



March 2020

Transcendental Style in Film: Ozu, Bresson, Dreyer (2nd edition)

Michael Gibson
Vanderbilt University, mgibson@rowman.com

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/jrf>



Part of the [Religion Commons](#), and the [Screenwriting Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Gibson, Michael (2020) "Transcendental Style in Film: Ozu, Bresson, Dreyer (2nd edition)," *Journal of Religion & Film*: Vol. 24: Iss. 1, Article 52.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/jrf/vol24/iss1/52>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by DigitalCommons@UNO. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of Religion & Film by an authorized editor of DigitalCommons@UNO. For more information, please contact unodigitalcommons@unomaha.edu.

Transcendental Style in Film: Ozu, Bresson, Dreyer (2nd edition)

Abstract

This is a book review of Paul Schrader's *Transcendental Style in Film: Ozu, Bresson, Dreyer*, 2nd edition (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2018).

Keywords

film, cinema, religion, mysticism, aesthetics, Paul Schrader, Martin Scorsese, Yasujiro Ozu, Robert Bresson, Carl Dreyer, Stanley Kubrick, slow cinema

Author Notes

Michael Gibson is a senior acquisitions editor at Lexington Books, the academic imprint of Rowman & Littlefield, and contributing editor in film for The Bias magazine. He is a PhD candidate at Vanderbilt University and author of a forthcoming monograph on film director Stanley Kubrick (Rutgers University Press).

Schrader, Paul, *Transcendental Style in Film: Ozu, Bresson, Dreyer*. 2nd edition. Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2018.

With the release of *First Reformed* (2018), writer-director Paul Schrader achieved a unique visual and dramatic synthesis of crucial features that have been hallmarks of his storied career in film criticism and filmmaking. First, his most recent directorial effort functions as a quasi-companion piece to his widely heralded screenplay for *Taxi Driver* (which won a Palme d'Or in 1976 for director Martin Scorsese, Schrader's then-frequent collaborator): both films track their protagonists through a social-spiritual dystopian journey, tracing their path from alienation, dislocation, and disillusionment to attempted self-martyrdom. Second, Schrader's *First Reformed* continues his career-long fascination with, and employment of visual homages to key cinematic works from directors like Jean-Luc Godard, Robert Bresson, and Carl Dreyer: callouts to *Breathless* (1960), *Pickpocket* (1959), and *Ordet* (1955) are densely interwoven into Schrader's film, the latter — *Ordet* — being nearly approximated by Schrader in its dizzying, if enigmatic ending. Third, with *First Reformed* Schrader provides his own cinematic exemplar of the potential convergence of the recent slow cinema movement and transcendental film style.

The latter point is particularly germane as, coincident with the theatrical release of *First Reformed*, University of California Press published a new edition of Schrader's landmark text in film criticism, *Transcendental Style in Film*. Prior to becoming a groundbreaking filmmaker himself, Schrader served as a noted film critic in the late 1960s and early 1970s, and penned the text for *Transcendental Style in Film* following his studies at the American Film Institute (AFI). It was not long after the publication of the original edition of this text that Schrader sold his first film script for *The Yakuza* (1974) for a then-record sum, which established him almost immediately as a key figure in the emerging New Hollywood scene; he would soon after collaborate with fellow New Hollywood directors like Brian De Palma and Martin Scorsese. Schrader's work as a film

critic was especially influenced by the pioneering work in American film criticism of essayists like Susan Sontag and Pauline Kael. Kael was particularly instrumental to Schrader's entrance into the film criticism community, and it was through her advocacy that Schrader secured a spot at the AFI in the 1960s. The text, here, reflects those influential roots, but also draws deeply from (though not heavily present in the citations) the auteur-driven theory advocated by Kael's New York film critic colleague, Andrew Sarris, and especially from the French critical wave, most notably André Bazin.

From these disparate critical reservoirs, Schrader constructs a fascinating argument about the capacity of film to express the transcendent (35). For Schrader, this is not to say that film itself is a religious medium or possesses properties that are intrinsically generative of the transcendent (38-40). Rather, in extending Bazin's argument from his famous essay on the ontology of the image, Schrader posits that cinematic *style* is the constitutive component that opens film to the possibility of religious or transcendental expression (36, 38, 41). Schrader suggests here, moreover, that transcendental style can be scrutinized and analyzed by the critic in a way that enables the critic to discern a cinematic method irrespective of content. In other words, transcendental film is not *religious cinema* in the concrete or material sense of content, subject, or theme, but instead a matter of style, format, and employment of particular methods (36, 40-41). In this way, Schrader distinguishes his argument about transcendental film from religious film: he is not meaning overtly religious films like *The Ten Commandments* (1923, 1956), *Ben Hur* (1959, 2016), or *The Robe* (1953); those are religious types but not transcendental films per se. Instead, Schrader perceives transcendental film style as analogous to the mystical, especially apophatic theological tradition: as Schrader notes, transcendental style "merges with mysticism" in that both are dialectical methods and "bring [people] as close to the ineffable, invisible, and unknowable as

words, images, and ideas can” (39). For Schrader, then, this is not a matter of metaphysics, but an *Anknüpfungspunkt* (“point of contact”), and as with the apophatic tradition, transcendental film involves a *style* that is constituted by a dialectical mode that gives expression to that which cannot be conveyed or spoken.

Although apophaticism (or mysticism) is a vital tool of analysis for Schrader, at the same time this does not mean that transcendental style is a theological exercise or a form that depends on occidental religious or philosophical metaphysics. In fact, one of the valuable and unique features of the book is that it is a transcultural case study: Schrader reads closely the works of three filmmakers — the Japanese master, Yasujiro Ozu, and two European directors, Robert Bresson and Carl Dreyer. Schrader’s analysis of Ozu’s work highlights the deeply “Zen” character of his films (55-81), which is not concerned with a metaphysical Other, but “the unity of all existence” and the process of awakening and integration of being and experience (80, 77, 59f.). Throughout the set of case studies, moreover, Schrader demonstrates the importance of materialist dimensions to the formal aesthetics and methods of transcendental style, such as culture and personality — what now might be termed ethnographic (e.g., 52-66, 112-130). The materialist elements, in Schrader’s view, inform not only key differences — those things that make each filmmaker and their cinematic work unique — but generate vital formal points of unity that hallmark transcendental style itself, most notably disparity/alienation and stasis, which he traces through all three directors (81-83, 97-111, 141-157).

The case studies Schrader provides demonstrate quite readily that transcendental film is a complex, multifaceted, and dynamic cinematic style that is both materially distinct from religious or dogmatic content and also rooted in spiritual sensibility or experience. With Ozu, as Schrader notes, we see how the everyday and the ordinary are visually rendered in ways that are inflected

by “Zen” culture and technique: the use of space, emptiness, static shots, stillness; in an especially illuminating discussion, Schrader compares Ozu’s cinematic technique with Zen art practices, particularly ‘one-corner style’ art that combines intricate design and framing with blankness (56-59). In the work of Bresson and Dreyer, Schrader finds variations of the visual cinematic expressions of Catholic existentialism: with Dreyer, one that channels the intensity and grandiosity of Gothic architecture and art (157-167); with Bresson, one that imbricates the interiority, intensity, and even austerity of scholasticism (especially, according to Schrader, Jansenism) with the formal visual stylization and dialectical conceptualization of Byzantine iconography (119-130). Throughout his own cinematic oeuvre, Schrader employs many of the same visual techniques and practices he distills here, embedding these in both his original screenplays and his directed films.

Readers of this text are in a privileged position to observe two things simultaneously. First, this is a significant volume in film criticism that advances innovative critical theory and is one of the vanguard texts that created an interdisciplinary encounter between film studies and religious studies, written by a then-emerging scholar with a background in both fields: Schrader was raised in the Dutch Reformed tradition and was a graduate of Calvin College before moving to California and studying film at the AFI. With this work, Schrader established himself as an important thinker in film criticism who could engage, with a high degree of sophistication, in comparative theoretical and methodological work informed by religious and theological scholarship. At the time, as well, the original edition of the volume made a decisive contribution to the reception and interpretation of the three filmmakers in world cinema — Ozu, Bresson, and Dreyer — translating those achievements to cinemagoers in the US. Prior to Schrader’s text, almost no American studies on Ozu existed, and much of the critical discussion of Bresson and Dreyer was conducted in French

and German film journals. Thus, Schrader was one of the key mediators of this cinema, and the attendant critical conversation, to American film studies. The second edition of the text, with a new, extensive introduction (1-33), demonstrates Schrader's continuous engagement with critical film theory and scholarship: despite a 45-year 'hiatus' between editions, during which Schrader became one of the most respected art cinema writer-directors, the new material exudes familiarity with the critical literature, appreciation of new world cinematic developments, and a constructive evolution and refinement of the author's own original theory. This new section contains fascinating analyses of new cinematic movements, notably slow cinema (10-19), film theory, especially the role of boredom (3-6, 20-21), and how these interface with, and even adjust, Schrader's thinking on transcendental style (then and now) [21-31]; even more, a constructive engagement with the work of Russian director Andrei Tarkovsky (6-10, 22-24) and a reproduction of a diagram of transcendental cinema designed by Schrader for his own courses (32) make purchasing this new edition worthwhile even if one owns the original volume.

Second, fans of Schrader's cinematic work have the opportunity with this volume to observe the critical theory and religious and visual grammar ingredient to the films Schrader would go on to make himself. The importance of Ozu to Schrader's script for *The Yakuza* or the thematic and visual landscapes in his directorial efforts, especially *Hardcore* (1979), *Mishima* (1985), and *Affliction* (1997), becomes evident in this volume. Bresson's work, particularly *Diary of a Country Priest* and *Pickpocket*, would be instrumental to Schrader's creative vision for the screenplays he penned for Martin Scorsese (e.g., *Taxi Driver*, *Raging Bull* (1980), *Last Temptation of Christ* (1988), and *Bringing Out the Dead* [1999]) and his direction of *American Gigolo* (1980), *Light Sleeper* (1992), and even *Auto Focus* (2002); in both formats, Schrader would write or visually reproduce key images from Bresson. Dreyer's *Day of Wrath* (1943) and *Ordet* have found their

way into Schrader's work, as well, particularly *First Reformed*; the latter, really, being an alchemic admixture of all three sources. The new edition of the text is especially salient to illuminating the conceptual and theoretical architecture of *First Reformed*. Strewn throughout the original edition of the volume, as well, are observations and insights that apply to other then-contemporary filmmakers, such as Stanley Kubrick (Schrader's identification of psychological and emotional 'muting' in Ozu's technique, for instance, could be analogously witnessed in Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* [1968])(55), or foreshadow techniques that would be appropriated by soon-to-emerge filmmakers, notably Martin Scorsese (such as the use of 'doubling' or 'tripling' action or dialogue within a sequence (98). It is unfortunate that the new edition does not include callouts to these aspects, but attentive readers of either edition can readily make these extensions and connections.

With a text that is already considered a classic, pioneering text in the field, discussion of 'weaknesses' or limitations seems fatuous. Nevertheless, a few minor points in this regard might be raised. First, as noted just above, the new edition misses a couple key opportunities. The inclusion of a substantial and extended new introduction and an updated bibliography are incredibly helpful — and in many ways highly valuable — but the main text of the book is not revised or updated. Second, and related, the lack of revision means that the scholarship at the core of the argument remains unchanged. There are two areas where this feels somewhat unfortunate. On the one hand, while Schrader's original volume was one of the inaugural texts introducing Ozu's work to a western audience, the scholarship underlying Schrader's presentation and analysis cites mainly Donald Richie's earlier volume on Japanese cinema (this is *not* to indicate that Schrader's analysis is derivative or unoriginal) or English-language reference works on Zen Buddhism. In the intervening years, fresh scholarship has been produced on Japanese cinema and

Ozu. A sample limitation: authors Daisetz T. Suzuki and Alan Watts, who provide Schrader with his understanding of “Zen” culture, have been shown to be ahistorical and essentialist or orientalist in their presentation of Japanese aesthetics, respectively. As well, recent critical translations of important primary and secondary sources of Japanese Zen Buddhism or scholarship on Buddhist visual cultures and practices more generally may have required Schrader to rethink his analysis. Updating the text and the bibliography around these points would have been beneficial. Moreover, significant work has been done over the last decade in relation to mysticism, scholasticism, and Eastern Orthodox iconography, which would be more useful and fruitful resources for Schrader’s argument, rather than reliance on what are now outdated secondary texts. Third, for a book on style and aesthetics, the text-only cover is disjunctive and flat. It is, though, the only disappointing material element of an otherwise exceptionally high-quality production from University of California Press: the paperback edition is affordable, durable, and attractively typeset with solid paper stock and binding.

The new edition of Schrader’s volume will, no doubt, prove a valuable resource to scholars, researchers, instructors, and students. The original text has already stood the test of time and has been used in countless courses and seminars, and is widely regarded as a thoroughly original piece of American film and religious scholarship. The second edition, particularly graced by Schrader’s new introduction, is especially salient not only for ongoing evaluation of Schrader’s work as critic and filmmaker, but also as a contribution from Schrader himself to the critical task of interpretation and reception of new cinema and burgeoning cinematic movements. Like any number of Schrader’s own screenplays or directed films, this volume rewards repeated visitations.