in epic structure by using this technique to transform a series of similar episodes--battles, contests--into a rising action. **Another tactic i**nvolves hyperbole, the "greater than" phenomenon, wherein the poet (Homer, Dante, Milton) asks the audience to imagine to the limits of sense percepetion--something huge, or bright, or deafeningly loud. Then the poet claims a greater than this, something that can hardly be named--expressing the universe, heaven, hell, a god, a god's action. This might seem a figural move only speech or text can initiate, but film's ability to create presence off frame, through point of view shots, light and shadow effects, sound track, and even jump cuts can similarly call into awareness an unseen more powerful than the seen.

Longinus, like Schrader, warns against overabundance, the amplification that is hollow or artificial, the over-elaborated emotion, immoderate or false enthusiasm. His warning and my basic adherence to Schrader's aesthetic lead me to set aside Edmund Burke's modification which connects the sublime experience with a hugeness that produces fear or terror of the supernatural--leading to the kind of abasement, loss of self or sensationalism that traps one on earth. So I'll stay with Longinus and use him to open up the possibility of transcendence as a cumulative effect, an aesthically contained overtopping.

I would use him to **modify Schrader**'s disparity or difference in the second phase also; the sublime or transcendent may come in the form of something "greater than," as a culmination or jump from what is established as everyday reality. It may not so obviously deny abundant or purely human, material means in the third phase of stasis either.

G.E. Moore, the 20th century philosopher who influenced Bloomsbury thinking, supports my modification of Schrader by way of Longinus and Aristotle. If I understand him rightly, he argues that the worth or value (measured, say, by pleasure) of the whole of something may be **more** than the sum of the intrinsic values of the parts. Bloomsbury thinkers, such as Roger Fry, Clive Bell, Virginia Woolf, and E.M. Forster, turned this principle into a somewhat epicurean aesthetic, which emphasized beauty as a relationship: to be admirably beautiful, nature or art requires an admirer. Affection or connection between two or more people may produce something finer than the sum worthiness of the individuals. In a sense, they echo of Wordsworth's romanticism, which mandates a human consciousness or voice to bring nature into sublimity. Even better is an affectionate relationship between two people who are worshipful in nature--"Tintern Abbey" or Adam and Eve before the Fall in *Paradise Lost.* Finally, we should remember Milton's God created beings like Himself so that that they could admire and enjoy His creation along with Him.

Finally, in effecting a transcendence that rests in this world, I agree with Schrader that **humor or irony have a role; however, rather than emphasizing the "disparity,"** it may also join characters to each other and other humans. Humor may make the transcendent or sublime moment possible for the everyday human beings in the audience, who might be unable to enter into meditative aesthetics--a means to the spiritual little exercised today. Or, if they are exercised by some, might not the medium of film and audience dynamics, make them impossible.

Three Examples of Transcendent Style

After this review of Schrader's approach, supported in part with Longinus' aesthetics of sublimity and G.E. Moore ideas of beauty, I want to turn (back) to three examples that achieve something transcendent: scenes from F. W. Murnau's 1927 silent classic, *Sunrise,* Ingmar Bergman's *The Seventh Seal* (1956), and Wim Wender's*Wings of Desire* (1988).

On first viewing, they don't seem to qualify, as films or as scenes in films, which show a "transcendent style": the scenes are altogether too emotional or seem part of a whole that directly confronts the transcendent as part of their subject matter. But their disparity and continuity with what has gone before, their quiet power, and their affirmation of affectionate communion or community mark them as unique.

***Sunrise* (1927)** is a frankly allegorical film about a farm couple whose paradise has been contaminated by "a woman from the city," suitably vampish and serpentine in the 20s fashion. The husband, seduced by this woman, agrees to drown his wife, but at the last minute, face to face with her in a rowboat, he can't do it. [If this were Theordore Dreiser's *American Tragedy,* the boat would tip over, he wouldn't be able to save her, and he would be condemned to die.] She recognizes his intentions, falls into despair, and they go miserably into the city, as alienated as the cars that barely miss them when they cross an intersection. They wander the impersonal streets, she in tears, he miserable, and finally they are attracted into a church by a wedding in process. The wedding works its desired magic: the minister admonishes the groom to protect his future wife, which words pierce the husband's heart, cause him to break down and ask his wife to forgive him. She does, and they are reconciled in the entrance lobby of the church. It's almost too much, even for a romantic viewer, but it becomes sublime or transcendent when it *descends* from this peak into human comedy and community. They come out of the church, joy in their faces, ahead of the wedding party, as if they are newly married, and solemnly walk between the two lines of people waiting to throw rice! They are oblivious to people's wondering stares; this essentially comic situation affirms their joy and their humanity. The move from human transformation to comedy is repeated, as they walk back, oblivious, into the crowded intersection, cars zooming all around them, and then stop to kiss, bringing all traffic to a comic halt.

In Schrader's terms, the film's "everyday reality" is filled with overabundance as it displays and appeals to our emotions. Everything leading up to and including the church service and the couple's renewal swings from one emotion to another, from lust to murderous intent to sorrow to intense love, extremities only bearable, it seems to me, because they are expressed without words (nor are intertitles needed) in this silent film. Indeed, up to this point, the film, like the most opulent De Mille epic, pushes the audience to peaks of emotion, which may, for many, be enough. But the subtle release from purely serious emotion, the reversal of the city's threatening traffic and glistening planes into a doorway, gaping onlookers, and traffic jammed (with drivers in a hubbub) strangely exhilarates, allowing us to relax into a combination of joy and enjoyment that seems transcendent.

My second example is more familiar, a meal on the edge of the woods in Bergman's *The Seventh Seal*. It is shared by the knight, his squire, Joseph, Maria, and their baby. They eat and pass around a bowl of milk, which the knight blesses. It is a quiet moment in the middle of a journey fraught with peril from the black death and human treachery. More significantly, it is an entirely ordinary human meal untouched by supernatural appearances, clearly resembling the eucharist, but a communion outside the church. [The Church, in the film, is more preoccupied with death and guilt than salvation.] The small meal affirms a commonality with mankind, rather than the sacraments. The break or disparity, then, lies in what is good and totally human and shared. It even has a moment of stasis, in the bowl of milk held up to the camera, as a cup of trembling offered to the audience.

The third example is from that strange film about angels, Wim Wenders' *Wings of Desire.* In *Wings,* the protagonist angels are rather ordinary beings who live close to humans. They have flight, immortality, and selective omniscience, but otherwise their power is limited: they can only touch the lives of people sensitive to them. One person's thoughts turn toward hope; another jumps off a building. Both have ministering angels at their sides. The problem for the angels is that they are "outside" life; their world is white and shades. But one angel has a desire to live as a human--to drink coffee, to have all the sensations, and eventually, he knows, to die. His moment comes and he falls to the ground, touches and tastes blood from the abrasion on his head, and smiles. The smile is at once stupid, comic, and beatific. His new world is in color, and he has to learn the names of colors he has never seen before. He locates a woman, a circus trapese performer, he had previously ministered to, enters into a loving relationship with her, and in a final image, anchors a rope while she rotates around and around, high above him. The camera holds her in this circular, almost meditative motion; she is both abstracted, other than human, and very human, anchored by the love of the man holding the rope.

Conclusion

My three examples show both difference and amplification in comparison to the established everydayness of each film. The meal in the **7th Seal** is one of several meals, but is different in its quiet human communion, showing a disparity; later a similar meal in the castle will be ended by Death. The fall of the angel in **Wings of Desire** is surely different, a change from black and white to color signals that difference. But, it reverses the process from material to ascetic that Schrader privileges. Its final image is singular, but hardly static. Her athletic body circles above the former angel, now a rather ordinary looking man looking up and smiling. Finally, **Sunrise** shows an almost impossible amplification of effect, in the spirit of Longinus, which works because it is joined with its opposite, comedy. And all of these films create their transcendence through immanence, by joining their characters with what is best about humankind--its humorous unpredictability and its love.

Today, we seem to be in a period of film history when disunities in style and foregrounded techniques often seem more prized than the modernist/Hollywood standards of aesthetics that prevailed when Schrader wrote his classic study of what he called the "transcendental style." But if we can relinquish the temptation to totalize, and use Schrader's notion of process, enriched by other aesthetic theorists, I think we can at least discuss transcendence, moments of sublimity, in films that don't embrace stillness and meditation in quite the way his original directors did. And perhaps even develop analytical tools capable of being used on films as different as *Jesus of Montreal* and *Ghost Dog*.