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## “Transcendence” in Film: An Ongoing Issue

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## “Transcendence” in Film: An Ongoing Issue

### Abstract

This is a review essay on three books: Paul Schrader, *Transcendental Style in Film: Ozu, Bresson, Dreyer, With a New Introduction* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2018); Jeremy Begbie, *Redeeming Transcendence in the Arts: Bearing Witness to the Triune God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2018); and David P. Nichols, *Transcendence and Film: Cinematic Encounters with the Real* (Lanham, MD: Lexington 2019).

### Author Notes

Robert K. Johnston is Professor of Theology and Culture and Co-Director of the Reel Spirituality Institute at Fuller Theological Seminary, Pasadena, CA. A past president of the American Theological Society, Johnston’s recent books include: *Deep Focus* (2019, co-author), *God in the Movies* (2017, co-editor), and *God’s Wider Presence* (2014).

## **"Transcendence" in Film: An Ongoing Issue**

Paul Schrader, *Transcendental Style in Film: Ozu, Bresson, Dreyer, With a New Introduction* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2018)

Jeremy Begbie, *Redeeming Transcendence in the Arts: Bearing Witness to the Triune God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2018)

David P. Nichols, *Transcendence and Film: Cinematic Encounters with the Real* (Lanham, MD: Lexington 2019)

The discipline of religion and film is still in its relative infancy. As might be expected, research in the field has developed in phases. In its early stages, writers tended to concentrate on the religious content of a movie, often using forms of analysis taken from literature. By the turn of the millennium, however, the limitation with such approaches began to surface. Did we not need to take film's unique form of narrative with more seriousness, film having not only text, but sight and sound – dialogue, but also images and music? Kutter Callaway's research on the affective power of cinematic music and Richard Goodwin's work on the role of the visual in film in fostering revelatory experience both help to deepen these ongoing discussions.<sup>1</sup> Others, noting the limited scope of the films chosen for study in the first decade of religion and film research, argued for the importance of expanding discussions more broadly into world cinema. Brent Plate, for example, in his edited volume, *Representing Religion in World Cinema: Filmmaking, Mythmaking, Culture Making* (2003), wrote of "the Hollywoodcentrism that resides within religion and film circles." Recognizing this limitation, scholars have broadened their palate of films over the last two decades. The books in the Routledge Studies in Religion and Film are a strong example. The latest is Kris Chong Hoi Kiew's *Transcendence and Spirituality in Chinese Cinema* (New York: Routledge, 2020).

Central to each of the film monographs noted above is their exploration of transcendence. In my book *Reel Spirituality: Theology and Film in Dialogue*, I tried to distinguish between two kinds of experience a viewer might label as “transcendence.”<sup>2</sup> One description emphasizes an encounter with the sacred itself, with that which lies beyond the natural but which gives meaning to it. Remaining ultimately a mystery, the Transcendent is at once inviting and awe-filled. Those using such a description often reference Rudolf Otto’s understanding of the numinous, a “*mysterium: fascinans et tremendum*.” A second description focuses, instead, on the human possibility of exceeding our limitations, of experiencing wholeness within brokenness, of glimpsing how life was meant to be, but is not. When T. S. Eliot writes of “the still point in a turning world,” he is speaking of such transcendence.

Here are two distinct descriptions of the same term. Yet, what unites them is their common orientation around “mystery,” their recognition of the presence of something more than meets the eye, something that exceeds our current possession. Three recent books illustrate the range of this religion and film discussion. The first is Paul Schrader’s *Transcendental Style in Film (with a New Introduction: Rethinking Transcendental Style)*, the second, Jeremy Begbie’s *Redeeming Transcendence in the Arts: Bearing Witness to the Triune God*, and the third, David P. Nichols’ edited volume of essays by philosophers interested in the topic, *Transcendence and Film*.<sup>3</sup> In these books, the vibrancy and importance of the discussion concerning transcendence is on full display, while the differences in definition and description suggest that the topic will remain central in future religion and film scholarship.

Schrader’s volume is a reprint of a book first published in 1971, a book Schrader wrote as his master’s thesis while a student at UCLA. He states that his goal in writing the book was to describe “the bridge between the spirituality I was raised with and the ‘profane’ cinema I loved”

– a bridge he sensed, but which no one had yet described. 1971 was a unique moment of transition for him: "My love of movies was full blown and my knowledge of theological aesthetics still intact." Two years later, Schrader would stop writing regular criticism and turn to filmmaking. But what he brought together at that transition point has continued to shape the field of religion and film, even up to the present.

Few books continue to have influence after fifty years, and still fewer are written by twenty-four year old masters' students! But both hold true for this volume. Schrader noted that films by the Japanese director Yasujiro Ozu, the French director Andre Bresson, and the Danish director Carl Dreyer, all have "a general representative filmic form which (expresses) the Transcendent." Influenced by his college mentor at Calvin College, the philosopher Nicholas Wolterstorff, the early twentieth century Dutch scholar Gerardus van der Leeuw, and the strongly Reformed nature of his Protestant upbringing, Schrader understood transcendental art as that which stood before the Holy. Its enemy was immanence, the rational or emotional constructs meant to explain away the otherness of the transcendental. His goal – to explain the proper method for conveying on film not holy feelings, but the Holy.

Fundamental to this transcendental style was both austerity and asceticism. For Schrader this involved both the use of sparse means to tell the film story, as well as a particular narrative arc for its telling. Key was the film's meditative, reflective pace – one that lingered on a largely expressionless humanity set amidst the banal, minimalistic commonplaces of everyday living. Key as well was the presentation of the story's central character as alienated from his or her surroundings until there is a disruption, a decisive action by that character that sheds much of the ordinary allowing the transcendent to shine through. The story ends in stasis, a ceasing of activity

that does not resolve the disparity between the character and his/her environment, but transcends it.

In 2016, forty-five years after publishing his book, Schrader was asked to be on a panel to re-think “transcendental style.” This caused him to ask, does the book’s premise still hold up? His answer, a thirty-three page essay, which now opens the new edition of his book and which adds historical depth and more recent perspective to his thesis. This introduction is reason enough for readers to buy this second edition. Clear and lucid, his essay spells out what has developed into a far-ranging style of slow filmmaking, one that Schrader believes has headed in one of three anti-narrative directions: “The Surveillance Cam” (where a filmmaker like Wang Bang can let the camera document oil field workers for fourteen hours without comment); “The Art Gallery” (where the end-point is pure imagery -- is light and color); and “The Mandala” (where image heads toward meditation). Despite their differences, common to all is the filmmakers’ commitment to have the spectator contemplate. Moreover, while all three styles of durational cinema are part of the “Slow Cinema” movement, Schrader’s preference is clearly The Mandala. For here the spectator has the chance to move beyond contemplative boredom to a transcendental meditation ending in silence. As with the mandala, one can meditate for hours. For Schrader, “there is nothing more a movie can offer.”

In his essay, Schrader asks what happened after the initial publication of his book. His answer: “Gilles Deleuze happened. So did Andrei Tarkovsky. And Slow Cinema was soon to follow.” Central, as Deleuze recognized, was the change in focus in many films from space to time.<sup>4</sup> Time allowed the viewer to make associations, even contradictory ones. The result was the long take. Rather than being given the connections on the screen, the viewer was left with the need to complete the action. If movement-image could be manipulated to create suspense, time-image

was now manipulated to create introspection. What Deleuze described was mirrored in the parallel work of Andrei Tarkovsky. His *Sculpting in Time* understood the long shot to function not as a means to an end, but as the end itself.<sup>5</sup> It was meditative, about "being there," not "getting there."

An orientation around time has continued in filmmaking and can be said to define the Slow Cinema movement. "Watch an image long enough," writes Schrader, "and your mind goes to work" (9). Being slow is not simply a way of creating mood, but of activating the viewer. Plotless, wordless, slow, alienated – Slow Cinema has been described variously as contemplative, austere, abstract, and meditative. Some of it, thinks Schrader, is also transcendental. Too esoteric for most theaters, such cinema is mainly shown at festivals. "It is experiential not expositional" (10). Its style involves the long take, wide angles, a static frame, minimal coverage, offset edits, sparse dialogue, diegetic sound, heightened sound effects, visual flatness, repeated compositions, reiterated information, and little if any acting. The goal is a spiritual one.

Schrader understands that his Transcendental Style is not Slow Cinema, but its precursor. It has continued to evolve more broadly as "time-image." Thus, while different filmmakers have slowed movies down to create a new reality, to explore memory, or beget contemplation, only a few have fully embraced a transcendental style. Schrader mentions *Into the Great Silence* (Philip Gröning, 2005), *Silent Light* (Carlos Reygadas, 2007), and *Ida* (Paweł Pawlikowski, 2013). Other films such as *Breaking the Waves* (Lars von Trier, 1996) begin not with the sparse, but with the abundant, but conclude with a decisive action and static "holy image."

Interestingly, Schrader has been leery of fully adopting a transcendental style in his own filmmaking. The issue he has said in public discussion revolves around the need to keep the audience's interest through at least a minimum of exposition. Flatness, repetition, sparse dialogue, little action, minimal acting – Schrader realizes this usually adds up to a bored audience. His latest

movie, *First Reformed*, perhaps comes closest to making use of a transcendental style, but even this balances transcendental style with narrative flow. Here is a self-critique worth noting.

Worth noting as well is the wide range of films that viewers have testified about concerning their being the occasion of the Transcendent breaking through in the viewer's life. While Schrader's "transcendental style" has a theoretical logic, the mystery of Transcendence remains – the Spirit blows where it wills. It is not only Slow Cinema that invites the presence of the Transcendent.

Jeremy Begbie has spearheaded the worldwide "theology through the arts" movement for the last twenty five years. He has explored how art (particularly music but in this book also film and painting) might be of use to theology.<sup>6</sup> Like Schrader, Begbie has not been so much interested in art's/film's theological content as in its aesthetic style. But unlike Schrader, who has centered his criticism on exploring the theological importance of art, Begbie has, instead, been interested in exploring the importance of art for theology. Begbie's ongoing question has been, how can art (including film) be utilized by theology to better accomplish its task.

Being himself an author/practitioner (he is a trained musician), Begbie's focus, like the filmmaker Schrader's, has been on the style of music/film itself, regardless of any overt theological link or association. But where Schrader has focused on particular film texts, Begbie has more often considered music's generic form. Moreover, again like Schrader, Begbie's interest has not been in the audience's experience of transcendence, but in Transcendence itself (perhaps both being *Reformed* in theological viewpoint/background is the key here). Rather than exploring how art might invite the Transcendent for its hearer/viewer, Begbie has limited his interest to how music, art, and film might provide models, or metaphors, useful for thinking theologically.



In order to set up his argument, Begbie begins his discussion by setting up a composite foil of those who claim to have transcendent experiences through art (music, fine art, film). These include his former colleague David Brown, Emeritus Professor at University of St Andrews, as well as those teaching theology and the arts at Fuller Seminary, including myself. Although none of us recognize his composite to be anything like ourselves (Begbie's description is probably closest to Brown's position), Begbie uses this constructed model to highlight what he believes is an influential, but mistaken, approach in relating the arts to divine transcendence. This mistaken model, he believes, can best be understood when read through the lens of the "sublime." Asking at the book's beginning what theological value might be assigned to those of us who claim that experiences with art/film can be occasions for the in-breaking of the Transcendent, the rest of the book answers, "not much."

Begbie's chief complaint is that it is fallacious first to seek to bracket "the historically grounded particularities of biblical faith (and biblically shaped doctrine)" (3) in order to begin the theology and film dialogue by looking, listening, and receiving. That is, one should not begin with the experience of God through the Spirit in art, and then move to the Word, but one should instead begin with the Word and then let the Spirit illumine it and through it all of life including the arts.

In making his case, Begbie offers four critiques of his hypothetically constructed foil, corrections that he believes are necessary if Transcendence is to be redeemed. First, since humankind is limited in what we can speak or know, we should not begin our theologizing from the perspective of our human limitations. Second, our theologizing should work from a particularized sense of God's presence rather than an overly generalized approach. Third, since all are sinful, we should not trust the ability of art's hearers and viewers to respond appropriately to a

transcendent God. And fourth, is it not problematic to posit more a unitarian God than a robust trinitarian deity?

As in his other writing, there is much wisdom here, but also real limitation. My central concern is Begbie's seeming rejection as adequately trinitarian of *any* Christian theology that begins with an experience of the Spirit and then weighs it in terms of the Word. Begbie is Reformed through and through, not Pentecostal or Pietistic. That the history of the church has affirmed the value of multiple trinitarian approaches, including those that begin with the Spirit, is ignored. There is not one trinitarian theology. Surely, the criterion for an adequate trinitarian theology is the ability to move without friction or reduction between the persons of the Trinity, not necessarily to have Christology as the single starting point.

A corollary to Begbie's unfortunate narrowing of one's trinitarian perspective is his limited biblical focus. In this volume, he chooses to ground his theology almost exclusively in John's Gospel. But what of Old Testament wisdom literature? Is it not also biblical, as are other more creationally centered texts? What Begbie critiques as unitarian is simply our experience of the Creator Spirit in and through creation, creativity, and conscience – an experience that can through the same Spirit open up without reduction to the Christological.

Begbie criticizes such creational approaches, for they seem to center on human limits, thus pushing God to the margins of life. But Begbie's own oft-quoted critique of the limitations of spatial metaphors is useful here. Begbie notes that painting red over a yellow space either obliterates the yellow if it is a dry surface, or makes the space orange if it is not, while playing a "C" and then an "E" on the piano allows both notes to continue to reverberate equally.<sup>7</sup> If Begbie used his own aural metaphor, then the "sound" of Transcendence heard from and in artistic creation might well be a sound that continues to reverberate through all of life, even as one encounters the

living Christ. In John Updike's words, such supernatural mail can be decisive, even while remaining illegible. This surely was Elijah's experience as he heard a "sound of sheer silence." The Word of God followed for Elijah, but the "sheer silence" indelibly remained.

There is a Spiritual Presence that at times breaks in and through film and makes a claim on viewers. This presence is not simply discovered; it is revealed. Begbie believes such revelatory experience must be centered in the biblical description of Christ's work. But might it not also be the case that through the Spirit, "the heavens declare the glory of God"? Might there not also be "speechless speech" and "sounds of sheer silence"? And might these not be present in and through art? Such revelation does not replace Christ's atoning work in Christian theology, but invites it.

The Reformed tradition has long been a Protestant leader in recognizing the value of dialogue with culture. Theologians, including myself, remain in its debt. And Begbie stands with only a few others as a leading contemporary spokesperson for this tradition. Here is a book that is learned and filled with insight. Essential to Begbie's argument is the belief that God's agency must remain central within any discussion of transcendence. Here is Begbie's strength. But I differ from Begbie in recognizing that whole traditions in Christian theology believe that the Transcendence experienced in and through film is a gift of the Spirit that often precedes the Word. Perhaps it would have been better if Begbie had entitled his book "Reform-ed Transcendence in the Arts."

Begbie's interest is in "Transcendence" (upper case), in an encounter with the sacred itself, with that which lies beyond the natural but which gives meaning to it. David P. Nichols, on the other hand, is interested in "transcendence" (lower case), focusing, instead, on the human possibility of brushing up against the boundaries of our existence, of glimpsing something like wholeness within human brokenness. Nichols has edited a collection of essays focusing on the

relationship of film and philosophy, with the common focus being their interest in such transcendence.

Particularly influential in these essays is Karl Jaspers' phenomenology of liminal experiences, but Nichols' essayists also put selected films into conversation with Husserl, Merleau-Ponty, Kierkegaard, Heidegger, Deleuze and Badiou. In each case, whether viewing the films of Dreyer, Ozu, Herzog, Lynch, Malick, Scorsese, Kubrick, or Schrader himself, the filmmakers chosen are said to not simply be artists inviting philosophical analysis, they are, instead, doing philosophy itself as they invite a two-way philosophical conversation. That is, some movies are not just illustrations or examples that invite a philosophical gaze, but rather expressions of philosophy themselves as they explore both the limits of the real and being wholly present. The common assumption of these essayists is that the language of cinema (sight, sound, words) can be an alternate means of philosophical expression.

Each of the ten essayists present a different reading of what "transcendence" means for their given filmmaker. But four definitions/descriptions are central: (1) the limits of existence, (2) the immanence of transcendence, (3) rhythm or cadence, and (4) ciphers of transcendence. Dylan Trigg points out how Lynch's *Mulholland Drive* helps viewers brush up against margins of the real by blurring the line between wakefulness and dreaming, while Jason Wirth shows how Malick's *Badlands* opens up viewers to their finitude through the obliviousness of the main characters to theirs.

Allan Casebier, on the other hand, concentrates in his excellent contribution on film's ability to present a nearness of being (being wholly present). With Husserl, there is in some film stories a "transcendence-within-immanence," where life is so intensified that it seems too close to be focused on, paradoxically making it seem far away from us. (Though not mentioned, I was

reminded of C. S. Lewis's understanding of what a good story does.) A third form of transcendence noted in this collection is that having to do with time. David Nichols, in his superb essay on the ineffable in Scorsese's *Silence*, uses Merleau-Ponty to explore how film functions "like a mirror that reverses our ordinary sensibilities about who we are and what surrounds us." (134) *Silence*, through the rhythm of its editing, images and sound, produces its own rhythm and temporality that point viewers to what is "ordinarily elusive to our human perception." (10) Nichols' essay suggests that in *Silence* we discover an example of a modified "transcendental style," for it centers on time and not space.

Lastly, other essays in this volume use symbolism effectively to open the viewer to deeper experiences of being. As Karl Jaspers has argued, though life remains a mystery, we process transcendence through the mediation of ciphers.<sup>8</sup> There is no proof that is offered; instead, "a flood of meaning possibilities (pour) through the image." (6) Here is Kevin Stoehr's argument concerning *2001: A Space Odyssey* and Herbert Golder's insightful description of Herzog's *My Son, My Son, What Have Ye Done?*

Common to this collection of ten essays is their focus on what in film evokes a sense of presence that they label "transcendence." It is a phenomenological investigation more akin to philosophical "discovery" than to theology's "revelation," more attune to Eliot's "still point in a turning world" than Otto's "*mysterium: tremendum et fascinans.*" But as in life, what is "revelation" and what is "discovery" is often hard to distinguish for the film viewer. In Christian theology, the *ruach* (the wind, or Spirit) blows where it wills. Phenomenologically, it remains a mystery, transformative, but ever elusive.

As should be evident from these several monographs, "transcendence" has become a central concern in current religion and film studies. This surely has to do with the increasing

recognition that film's religious significance has fundamentally to do with its reception by viewers. But what is discovered, or what is revealed, remains strongly contested. For some, this reception is limited to perceiving new theological illustration. But for many others, the viewing of film invites audiences to see that there is "more in life than meets the eye," to use Kris Chong's helpful phrase. This can happen as one "intends" to/stretches out to/discovers transcendence (lower case "t"), or as one receives/encounters the Transcendent (upper case "T") which is revealed as divine Presence. Is such an experience personal projection or numinous gift? The border remains fuzzy, even as the differences remain clearly drawn. Moreover, with both, personal transformation is often the result, even while ongoing mystery remains.

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<sup>1</sup> See Kutter Callaway, *Scoring Transcendence: Contemporary Film Music as Religious Experience* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2013), and Richard Goodwin, *Seeing is Believing: Revelation, Emotion, and Film Images* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, forthcoming 2021).

<sup>2</sup> Robert K. Johnston, *Reel Spirituality: Theology and Film in Dialogue* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2000; 2<sup>nd</sup> edition 2006).

<sup>3</sup> Paul Schrader, *Transcendental Style in Film: Ozu, Bresson, Dreyer, With a New Introduction* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2018); Jeremy Begbie, *Redeeming Transcendence in the Arts: Bearing Witness to the Triune God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2018); and David P. Nichols, *Transcendence and Film: Cinematic Encounters with the Real* (Lanham, MD: Lexington 2019).

<sup>4</sup> See Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 1: The Movement-Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Babara Habberjam (London: Bloomsbury, 2013); and Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta (London: Bloomsbury, 2013).

<sup>5</sup> Andrey Tarkovsky, *Sculpting in Time: Tarkovsky The Great Russian Filmmaker Discusses His Art*, trans Kitty Hunter-Blair (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1989).

<sup>6</sup> See Jeremy Begbie, *Resounding Truth: Christian Wisdom in the World of Music* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007); Maeve Louise Heaney and Jeremy Begbie, *Music as Theology: What Music Says about the Word* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012); and Jeremy Begbie, *Theology, Music and Time* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

<sup>7</sup> See Jeremy Begbie, ed., *Beholding the Glory: Incarnation through the Arts* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2000).

<sup>8</sup> Karl Jaspers, *Philosophy*, vol. 3, trans. E. B. Ashton (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1971), 113-208. Cf., Leonard H. Ehrlich, "Tillich's 'Symbol' vis-à-vis Jasper's 'Cipher,'" *Harvard Theological Review* 66:1 (1973), 153-156.

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