

## ***“Transcendental Style” in Film: Brief Summary***

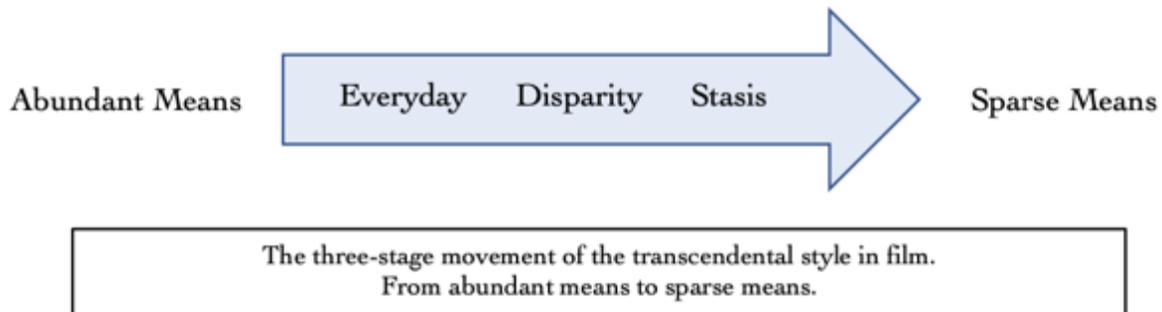
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The transcendental style of cinema captures a spiritual state using austere camerawork, acting devoid of self-consciousness and editing that avoids editorial comment. The term was coined by Paul Schrader (screenwriter for *Taxi Driver* and *Raging Bull*)<sup>1</sup> in his influential book written at the tender age of 24, that analyzed the common cinematic language used by three great directors from divergent cultures —Yasujiro Ozu (Japan), Robert Bresson (France), and Carl Dreyer (Denmark). Transcendental style "*seeks to maximize the mystery of existence,*" and elements such as plot, acting, camerawork, music, dialog, and editing are non-expressive and static.

### *Three Stages of Transcendental Film*

According to Schrader, there are three stages in a transcendental style:

- “*Everyday*”: The first stage sets up the everyday world of the protagonist where nothing appears out of place. The beginning of the film is more or less conventional, in terms of action and plot.
- “*Disparity*”: In the second stage an antagonistic force enters the everyday life, which triggers an internal struggle – an irrational commitment or passion on the part of the protagonist.
- “*Stasis*”: Disparity leads to an event (called “*decisive action*”) that reveals the co-existence of the transcendent and the mundane. The final stage is marked by a return to the everyday, but the viewer is now aware of the presence of the transcendent beneath the surface of things.



According to Schrader, the beginning of the film is expressed in “abundant” terms with enough story to engage an audience. As the film progresses, the cinematic expression becomes more austere as it gradually begins to “lean away” from the viewer, who must actively find his/her own meaning within the film.

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<sup>1</sup> Schrader was a devout Calvinist (theology major at Calvin College) before becoming an Episcopalian.

At the very end (*stasis*), the viewer is often presented with a motionless image that is designed to capture the spiritual that coexist alongside the physical. In *The Trial of Joan of Arc* (Bresson, 1962), this moment occurs when the viewer sees both the charred remains of Joan's physical body and also "*the spiritual expression of Joan's martyrdom*" that lingers. Although the movement of the story ceases and the imagery returns to everyday objects, the viewer's involvement continues "*into the static image ... beyond the province of art.*"



Final Scene from *The Trial of Joan of Arc* (Bresson, 1962)

### *Note on Stasis and Boredom*

In "leaning away," these films use time/duration and boredom as a cinematic technique. In *Jeanne Dielman* (Chantal Akerman, 1975), for example, the audience sees the protagonist washing the dishes over and over. And over. So when is it effective and when is it simply boredom?



All I would say is that these films are different from the arthouse "slow movies" that, for example, force you to watch someone sleep for 7 hours straight (that would be Andy Warhol's *Sleep*). When I recommend these films, I usually tell people that for *the engaged viewer*, they can be emotionally powerful and even profound. I hope that you will find that to be the case.

Here is the link to a 3-minute video on the topic by Paul Schrader: [Schrader Interview](#)

### *Note on Selected Films*

Following are some films I have chosen based on (i) free online availability; (ii) impact they had on me personally over the years and (iii) longstanding critical acclaim. If you like them (or don't like them at all), I have more recommendations – please feel free to reach out to me individually.

*A Man Escaped* (Robert Bresson, 1956)

- Web link: [A Man Escaped -- Bresson](#)

The true story of a French Resistance fighter's escape from the imprisonment by the Nazis was the inspiration for this movie, as Bresson states in the beginning: "*The story is true, I give it as is without embellishment.*" However, Bresson subtly transforms the simple story into a metaphysical meditation on Grace by introducing an unseen force which helps the man in simple but crucial ways – "*this miracle, the mysterious hand which moves over the prison.*" The kind of film which inspires awe. One of my all-time favorites -- once seen, never forgotten.

*Andrei Rublev* (Andrei Tarkovsky, 1966)

- Web link: [Andrei Rublev -- Tarkovsky](#) (please start at the 2 hour 11 minute mark)

Andrei Rublev was a Russian icon painter in the 1400s. Tarkovsky re-imagines him as a troubled visionary who wanders the divided Russia under the Tartar invasion, under a vow of silence after witnessing the horrors of war. This long film has several episodes but the last episode (starting at 2:11 mark) is the most powerful – the bell-maker boy's blind faith rekindles Rublev's will to speak and to paint, leading the film to its blazing climax showing the details of Rublev's surviving icons.

*Tokyo Story* (Yasujiro Ozu, 1953)

- Web link: [Tokyo Story -- Ozu](#)

All that happens in dramatic terms is that aging parents arrive in Tokyo from the countryside to visit their various offspring, and grow painfully aware of the chasms that exist between them; only the widowed daughter-in-law is pleased to see them. As Schrader noted, "*for Ozu, transcendence is a communal activity; the individual reaches awareness only by participating within a family.*" Generally considered by critics to be a top 5 film of all time.

*Day of Wrath* (Carl Dreyer, 1943)

- Web link: [Day of Wrath -- Dreyer](#)

This is a very somber and pessimistic film dealing with the persecution of witches in 17<sup>th</sup> century Denmark. I cannot say I enjoyed watching it – the pace is measured and slow and visuals are stark, but I do recall that the film reaches unmatched emotional intensity. Not for the faint of the heart. Dreyer embodied the most intense, austere style – *The Passion of Joan of Arc* (1928), about the trial of Joan based on the actual court transcripts, may be the most intense and moving film of all time, almost to an unbearable extent.

*Comanche Station* (Bud Boetticher, 1960)

- Web link: [Comanche Station -- Boetticher](#)

No subtitles! The hero is an obsessive man searching for the wife kidnapped by Comanches, who rescues instead another woman, only to be hunted by bounty hunters. Thematically similar to John Ford's classic, *The Searchers*, this is a bleak but ultimately warm film that somehow manages to rise above the normal conventions of a B Western movie.

*Lourdes* (Jessica Hausner, 2010)

- Web link: [Lourdes -- Hausner](#)

Something from this decade! The story concerns Christine, a young Frenchwoman who has multiple sclerosis and has come to Lourdes as part of a religious pilgrimage organized by the Order of Malta. This is a superbly subtle, mysterious and brilliant film that unsettles and confounds our expectations about religion and miracles. Also includes an actual pilgrimage to Lourdes with the actors "embedded" with the pilgrims (one scene features Cardinal Roger Mahony, the archbishop of Los Angeles, leading a prayer service).