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Baraka: A World Without Words: A Guided Meditation

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Baraka: A World Without Words: A Guided Meditation

Abstract

Baraka: A World Beyond Words (1992) is a guided meditation that aims to induce the transcendent experience in the viewer. Through the eyes of a Zen Buddhist monk, the viewer is invited to meditate on the various phenomena that testify to the existence of the transcendent (the first eight chapters), to experience the everyday world where the transcendent is painfully absent (the next eleven chapters), and to finally arrive at stasis (the last two chapters). This paper is a description of and commentary on each of the 21 chapters of the film.

Keywords

baraka, meditation, transcendent experience, transcendent, transcendental style, mandala

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INTRODUCTION

Baraka: A World Beyond Words (1992) is a non-verbal, non-narrative documentary film that explores the theme of transcendence, creating a powerful emotional experience for viewers. As a testament to its greatness, Roger Ebert, film critic for the *Chicago Sun-Times* for almost fifty years, once said that “if man sends another Voyager to the distant stars and it can carry only one film on board, that film might be *Baraka*.”¹

What distinguishes *Baraka* from most other films is not just that it is wordless and plotless, but also, and especially, that it is structured as a guided meditation that aims to induce the transcendent experience in the viewer. According to Director Ron Frick, *Baraka* is a guided meditation on “humanity’s relation to the eternal.”² The idea, adds Producer Mark Madison, is “for the viewer to have an inner journey, and the absence of both dialogue and commentary was intended to leave space for an internal dialogue, and allows the viewer to be guided by the music and imagery.”³

Many good films, as Nathaniel Dorsky first pointed out, can be used as guided meditations. When we watch a film in the theatre, we sit in the darkness and watch an illuminated world, the world on the screen. At the same time, we watch the images on the screen from the dark theater of our skull, the mysterious darkness of our own being, and the luminous world on the screen sheds light on our inner

darkness. Likewise, when we meditate, we also go into the darkness of our being, and we receive illumination from the images that present themselves to us.⁴

Baraka makes explicit in various ways that it intends viewers to use the film as a guided meditation. Especially important is the presentation of the image of a Zen Buddhist monk meditating. This image occurs three times, first in the cold open, next at the end of Chapter 3, and finally at the beginning of the last chapter. In each of these shots, a monk sits in the same meditating position before an open doorway with his back to the camera; the camera zooms in to the back of his head until the viewer sees only a black screen, suggesting that the viewer's mind has become one with the monk's mind, where we see what he sees and can arrive at the same insights and experience the same emotions.

Also, enforcing the idea of the film as a guided meditation is the mandala structure of each chapter of the film and of the film as a whole. *Mandala* is a Sanskrit word meaning "circle" and is the Indian term for the circles drawn in religious rituals as instruments of meditation, concentration, and self-immersion, for the purpose of realizing inner experience. The mandala frequently contains a quaternity—a fourfold structure that expresses symbolically the nature of the divine and by extension describes the structure of the world that mirrors that divinity. Outside a religious context, individuals who are suffering from disordered states marked by conflict and anxiety often spontaneously create mandalas as a means of

self-healing. These mandalas are also usually characterized by the circle and the quaternity.⁵

The 21 chapters of *Baraka* are typically structured as mandalas, either by organizing the chapter around a quaternity of images that coalesce around a central point or by beginning the chapter at dawn and ending it at sunset or night so that the chapter forms a circle. For instance, a quaternity of images—the Himalayan Mountains, a snow monkey in a hot spring, the starry sky, and a solar eclipse—in Chapter 1 form a mandala for our contemplation of a *force mystérieuse* in the universe. And Chapter 19 begins with a view of the river Ganges at sunrise and ends at sunset over the Ganges.

The “transcendent” experience has been called by various other names: William James identified it as a religious experience;⁶ Richard Maurice Bucke, as cosmic consciousness;⁷ Rudolf Otto, as the sense of the numinous;⁸ Herbert Maslow, as peak experience.⁹

As defined by Louis Roy, who has written a phenomenological study of the experience, the transcendent experience is an unusually moving, powerful, and memorable event characterized by “an apprehension of the infinite through feeling, in a particular circumstance.” Roy says that the two central elements of the transcendent experience are feeling and discovery. The transcendent experience is inseparably emotional and noetic. The predominant feeling—such as awe, joy, hope, love or compassion—is emotion that leads to contemplation, not action. The

discovery, which takes place at the same time as the feeling, is a cosmic disclosure, an insight. It is definitely not a vision, an intuition, or a direct touching of the transcendent but is the awareness of a relationship with a unique unknown pronounced to be non-finite, in-finite, the sense of being in the presence of a mystery. It is the realization that one is being grasped by ultimate concern in the face of the *mysterium tremendum*. The experiencer is aware of having been touched, moved, and grasped in a unique way, and of having discovered something highly significant. The exact transcendent character of the discovery, Roy says, has to do with the idea of totality, which fills the mind with wonder.

Four other elements of the experience are less central: (1) the preparation, (2) the immediate occasion, (3) the interpretation, and (4) the fruit. The *preparation* is the cognitive and affective setting that conditions the forthcoming experience. It is constituted by the lifestyle, personality, views, concerns, problems, and questions of the experiencer, and is often marked by uneasiness, tension, or struggle. The *occasion* is the trigger that sets off the experience. It can be an action, a person, a painting, a dream, a shock—almost anything, really. The *interpretation* is the awareness of that which has just occurred and the explication of the experience. The *fruit* is the benefit that a person obtains from the experience, in terms of knowing, wisdom, attitude, and motivation. It may consist of a personal transformation, a conversion, or a response to a mysterious imperative immanent

in the experience. The experiencer may find fulfillment, meaning and freedom from all fear of death. The fruit may come right after the experience or many years later.¹⁰

Since the experience of transcendence can be a great blessing, the title of the film is most appropriate: “Baraka” derives from the Arabic word for the Islamic concept of blessing or as an expression for the breath or essence of life. The film can, indeed, be a blessing to those who take seriously the experience of transcendence and allow it to redirect their lives.

The first eight chapters of the film testify to the existence of the transcendent, calling viewers’ attention to the disparity between the images of the visible world and the viewers’ awareness of a higher reality, of another dimension, behind those images. There are three types of images: (1) scenes from nature that have triggered transcendent experiences in millions throughout the ages—the Himalayas, the stars, the solar eclipses, Hawaii’s volcanoes, and the Iguazu Falls; (2) scenes of the devotions of the practitioners of various religions; and (3) scenes of life in Nepal, Bali, and the indigenous societies of the Maasai and the Kayapo, where the transcendent informs everyday life to an exceptional degree.

The next 13 chapters strive to create the transcendent experience in the viewer by using what Paul Schrader has described as the transcendental style. The transcendental style, Schrader says, consists of the depiction of the everyday and the experience of disparity culminating in a decisive action and stasis.¹¹ Schrader’s

“everyday” corresponds with Roy’s “preparation”; the decisive action with Roy’s “trigger”; and Schrader’s “stasis” with Roy’s “feeling” and “discovery.”

Most of these 13 chapters contain cold, hard images of the everyday reality of millions of people around the world—images of wanton destruction of nature, onerous work, poverty, crime, war, and death—painful images showing disunion between the natural world and human society, from which all awareness of the transcendent is excluded.

Viewers look at these images with a growing sense of dismay. We have an acute sense of two opposing worlds—an outer world of cold, hard facts and an inner world of compassionate feelings. Yet, we know that our agonized feelings have no value. They can do nothing to relieve the suffering of the mass of humanity. Paul Schrader points out that such overwhelming compassion cannot come from the cold environment or the humane instinct, but can only come from touching the transcendent ground of being.¹² The viewer’s deep, illogical, suprahuman feeling in a cold, unfeeling environment shows, Schrader says, that there exists a deep ground of compassion and awareness which man and nature can touch intermittently. “This,” he says, “is, of course, the Transcendent.”¹³

After a period of experiencing this intensifying disparity, there is finally a moment of what Schrader calls “decisive action,” where there is an outburst of spiritual emotion totally inexplicable within the everyday. In *Baraka*, the moment of decisive action is the shocking view of the corpses on the burning pyres at

Varanasi. These images force viewers to face the reality of our own deaths. However, this awareness culminates not in despair but in stasis, as shown in the last two chapters of the film, where the viewer arrives at a joyful acceptance tinged with sadness at the mutability of life and a feeling of boundless love and compassion for all mankind.

On first viewing, *Baraka* may seem like a haphazard collection of images from the 25 countries in which the film was made. In reality, the film is very tightly unified. Apart from the mandala structure of each chapter and of the film as a whole, as described above, the images are linked in various other ways. Most significant are the recurrent images of the sky and the sound of the wind, and the use of repeated camera shots, such as shots of the frontal view of the world's citizens.

The sky is present in almost every one of the first chapters and in the final two chapters, where the world is impregnated with sacredness. On the other hand, in most of the images of the desacralized modern world in the second part of the film, the sky is absent (as in the shots of commuters rushing to meaningless jobs or of factory workers or of the streets of megacities). When the sky is present in these chapters, it is often obscured by smog (like the smog above the trash dumps of Calcutta) or smoke (like the thick black smoke from Kuwait's burning oil wells).

From time immemorial, the sky has been seen as something sacred, says Mircea Eliade. Infinitely high, the sky "symbolizes" transcendence, power and changelessness simply by being there. When religious values came to be set upon

the sky, it became the dwellings of the gods, and “Most High” became quite naturally an attribute of the divinity. As a result, the symbolism of the sky has held its position in every religious framework down through history, simply because its mode of being is outside time. Even in desacralized modern-day society, the sacred meaning of the sky remains a symbol of transcendence.¹⁴

The sound of the wind also unifies *Baraka*. A strong wind blows through the chapters of *Baraka*. It blows around the peaks of the Himalayas and around the summit of Haleakala in Maui, Hawaii. It blows on the blankets of the homeless family lying sleeping on sidewalks in Brazil. It blows through the now-empty rooms of Auschwitz-Birkenau in Poland and of the Tuol Sleng in Cambodia. It sends the clouds scudding across the sky over Varanasi. It blows around the Buddhist monk ringing the bell at the Chion-in Temple in Kyoto, Japan. And it blows around the lone juniper tree at the end of the film.

The wind has been personified in many mythologies as a god or as having some connection with the supernatural. The Hebrew *ruach* means both “wind” and “spirit,” as do the Greek word *pnuema* and the Latin word *spiritus*. In Christian mythology, the *ruach* of God moves over the waters of Earth in the opening passages of Genesis. Archetypally, the wind is the audible manifestation of the mysterious power that pervades the universe and connects us with each other.

The repetition of types of shots is still another technique that unifies *Baraka*. One such repeated shot is the use of frontality. Throughout *Baraka*, people are

photographed facing the camera, and the viewer. Sometimes the images are of one person alone, such as the Kayapo warrior expressing dismay at the destruction of the rain forest, the mugshot of the terrorized Cambodian man in Tuol Sleng, and the elderly holy man at Varanasi expressing compassion at the inevitability of our deaths. More often, the portraits are of three people, such as the three Kayapo children or of three Japanese schoolgirls standing beside a subway train. As Amy Stapleton points out, “the returns of the gaze by the film’s human and animal subtexts serve as punctuation marks in the visual text, creating suspended moments that underscore particular passages within the film’s often breathless and frenetic pace.”¹⁵ According to Schrader, religious artists have always used frontality to inspire an I-Thou devotional attitude between the viewer and the work of art.¹⁶

CHAPTER COMMENTARIES

The following are descriptions of the major images in each of the 21 chapters of *Baraka: A World Beyond Words*, as named on the DVD. Locations were identified through the official website for *Baraka*,¹⁷ Darren Lambert’s website,¹⁸ and Mark Madison’s *Baraka: A Visual Journey*, a collection of still photographs that Madison took while on location for the film.¹⁹ I have included some background information on many of the images to suggest why I think they were included in the film.

1 OPENING TITLE

A quaternity of images—the Himalayan Mountains, a snow monkey in a hot spring, the starry sky, and a solar eclipse—form a mandala for our contemplation of a *force mystérieuse* in the universe. On the sound track, the ascending notes of a lone flute—pure, bright, and ethereal—correlate with the feelings of awe these images arouse.

The Himalayas epitomize the mystique of all mountains, which, being the highest point of the earth, are the meeting place of heaven and earth. “Everything nearer to the sky shares, with varying intensity, in its transcendence,” says Mircea Eliade.²⁰ The feelings of awe aroused by the Himalayas have led Hindus, Buddhists, Muslims, and many other religions, to establish in the Himalayas monasteries and places of worship, like the Tiger’s Nest, a Tibetan Buddhist monastery that hangs precariously off the side of a steep cliff in Paro Valley, Bhutan.

Several snow monkeys (Japanese macaques) bathe in a hot spring in Jigokudani Park, Nagano.²¹

Time lapse photography is used to show the stars revolving in a dark blue sky as it brightens with the coming of day. Prominent among the stars is the Orion constellation, named after a gigantic, supernaturally strong hunter/warrior in Greek mythology. The most prominent stars in the Orion constellation are the three stars that form Orion’s belt. The brightest star, which establishes the warrior’s left knee, is a prominent navigation star, being readily visible in all the world’s oceans.²² The

shots of the Orion constellation, which will be repeated throughout the film, suggest that a Presence is standing guard over us, protecting and guiding us.

After the sun rises, the stars disappear and the sky suddenly turns a diaphanous blue. A snow monkey stands in the hot springs with his eyes closed, seemingly meditating on the miraculous transformation of the night sky into the day sky that he has just witnessed.

Amy Staples calls this a symbolic image of man's primordial beginnings,²³ while Director Ron Fricke says that the meditating snow monkey was exactly what he wanted in this scene. He says he wanted a Buddha figure but not a person, since one can always attribute some personality trait or way of life to a person but cannot do so with an animal.²⁴ With this shot, Fricke seems to suggest that the ability to perceive the numinous is deeply embedded not just in human nature, but also in the nature that human beings share with non-human primates. To emphasize the parallel between the monkey's experience of the numinous with the human experience, the monkey is filmed in half profile on the left of the screen, in a way similar to the way that other Buddha figures are filmed later in the film.²⁵

A solar eclipse appears. Many people have reported having transcendent experiences while viewing an eclipse, the most ancient and universal symbol for the Absolute. As the solar eclipse slowly moves up from the bottom of the screen, the word "BARAKA" in gold letters appears in the center of the screen, promising the viewer that the film that follows will be a blessing.

2 NEPAL MORNING

The chapter begins at dawn in the town square of Kathmandu Valley, Nepal, at the base of the Himalayas, and ends at night with Tibetan Buddhist monks chanting before a stupa in Kathmandu, forming a mandala of serenity. As the Nepalese go about their daily activities, they seem to be ever mindful of a transcendent reality.

We see the serenity in the soft haze of the lighting and in the long takes that invite the viewer to observe details in the scene that might otherwise go unnoticed, such as the holy monkeys scampering among the stupas. We hear the serenity in the background music, where the flute still predominates, as it did in the scenes from the Himalayas, but now faint gongs and bells also sound intermittently.

The Nepali are traditionally a religious people. Most Nepali are Hindu but many others are Buddhist. Still others practice a blend of Buddhism and Hinduism, sharing common temples and worshipping common deities.²⁶ As testament to the religious fervor of the Nepali are the incredible number of religious shrines throughout the country. The most magnificent of these shrines are the Hindu Pashupatinath Temple in Bhaktapur and the Buddhist Swayambhunath Stupa in Kathmandu.

Offering divine service is the business of the day for the Nepali: Several women sweep around the temple in Bhaktapur, distribute rice on the stones of the Pashupatinath Temple in Bhaktapur, and place red rice on the forehead of a goddess

in meditation at the Swayambhunath Stupa. Two men pour gold paint on the walls of the Swayambhunath Stupa.

At the top of the Swayambhunath stupa is a glittering golden spire that reaches to the sky, making it visible for many miles away on all sides of the valley. Swayambhunath, among the most sacred Buddhist pilgrimage sites in Nepal, is popularly known as Monkey Temple because of the presence of a large number of holy monkeys living in parts of the temple. The spire of the Swayambhunath stupa rests on a gilded cubical structure with the eyes of the Buddha painted on each side, looking in all four directions. Above each pair of eyes is a third eye, signifying the "eye of consciousness," which brings enlightenment. In the place of the Buddha's nose is the Nepalese number one, signifying the unity of all things existing in the world. The cubical structure rests on a white dome, a mandala that represents the universe.²⁷

At the end of the day, Tibetan Buddhist monks chant evening prayers near the Swayambhunath stupa.

3 MEDITATION

In Chapter 3, devotees of various religions from around the world exhibit a similar reverence in their encounters with the sacred, attesting to the universality of the religious instinct. Although each religion—Hindu, Jewish, Christian, Sufi, Muslim, and Buddhist—is characterized by a unique set of symbols that formulates a unique

conception of a general order of existence, each religion seems to function in a similar way: All seem to bring worshipers into touch with a “*mysterium: fascinans et tremendum*,” with what Joseph Campbell in *The Power of Myth* calls the unknowable and unknown, unnamable, transcendent.²⁸

In Nepal, a Hindu holy man with dreadlocks and a Vishnu mark on his forehead and wearing a prayer shawl reads from a holy book in a cloud of incense. Before the Western Wall in Jerusalem, an Orthodox Jew wearing a prayer shawl marks a place in the Hebrew prayer book with one of his long braids, and young Orthodox Jews, wearing prayer shawls and *tefillin*, prepare for morning prayers while others pray. In Turkey, the Dervishes of the Mevlevi order of Sufis pray before beginning to whirl. After removing their black cloaks representing their turning from the world, the Dervishes pass before the master, bow, and kiss the master’s hand while the master kisses the napes of their necks, transmitting the love of God to them. They then begin to whirl in repetitive circle, chanting Allah’s name.²⁹ At the Inman Mosque in Isfahan, Iran, a Muslim woman kisses a large, ornate lock on a gate to the mosque, and a Muslim man prostrates himself before the mosque. In Jerusalem, various Christian groups worship at the Church of the Holy Sepulchre: First, a Franciscan monk enters the church, kneels and kisses “The Stone of the Anointing,” believed to be the spot where Jesus’ body was prepared for burial. Then, six Roman Catholic priests and monks conduct a ritual inside the church, followed by two Greek Orthodox priests who perform their own rituals. In

Nepal, a Tibetan Buddhist monk performs the daily light offerings, which aim to dispel ignorance and bring wisdom and compassion for all beings, just as light dispels the darkness, and an old Buddhist monk prays beside the light offerings. In Kyoto, a Zen Buddhist nun meditates on the Zen rock garden at Ryōanji.

The chapter concludes with a complex metaphor for the process of meditation: A Zen Buddhist monk sits in meditation before an open door, his back to the camera. The screen goes black as the camera zooms into the back of the monk's head, symbolizing the identification of the viewer's mind with the monk's mind. An image of ocean water rushing through the Keyhole Arch, offshore of Pfeiffer Beach in Big Sur, California, serves as a metaphor for the process of enlightenment: The opening in the rock corresponds with the doorway around the monk's head, suggesting that the rock wall represents the belief systems and other illusions that ordinarily block insight into the true nature of reality, and that the in-rushing water represents the insight into reality that comes with meditation, whether the meditator is sitting on a meditation cushion or in the movie theatre.

4 BALINESE “MONKEY” CHANT (KECAK)

The chapter opens with a shot of the Uluwatu Temple in Bali, Indonesia, at dawn and concludes with a performance of the Balinese Monkey chant (Kecak) at the same temple at sunset. At the center of this mandala is the Tri Hita Karana (THK) philosophy, taught in the *Bhagavad Gita*. THK, the basis of Bali culture, teaches

that a harmonious relationship with God, with other people and with nature is necessary for happiness.³⁰

Uluwatu Temple is an Eleventh-Century Hindu temple in Bali, built at the edge of a high cliff projecting into the Indian Ocean. At this temple, the three divine powers of Brahma (the Creator), Vishnu (the Preserver), and Shiva (the Destroyer) become one in Siva Rudra, the *trimurti*. In front of the temple is a small forest where hundreds of sacred monkeys live.³¹

The Tegalalang Rice Paddy is one of the most beautiful of Bali's five famous large terraced rice fields. The THK principle, which informs all of Balinese life, is reflected in the Balinese system for the management of its rice fields in which water from springs and canals is channeled through the water temples where the priests bless it and allocate it to the rice terraces. The priests also conduct ceremonies that promote a harmonious relationship between the Balinese and their environment and between each other.³²

The Prambanan Temple Compound (Hindu) consists of over 500 Buddhist and Hindu temples, representing a standing proof of past religious peaceful cohabitation. Three of the Hindu temples are decorated with reliefs illustrating the *Ramayana* epic and are dedicated to the *trimurti*.³³

The magnificent Borobudur temple, built in the shape of a mountain, is the world's biggest Buddhist monument and is one of the world's seven wonders.³⁴ A statue seen through the latticed openings of a stupa cover at Borobudur shows a

Buddha meditating in half-profile, like the snow monkey in Chapter 1. The artist has captured in stone the look of deepest devotion on the face of the Buddha.

The Kecak Dance, performed every day at sunset at the Uluwatu Temple, also dramatizes the THK principle of harmonious relations among people: About 60 shirtless men wearing black-and-white checked sarongs sit in a concentric circles and chant “cak, cak, cak” while moving their hands and arms, representing the army of monkey-like creatures who helped Prince Rama fight the evil King Ravana in the *Ramayana*, a Sanskrit epic poem considered one of India’s great works of literature. The Kecak Dance is said to originate from an ancient religious ritual aimed at exorcising evil spirits, but in 1930 a dramatic performance version of the ritual incorporating the *Ramayana* was created, and the dance has been popular ever since.³⁵

5 VOLCANOS/ORGANICS

The Hawaiian volcanoes, the marine iguanas and blowholes of the Galapagos, the rock formations of the American Southwest, and Ayers Rock of Australia form a quaternity of images for the contemplation of the mystery of the universe.

With the sound of a strong wind and distant rhythmic drumming, the camera circles over Hawaii’s Pu‘u ‘Ō‘ō and Haleakala, conveying a sense of the sublime which corresponds with the transcendent experience. The source of the sublime can

be terror, the strongest emotion the mind is capable of feeling, or infinity, which fills the mind with a sort of delightful horror.

When a volcano will erupt and how long the eruption will last is a huge mystery. In some cases, earthquakes and tremors may precede an eruption but the volcano may then settle down and may not erupt for tens or even hundreds of years. (Haleakala has not erupted since the Seventeenth Century.³⁶) In other cases, a volcano may erupt only days after the first warning signs began to appear. Further, an eruption may last only a few days, or it may go on for 35 years, like the Pu‘u‘Ō‘ō eruption of 1983 to 2018.³⁷

Another awe-inspiring fact about volcanoes is that, as mountains are high, volcanoes are deep. Some volcanoes extend thousands of feet both above and below sea level, bringing their total height to more than that of Mount Everest in the Himalayas.³⁸

Also mysterious are the thousands of canyons and giant sandstone arches and other rock formations in the North American Southwest. So fantastic are these formations that the area has come to be called “red-rock wonderland.”³⁹ Among these rocks is Cliff Palace, the most famous of the stone communities that the Anasazi built in the sheltered alcoves of the canyon walls in today’s Monte Verde National Park.⁴⁰ The Anasazi mysteriously disappeared from the area around 1300 CE.⁴¹

The Galapagos present yet another mystery: the marine iguana, a species of iguana found only in the Galapagos. Scientists believe that marine iguanas separated from the ancestor they shared with the land iguana about 6 million years ago. However, the oldest rock on the Galapagos Islands is less than 3 million years old. Scientists are unable to explain where the marine iguanas were before coming to the Galapagos.⁴²

The blowhole, like the one at Punta Suarez on Espanola Island, is a further mystery of the Galapagos. A blowhole results when the repeated onslaught of ocean waves causes water to be trapped in a sea cave; then, when the water recedes, jets of water suddenly shoot out of a hole on the surface of a rocky coastline at enormous pressure, like a geyser, reaching as high as 100 feet. No one can predict when the water will erupt.⁴³

Finally, there is the enigma of Uluru (Ayers Rock), a huge red sandstone rock in Australia, which was formed by the same processes that formed the arches and other rock formations of the North American Southwest. According to Aboriginal myth, at the beginning of time, the world was unformed and featureless until ancestral beings emerged from the void and journeyed across the land, creating all living species and the features of the desert landscape, including Uluru. Today's Aborigines believe themselves to be direct descendants of these ancestral beings and still hold Uluru sacred and use it for rituals and leave paintings in its caves.⁴⁴

The Aborigines have various prohibitions regarding the use of Uluru. For example, they permit only certain elderly Aboriginal males to climb the rock. They also prohibit removing rocks from the formation, warning that anyone who does so brings a curse upon himself. However, tourists, being tourists, have often disrespected the Aboriginal beliefs. And they have come to regret it. Over the years, at least 35 people who climbed Uluru have died, either because they suffered heart attacks or because they fell off the rock.⁴⁵ Also, many people who took rocks home with them later suffered various calamities, motivating them to mail the rocks back to the Australian government in an attempt to remove the perceived curse.⁴⁶

6 BODY ADORNMENT

For the members of indigenous cultures, the body is holy, and body adornment is one of the ways in which they express their unity with nature.

Two cave paintings from a side of the Uluru in Australia reflect the Aboriginal belief that the sexual mystery, the generation of all life, is a holy mystery. The top painting depicts the wife of the Creation Ancestor of one group of Aborigines; the middle painting depicts the Creation Ancestor above his wife; to his right is the “Lightning Man,” who makes lightning appear and creates roars of thunder in storms.⁴⁷

Body painting and other adornment carries deep spiritual significance for the Australian Indigenous People. Here an Australian Aborigine exhibits his

painted face, an Aboriginal woman paints her man, and a young Aboriginal man applies face paint with a comb.

For the Kayapo (Brazil), also, body adornment has spiritual significance. The Kayapos use body paint, as well as beads and feathers combined, to make their bodies look like bees, spiders, and beetles. They believe their ancestors learned how to live in their forest environment from these insects.⁴⁸

7 DANCE

For indigenous peoples, dancing is the way they align themselves with the ebb and flow of the primal energy that moves throughout the universe, of *baraka*.

Here, three groups of indigenous peoples perform dances that are integral to their cultures: Young Maasai men and women of Kenya perform a mating dance. Kayapo mothers and children perform a line dance, while chanting, and Kayapo men face Kayapo women to perform a playful “battle of the sexes” dance.⁴⁹ The Tiwis perform a burial ceremonial dance on the Tiwi Islands, Australia.⁵⁰

8 WATER JOURNEY

Chapter 8 begins with a shot of pink flamingos flying through the sky over Lake Natron in Northern Tanzania. The rest of the chapter is devoted to shots of Iguazu Falls, on the border between Brazil and Argentina. Shots of the sky and the falls

structure this chapter, the one the epitome of serenity, the other the epitome of power, the opposite poles of the *énergie mystérieuse* that pervades the universe.

Only the call of the flamingos and then the sound of the roaring falls are heard on the soundtrack until the music begins. Then one extended chord rises higher and higher, similar to the way the one note of the flute rose higher and higher as the camera climbed the Himalayas. The music expresses the onlooker's bated breath, the feeling of awe, in the face of such magnificence.

Like the iguana, the pink flamingo is an anomaly of nature. Fossil evidence indicates that the group from which flamingos evolved existed about 30 million years ago, before many other avian orders had evolved.⁵¹

Iguazu Falls is revered as the world's most spectacular waterfall. One of the nine wonders of the world, Iguazu Falls, like the Himalayas and the Haleakala volcano, has a numinous quality, filling onlookers with awe, impressing them with a mysterious force that is wholly other—a mysterious power that is at once terrifying and fascinating, and before which they find themselves utterly abashed.

The peacefulness of the great dome of the open sky over the boardwalk to Iguazu Falls overlooks Argentina, contrasting with the violence of the falls.

9 DESTRUCTION

From Chapter 9 to Chapter 19, the images are of a different sort from those of the first eight chapters. In the earlier chapters, the images inspired awe of the

transcendent. The viewer was filled with serenity and assurance of the interconnectedness of humans with nature and of humans with each other. In Chapter 9 and the following chapters, the images are of the opposite sort. They show the disharmony of humanity and nature and of humans with each other.

These images cause the viewer to suffer. However, suffering also leads to transcendence. As Joseph Campbell explains, “when the center of the heart is touched, and a sense of compassion awakened with another person or creature, and you realize that you and that other are in some sense creatures of the one life in being, a whole new stage of life in the spirit opens out.... For to experience this sense of compassion, accord, or even identity with another... is the beginning, once and for all, of the properly religious way of life.”⁵²

The disparity between these cold, hard images and the viewer’s feeling of compassion is an essential element of the transcendental style, as described by Paul Schrader. These feelings show, Schrader says, that there exists a deep ground of compassion and awareness which man and nature can touch intermittently. This he defines as the transcendent.⁵³

Chapter 9 begins with a transitional image: An acacia tree stands tall against the soft blue sky on the Serengeti, a large grassy plain that stretches across much of Tanzania to southwestern Kenya, the best-known wildlife sanctuary in the world. The camera tilts up the tree to show an eagle the same color as the tree sitting on a limb, a fitting metaphor for the unity of life on the Serengeti.

However, modern civilization has begun to encroach on the Serengeti, and many species, like the Thompson Gazelle, are now endangered. Here, a herd of Thompson Gazelle—one male and numerous females—is pummeled by a rain storm, exciting the viewer's sympathy.

Next, we see a heavy rain storm moving over the Amazon rainforest, the world's largest and most diverse rainforest, accompanied by the ominous sound of thunder. Gradually, the sound of thunder merges with the sound of a saw cutting down a tree in the rainforest, sending the insects that live in the tree scurrying. The viewer watches their panicked exit with compassion.

A Kayapo warrior looks straight into the camera, his mouth tightly closed in indignation, as the camera zooms in, to his outraged eyes. He seems to be asking the viewer, "Why are you allowing this to happen?"

The viewer watches with dismay an explosion at Carajás Iron Ore Mine, Brazil, the largest iron ore mine in the world, which leaves a giant open pit after the mine is abandoned. (Mining is the second major cause of the deforestation of the rain forest.)

A Kayapo child stands in the rainforest, looking directly at the camera, eyes seemingly expressing shock, dismay, incomprehension at the destruction of the rainforest.

The continuous rumbling of thunder on the soundtrack seems to warn of the disastrous consequences the loss of the Serengeti and the Amazon rainforest would entail, not only to Africa and South America, respectively, but to the entire planet.

10 BRAZIL FAVELA/CIGARETTE FACTORY

Three slums and a cemetery form a quaternity in Chapter 10, further stirring the agonized feelings of the viewer. Favela da Rocinha, Barrio Mapasingue, and Kowloon Walled City are three of the worst slums that have ever existed. These enormous slums were created when the rural poor swarmed into cities at the beginning of the Twentieth Century to work in the factories that produced the marvelous technological inventions of the century. That the lives of the people living in these slums is a living death is dramatized by juxtaposing images of the slum apartment buildings with the boxes of the dead in a cemetery.

Peruvian pipe music is heard throughout most of this chapter. Its mixture of gaiety and melancholy seems to capture the world's delight in the new technology that the Twentieth Century created and the world's indifference to the widespread misery the production of this technology brought to so many people.

Favela da Rocinha is the largest urbanized slum in Brazil and the ninth most populous living area in the world. Here, disease is rampant, and infant mortality rates are high because of crowding, unsanitary conditions, poor nutrition and pollution. Much of the crime in Rio is committed by the residents of this favela.⁵⁴

We note that in the first shot of the slum, smog obscures the sky. In the second shot, no sky is visible at all, expressing the claustrophobia of tenement life.

In Barrio Mapasingue, in Guayaquil, Ecuador, many adults and children are imprisoned in a life of poverty, symbolized by the bars over many of the windows. When the sky is visible at all, it is obscured by smog.

Kowloon Walled City was an ungoverned and densely populated Chinese enclave within the boundaries of Kowloon City, British Hong Kong. It became an outrageously densely populated slum controlled by vicious gangs in the 1950s, and it continued to grow throughout the century, becoming the most densely populated spot in the world by 1990, housing more than 33,000 people in tiny apartments in 350 buildings stacked 10-14 stories high in an area barely a hundredth of a square mile in size.⁵⁵

That life in these slums is a living death is implied by juxtaposing the stacks of box-like apartments housing the very poor with the stacks of small white boxes containing the dead bodies of the very rich in La Ciudad Blanca (The White City) Cemetery in Guayaquil, Ecuador. In a painting on the cemetery wall, even Jesus seems aghast at this situation.

11 SUBWAY RIDERS/MONK WITH BELL

Chapter 11 contains two contrasting sets of images from Tokyo, one concerned with the life of the Japanese white-collared worker, the “salaryman,” and the other

with a Zen Buddhist monk doing walking meditation on the busy city streets. The salaryman and the monk are iconic figures that well illustrate the usurpation of the traditional ways of life by modernism, not only in Japan but all over the world.

A Japanese salaryman smokes nervously as he waits for the subway train in Tokyo, and another salaryman wipes away the sweat as he waits for the train on a hot summer morning. Although many salarymen find their jobs meaningless, they are extremely fearful of losing them. This fear motivates their panicked rush to get to work on time. Only one prolonged note is heard on the sound track, expressing the salarymen's inner tension.

A young salaryman watches television in his tiny capsule at the Green Plaza Capsule Hotel, Tokyo, in front of the Shinjuku subway station. The salaryman is not only expected to work long hours—often as much as 80 hours per week—but also to be available for going out drinking with his boss and colleagues after-work, on demand. If he stays out so late that he misses the last train home, he can spend the night at a “capsule hotel,” a low-cost hotel near the train station, so that he can arrive on time for work next morning.

A Zen Buddhist monk does walking meditation on the crowded Tokyo streets. The gentle tinkling of his bell reminds the crowds of shoppers and salarymen that the principles of Zen Buddhism still offer a way out of a meaningless existence. The passers-by ignore him.

12 CITY AND MANUFACTURING

Chapter 12 focuses on a quaternity of places that most clearly manifest the changes modernism has wrought in the daily lives of millions of people: the onsen, the city, the train station, and the factory. Significantly, the sky is totally shut out from all of the shots in this chapter, except in one of the overhead shots of Sao Paulo's high rises, where a thick smog pollutes the sky.

Three Japanese men sit in an "onsen," a hot spring bath. Onsens are traditionally situated outdoors in areas of outstanding natural beauty, but the onsen in this scene is an indoor public bath supplied by ordinary heated water and with no natural scenery visible, reflecting the corruption of Japanese traditions brought by modernism.

One of the men rises to step out of the bath, showing a fully tattooed body. After rubbing the towel over his body, he deliberately dips it into the water. Traditionally, tattoos are forbidden in an onsen, because of their association with gangsters, and a bather is strictly forbidden from allowing his towel to touch the water, out of respect for other bathers.

In onsens, bathers are expected to interact socially with their fellow bathers, but these men seem totally alienated from each other.⁵⁶ They provide an ironic version of the "three wise monkeys" maxim, evoking the snow monkey of the first chapter.

The body paint of a Kayapo boy, which identifies him with his society as a whole, provides an ironic contrast to the gangster's body paint, which identifies him with a group hostile to his society.

An overhead view of Moslems at prayer in the Istiqlal Mosque in Jakarta, Indonesia contrasts with scenes from modern life: Overhead views of Sao Paulo's high-rise buildings and time-lapse shots of the frenzied traffic on New York City's streets under some of the tallest buildings in the world and a pedestrian scramble taking place in front of Shibuya Station in Tokyo, Japan.

Some images of the impact of trains on modern life follow: First, a brass clock facing in all four directions, like the face of the Buddha on the Swayambhunath stupa, tops the information booth on the main concourse of New York's Grand Central Terminal, reminding hundreds of thousands of commuters each day to "HURRY UP PLEASE ITS TIME." And time lapse photography captures the speed at which the commuters rush through the station every day.

Next, a young Japanese man rides the subway home, exhausted after spending long hours at the office. Finally, time-lapse photography is used to show the crowds of people waiting for their trains and boarding and leaving their trains at Shinjuku Rail Station in Tokyo, the world's busiest railway station, under a large, overhead clock.

Trains changed the conception of time for the modern man. The railways had to standardize time to prevent serious accidents, and the influence of railway

time and speed spread to the whole of society. Time was henceforward to be measured by the clock, not by the rising or the setting of the sun, or by the natural inclinations of one's body or mind. The human being was expected to be as reliable, regular, and predictable as a machine.

Two other images showing the impact of the train are three Japanese school girls, who have been well trained to follow a schedule, standing beside a subway train, looking stoically into their future. A young Japanese man on the subway may also be pondering his future as a cog in the corporate machine.

Images of factory workers follow: A young man working at Victor Company of Japan, Ltd. (JVC) wears a glove, not for his own protection, but for the protection of the delicate parts of the machine he is making. Rows and rows of women work at a keyboard factory in Thailand. Rows and rows of women make cigarettes in the Gudang Garam Cigarette Factory, Kediri, Indonesia. The lone male supervisor, in a sea of female employees, seems displeased with one of the women. (This scene reminds us of the Thompson gazelle on the Serengeti.)

The modern factory employs hundreds or even thousands of unskilled workers who worked on "assembly lines" under the supervision of a supervisor. Workers now perform one specific task over and over again, functioning as replaceable parts in the process of production.

These images of the city and manufacturing arouse strong feelings of sympathy in the viewer for the denizens of the modern world, who are forced to repress their humanity to more closely resemble machines.

13 CHICKENS

Images of eggs and baby chickens on conveyor belts at an egg-producing factory alternate with images of commuters on subway trains and at train stations. This juxtaposition of images makes the point that the experience of the two groups of beings is equally cruel and oppressive.

A factory worker sorts the baby chicks by gender. The female chicks go into one chute and will live to be egg producers. The male chicks go into the other chute and will be killed because they are unproductive. Baby chicks slide down steel walls of a chute to a hole in the center. Gauges and metal rods move up and down with the same measured, inexorable movement as the women perform their tasks in preparing the baby chicks to become egg producers. A female worker puts a chick under a green-ink dispenser and sends it on its way. A chick's beak is singed by a smoking hot metal bar so that she will later be unable to peck other hens to death when she is put into a crowded cage with them.

When the chicks become hens, they live out their lives crowded together in battery cages stacked four tiers high and devote themselves to producing eggs. Perspective photography is used to make a parallel between the image of the hens

and traffic on Park Ave, New York City, as employees rush to their offices to be productive.

A Butoh dancer expresses the horror that the viewer may feel after witnessing the foregoing scenes. The music is one high, thin note extended.

14 CALCUTTA FORAGERS/HOMELESS

The chapter begins with the image of two emaciated donkeys, driven by a ragpicker across a barren landscape, making an agonized effort to pull a large wagon filled with burlap bags and cardboard boxes up a hill. The rest of the chapter focuses on two groups of impoverished people: the ragpickers of Calcutta and the homeless in other parts of the world. In all the shots in this chapter, the sky is murky with pollution or is not visible at all, signaling the separation of the poor from nature. On the soundtrack, the haunting music of “The Host of Seraphim” by Dead Can Dance expresses the viewer’s compassion for the hopeless sufferings of the poverty-stricken.

An estimated four million “ragpickers” or “Untouchables” in India live by picking through garbage, where they are exposed to cuts, infection, respiratory diseases and tuberculosis. Because they are deemed impure, less than human, they are subject to humiliation, harassment, and sexual abuse on the streets. Often entire families take part in collecting, sorting and selling the scrap materials, just as their ancestors did for many generations before them.⁵⁷

Two female ragpickers face the camera, inviting an “I-Thou” relationship with the viewer. Other images from the ragpicker’s life: Some male ragpickers wash up. Ragpickers patronize a food stand. A young boy holds a baby while he watches three younger children play in the trash on the ground beside graffiti-covered walls.

Images of homelessness in various parts of the world follow: Most poignant perhaps are the homeless boy fighting off sleep while panhandling on a cold winter day in the Middle East and a homeless family sleeping on a sidewalk beside a concrete girder in Brazil, while a strong wind makes the thin blankets covering their bodies balloon out.

15 STREET TRAVELERS/BUTOH DANCE

Chapter 15 focuses on the effects of poverty on children and women. Both are denied access to education, health care, housing, nutrition, sanitation and water. Further, women are often pushed into sex work as their only means of survival.

The first image is a slow-motion shot of a young boy riding in front of his father on a bicycle in some unnamed Indian village. Both father and son stare straight ahead as if looking to the future with stoic acceptance, their extreme thinness attesting to their food-deprived existence.

Next, a Vietnamese father gives his wife and child a ride on a moped in Cambodia during the period of Vietnamese occupation of Cambodia in the 1980s. In contrast, a Cambodian father on a bicycle pushes his five children in a cart.

In the poverty-stricken Barrio Mapasingue, Guayaquil, Ecuador, a boy looks apprehensively out the window of his apartment building.

The viewer looks at these images and wonders what hope, if any, the future can hold for these children.

A sex worker wearing a blonde wig and hot pants solicits clients in front of a decrepit building in Guayaquil, Ecuador, where over half of the population lives in poverty. To survive, many of the women become sex workers, as prostitution is legal and regulated in Ecuador.

Eight young sex workers, wearing nothing more than short, pink satin robes and high heels, stand on the sidewalk outside Soi Cowboy, a bar in the most notorious red-light district of Thailand. Thailand is known as a “sex paradise” the world over. Over 2 million women, many under the age of 18, are estimated to earn their living through prostitution in Thailand. Most of these victims of men’s lust are young women with little education from rural areas, who support their families in the countryside with their earnings, as their society expects them to do.⁵⁸

As if to soothe the viewer’s devastated feelings after viewing these images, three Butoh dancers dance and then move off stage to the left, one hand raised in farewell.

16 WAR/OIL FIRES

The chapter begins with shots of the Aerospace Maintenance and Regeneration Group (AMARG), in Tucson, Arizona, and next focuses on images of the Gulf War of 1991.

AMARG stores over 4,000 decommissioned planes and helicopters from all branches of the U.S. government. Here, where there is little humidity to cause corrosion, most of the planes are dismantled and used for spare parts. Built after WWI, AMARG is also called “The Boneyard.”⁵⁹ The viewer looks at these images and thinks of all the lives these planes have been used to destroy.

The remaining images in the chapter are of the Gulf War. On August 2, 1990, the Iraqi Army invaded Kuwait. In response, the United States, supported by coalition forces from 35 nations, sent in military forces to expel Iraq. But before the Iraqis left Kuwait, they set fire to most of Kuwait’s oil wells and refineries. As a result, over a billion barrels of oil were released into the environment. Plumes of smoke, containing a hazardous mixture of emissions and particulate matter, blocked out the sky all day long. The layers of soot and oil that fell from the sky resulted in devastating environmental and economic damages.⁶⁰

In retaliation, US forces bombed the caravan of thousands of Iraqi vehicles trying to flee Kuwait on February 26, 1991, leaving the highway strewn with the corpses of Iraqi soldiers and with the debris from tanks and other armored vehicles.⁶¹

On the soundtrack, the music made by bagpipes and Japanese Koto drums and Tibetan water music evokes the sounds of war.

After an overhead view of the “Highway of Death,” the camera pans left, showing a sky filled with black smoke over the scorched earth and then the burned-out Iraqi tanks. Black smoke covers the sky, rising from a wall of fire. On the soundtrack, only the sound of raging fire is heard. The viewer feels almost unbearable pain at the sight of the loss of life and the devastation of the earth.

17 STEEL WORKERS/DEATH CAMPS

The viewer’s agonized feelings intensify in Chapter 17: The chapter begins with men at work in a steel mill in Bytom, Poland. These images are followed with shots of (1) Auschwitz-Birkenau in Poland, the Nazis’ principal and most notorious concentration and extermination camp in the 1940s and (2) Tuol Sleng in Cambodia, one of the 196 torture and interrogation centers operated by the Khmer Rouge regime under the leadership of Pol Pot in the 1970s.

Polish steel workers march in file to the open door of a furnace full of melting scrap metal and fling their shovelfuls of dolomite into the mouth of the furnace. The workers watch impassively as the roaring fire cooks the molten iron. The last two shots of the above sequence echo the last two shots of the iguanas in Chapter 5. The images of the steel mill workers serve as metaphors for the human

beings who tortured and killed millions of their fellow men, while the rest of the world stood by, watching impassively.

Burning their victims inside the ovens of Auschwitz-Birkenau, the Nazis systematically starved, tortured and murdered over 1.5 million people between May 1940 and January 1945, in “the Holocaust.”⁶²

Outside, electrified barbed wire fences surround Auschwitz-Birkenau. Inside the now-empty prison, the only sound is that of rushing air, the sound of silence, punctuated by the occasional faint clanging noise of an oven door being shut.

Images of Jewish twins are shown, perhaps victims of Josef Mengele, a German officer and physician who performed deadly experiments on prisoners at Auschwitz-Birkenau. He had a special interest in twins, whom he subjected to various tests and then had killed and dissected.⁶³ The camera tracks six rows of mugshots of victims at Auschwitz-Birkenau. A container holds the shoes that prisoners were forced to remove upon entering the prison.

Tuol Sleng (also known as Security Prison S-21) in Phnom Penh, Cambodia, was the largest of the 196 torture and interrogation centers the Khmer Rouge regime operated under the communist dictatorship of Pol Pot in the 1970s. Inside Tuol Sleng, formerly a high school, classrooms were converted into prisons and torture rooms. Prisoners at S-21 were usually held for weeks and months for grueling interrogations before they were taken out for execution. They were

accused of being enemies of the revolution and were tortured until they confessed to committing fantastic crimes they could have never committed. Of the 15,000 prisoners admitted to Tuol Sleng prison, only 14 are known to have survived. One survivor recalls that every night he heard “people crying and sighing around the building. I heard people calling out, ‘Mother, help me! Mother, help me!’”⁶⁴

Several thousand black-and-white photographs of the victims who were condemned to death at Tuol Sleng now line the walls of Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum. Here, a young girl faces the camera, eyes wide, mouth slightly open in astonishment, and a Cambodian man stares into the camera, eyes wide with terror. More images of terror follow: A single bed is littered with torture instruments inside one torture room at Tuol Sleng. Skulls and bones exhumed from the mass graves of the Killing Fields, where the victims of Tuol Sleng were buried, are stacked in a pile.

The Vietnamese invaded Cambodia and defeated the Khmer Rouge in 1979. However, for the next 10 years, the Khmer Rouge and other groups resisted the occupation so there was constant fighting. Furthermore, both the Khmer Rouge and Cambodian soldiers committed crimes against the civilian Cambodians, leading to a feeling of abject hopelessness in many Cambodians.⁶⁵

Here, Cambodian soldiers stand guard over stacks of ammunition, echoing the stacks of bones exhumed from the mass graves of the Killing Fields. A Cambodian soldier stares forlornly at the camera.

18 TIANANMEN SQUARE/STONE FIGURES

In Chapter 18, the viewer is reminded of the great suffering that various leaders have caused their subjects throughout time: Mao Zedong, Qin Shi Huang, Darius I, Pharaoh Menkaure, and Ramesses II. In contrast, Jayavarman VII was a good leader who had compassion for his subjects.

Mao Zedong, who ruled Communist China from 1949 to 1976, was a mass murderer notorious for his appalling cruelty. His persecutions and policies are estimated to have been responsible for the deaths of more than 100 million people.⁶⁶ The Great Hall of the People, at the western edge of Tiananmen Square in Beijing, exists as a monument to his legacy. The massive pillars of the Great Hall dwarf a soldier of the Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) into insignificance as he stands guard. A PLA soldier stands looking out at Tiananmen Square at the gates to Mao Zedong's tomb. Three PLA soldiers face the camera.

Qin Shi Huang, a brutal tyrant who became the First Emperor of China in 221 BCE, had a subterranean city built under the capital city of Xianyang to house his tomb. He commissioned a terracotta army that was apparently intended to stand guard over the emperor's tomb for all eternity. It is said that 700,000 craftsmen and laborers from all over the empire were pressed into service over a 30-year period to build the mausoleum.⁶⁷

Darius I, who ruled the Persian Empire from 522-486 BCE, organized his empire into provinces, assessing taxes on each province, to be paid in gold and silver. However, some people paid no regular tax but had to contribute gifts periodically. For example, the Nubians on the Egyptian border had to bring two quarts of unrefined gold, 200 logs of ebony, and 20 elephant tusks, every two years. And the Colchians had to contribute 100 boys and 100 girls every four years.⁶⁸ As a result, Darius amassed great wealth, which he used to finance his many military conquests and his various construction projects, including the new capital city of Persepolis, where this bas-relief of Darius is found.

Pharaoh Menkaure ruled Egypt from 2530 BCE to 2500 BCE. He and his father and grandfather built the three pyramids of Giza to protect the embalmed bodies of the deceased pharaohs so that they could ascend to the afterlife. Although Menkaure's pyramid is the smallest of the three, it, too, required years of back-breaking work from thousands of men.⁶⁹

Rameses II, who ruled Egypt from 1279 BCE to 1213 BCE, has been called an unbridled despot who tormented his own subjects and strangers to the utmost of his power. His most splendid accomplishments were the Ramesseum, his mortuary temple, and the Colossus of Rameses. The head and torso of the gigantic Colossus of Rameses once sat beside the entrance to the Ramesseum.⁷⁰

The music accompanying this sequence of images is that of men chanting a dirge in monotone, in which the vowel “o” predominates, punctuated by the occasional sound of groaning.

In contrast with these five cruel rulers, Jayavarman VII, who ruled the Khmer Empire during the last decades of the Twelfth Century, aimed to create an earthly paradise for his subjects. To this end, he built a network of highways that radiated outward from the royal palace and reached far into the provinces; he built more than a hundred rest houses along those highways; he built over a hundred hospitals throughout the empire; and he built a system to harness river and rainwater to provide pure drinking water and irrigation for rice crops. He also constructed countless Buddhist temples, the most magnificent of which are the Bayon and Ta Prohm temples.⁷¹

His role model was Avalokitesvara, the Bodhisattva of Infinite Compassion, who is first mentioned in the *Lotus Sutra*, where it is said that to follow Avalokitesvara is to regard the wishes of all with whom we come in contact with compassion and to sacrifice our ego for them in order to help them in their suffering and distress.⁷² The 49 towers of the Bayon Temple each support up to four large smiling faces of Avalokitesvara gazing benevolently in the four cardinal directions.

19 VARANASI SUNRISE

The Varanasi mandala is created by beginning the day at sunrise and ending the day at sunset, with death as its center. After experiencing a growing disparity between the factual, emotionless environment depicted in the previous ten chapters and his intensifying feelings that the way life is being lived in the modern world is awry—that there is a painful disconnect between the way things are and the way they should be—the viewer now experiences the reality of death, his own death.

As day begins in Varanasi, India, crowds of people arrive at the Manikarnika cremation ghat to participate in the cremation of their deceased loved ones or to pray, bathe, wash their clothes, and mourn their dead in the sacred Ganges River, which has its source in the Himalayas. Hindus believe that if they are cremated at this site, their souls will rest in perpetual peace and they will be liberated from the cycle of rebirth.⁷³

The river Ganges is first viewed at sunrise, from inside the temple. The viewer watches as people go about their daily activities: we see a man getting a shave with a straight razor (probably because he will light his relative's funeral pyre and is required to be clean-shaven), and an elderly woman replace her denture after rinsing it in the Ganges. However, the viewer may experience anxiety as he sees a boat bringing kindling for the day's cremations and men carrying a corpse on a stretcher toward a pyre. Other corpses on stretchers lie on the steps leading to the river, drying out before being taken to the burning pyres. Smoke from pyres fills

the air as three doms tend a pyre. An Indian saddhu stands facing the camera, his lips moving in prayer. Mourners carry an elaborately decorated bier with a body of their relative down to the Ganges River, where it will be immersed before being cremated.

The viewer's anxiety turns to horror when he sees a corpse lying on burning kindling, and then sees another one. It is the final disparity in an environment that has become more and more disparate. The significance of what he is watching, the reality of his own death, is brought home to the viewer when an elderly holy man looks straight at him, his eyes filled with sorrow and compassion and bitter acceptance and seems to say to the viewer, "Yes, you, too, must die."

This is what Roy calls the "occasion" and Schrader calls the "decisive action," which constitutes the third step of the transcendental style and demands the viewer's full emotional output. The decisive action has a unique effect on the viewer, Schrader says: If a viewer accepts the decisive action as credible and meaningful, he must also accept "a philosophical construct which permits total disparity—deep, illogical, suprahuman feeling with a cold, unfeeling environment." This is the ground of compassion and awareness which Schrader calls the Transcendent.⁷⁴ If the viewer can accept both painful everyday reality and the deep ground of compassion and awareness, he arrives at a view of life that can encompass both. Schrader calls it the experience of stasis; Roy calls this view the "transcendent experience."

The viewer's inner turmoil is mirrored by the clouds churning violently across the sky as a splendid sunset marks the end of this day in Varanasi. The waning crescent moon then appears in the sky, signaling the approaching death of the moon.

20 ECLIPSE/SACRED JOURNEY

In Chapters 20 and 21, the viewer experiences stasis. The mandalic structure of Chapter 20 is achieved primarily by beginning the chapter on the morning of New Year's Eve, with a monk ringing an ancient Buddhist temple bell in joyful celebration of the New Year, and ending after dark as funeral lights are set loose on the Ganges. The chapter also revolves around two quaternities. The predominant emotion here is joy, and the discovery is the necessity of death for eternal life.

Chapter 20 begins with three images of joy: First, as a strong wind blows his robe and the leaves of the trees around him, a monk rings an ancient Buddhist temple bell at Chion-in Temple in Kyoto, Japan. (The bell is rung 108 times on New Year's Eve to eradicate the 108 worldly desires from hearers' hearts so that they may start the new year afresh.⁷⁵) Next, a young Maasai warrior seems to jump for joy as he performs the *adama* (jumping dance), which marks his transition to senior warrior and announces his eligibility for marriage.⁷⁶ Finally, a total solar eclipse, bringing joy and wonder, begins this chapter, as it ended Chapter 1 (and will appear again in the last chapter).

A quaternity of images of joyful devotion follows: The Dervishes spin; a Jew, a Muslim, and a Christian pray in Jerusalem, a sacred site for all three religions; and pilgrims circle the Kaaba, the House of God, at the Grand Mosque of Mecca during *hajj* (the annual Greater Pilgrimage), while inside the Grand Mosque, a large number of Muslim men prostrate themselves in worship.

This quaternity is followed by a quaternity of churches and mosques: The Hagia Sophia, originally built as a basilica for the Greek Orthodox Christian Church, was the center of religious, political, and artistic life for the Byzantine world for almost a millennium, later becoming a mosque for 500 years and then, in the 1930s, a museum;⁷⁷ St. Peter's Basilica in Rome, the burial site of St. Peter, the most renowned work of Renaissance architecture and the largest church in the world;⁷⁸ the Shah Cheragh in Shiraz, Iran, the "King of Light," called the most beautiful mosque in the world because of the brilliant tiles and colored glass that cover the interior walls, filling pilgrims with an indescribable sense of awe;⁷⁹ and The Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem, believed to be the site of Jesus' crucifixion and burial.⁸⁰ Each of these structures is topped by a magnificent dome, reminding the Christian and Muslim alike of the oneness of creation, where the transcendent and the everyday are parts of a whole.

Under the dome of St. Peter's Basilica is Bernini's Tomb of Alexander VII. At the top, Pope Alexander VII kneels on a pedestal, surrounded by four white marble allegorical women representing Prudence, Justice, Charity, and Truth,

Alexander's reputed virtues. Alexander's pedestal seems to rest on a huge red jasper drapery, generally considered to be a shroud. Below, a skeleton emerges from the door under the tomb, raising the billowing drapery that conceals his face, holding an hour glass in his right hand. In this elaborate sculpture, the grisly skeletons of the Varanasi chapter, reminding us of the inevitability of our death, have been transformed into a gilded bronze skeleton reassuring us that death is necessary to enter into the heavenly realm. Thus, grief is transformed into joy. Judith Bernstock says, "In the tomb of Alexander VII, Bernini may offer a guide... for the religious spectator preparing for his death, the image of the soul of a humble, devout pope, who imitated Christ and lived a life of virtue, is elevated and rendered pure white... above a symbolic sea of Christ's blood."⁸¹

The chapter concludes with a final image of joy: Funeral lights (a small candle inside a cup made from leaves and flowers) float gaily on the Ganges at the end of the day, lighting the way to the next world for loved ones who have died that day.

21 ROTATING STARFIELDS

Chapter 21 brings *Baraka* full circle. As the first chapter began at dawn, this final chapter begins and ends in darkest night. The mandala that this chapter forms is also one of stasis, centering on the compassionate acceptance of the impermanence of all earthly glory and the assurance of eternal life.

The dark blue sky and the black screens that begin and end the chapter function like the circles painted dark blue and black on many traditional mandalas. The dark blue and black circles shut out the outside world and hold the film together as a complete and unified whole.⁸²

The chapter begins with the monk again shown sitting in meditation. Again, the camera slowly zooms into the back of the monk's head until the screen is completely black, indicating that the viewer is moving into the monk's mind. What the monk sees in his mind's eye, the viewer sees on the screen:

The monk first sees, through an opening of a rock wall, one of the gigantic faces of Avalokitesvara, the bodhisattva of compassion, on the towers of the Bayon Temple in Cambodia. The smiling faces seem to send forth all-encompassing love for all suffering mankind, a love infinitely greater than mere human love.

Above the Bayon ruins, time lapse photography shows the clouds swirling across the sky, the stars revolving and the moon rising in the night sky. Among the stars, the Orion constellation is prominent, offering, like Avalokitesvara, protection and guidance to all living human beings. The moon moves across the sky, assuring the monk that his death is not final, just as the moon's death is not. The moon is "a body that waxes, wanes and disappears, a body whose existence is subject to the universal law of becoming, of birth and death," says Eliade. "For three nights the

starry sky is without a moon. But this ‘death’ is followed by a rebirth: the ‘new moon.’”⁸³

The monk then is filled with sadness at seeing the ruins of once-splendid structures, reminding him of the mutability of all physical things. He sees the ruins of the Ramasseum, built by Pharaoh Ramesses II to keep alive the memory of himself as Osiris, which is said to have inspired Percy Bysshe Shelley’s “Ozymandias,” which concludes: “My name is Ozymandias, king of kings:/Look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair!/ Nothing beside remains. Round the decay/ Of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare/ The lone and level sands stretch far away.”⁸⁴

The monk also sees the ruins of Persepolis, the capital city of the ancient Persian Empire. Persepolis was built to commemorate the reigns of Darius I and his descendants. However, in the Fourth Century BCE, Alexander the Great conquered the city and looted its treasures and then burned “the jewel of Persia” to the ground.⁸⁵

Then the monk sees Turret Arch and the Ship Rock landform, two of the most impressive rock formations of the American Southwest. These structures, created millions of years ago, will also one day crumble into dust.

Finally, the monk sees a juniper tree, still standing after decades of drought, and is reassured that, in spite of the impermanence of all material things, the transcendent life force, which is baraka, endures. Like the charred stake in Robert

Bresson's *Trial of Joan of Arc* and the shadow of the cross in his *Diary of a Country Priest*, the juniper tree is a re-view of the external world intended to suggest the oneness of all things. This static view, Paul Schrader says, represents the 'new' world "in which the spiritual and the physical can coexist, still in tension and unresolved, but as part of a larger scheme in which all phenomena are more or less expressive of a larger reality—the Transcendent."⁸⁶

In the dark blue sky, the stars rotate, and the Orion constellation is visible, and then the screen goes black and all is silence. To again quote Paul Schrader, the end point of meditative cinema is silence. "It is the mandala. One can meditate upon a mandala for hours on end. There's nothing more a movie can offer."⁸⁷

CONCLUSION

In the first eight chapters, we have gazed with awe on the hierophanies of the Himalayas, the Hawaiian volcanoes, Iguazu Falls, the starry skies and the solar eclipse. We have been impressed by how different religious traditions from around the world seem to bring devotees to a similar state of profound reverence. We have observed various cultures—Nepali and Bali societies and indigenous cultures—where people seem to live in harmony with the transcendent.

In the second part of the film (Chapters 9-19), we have viewed several scenes from the modern world where the transcendent is notably absent. We have witnessed the everyday suffering of millions due to the wanton destruction of

nature, onerous work, poverty, crime, lust, war, torture and persecution. Yet, the growing disparity between the emotions we feel and the cold, hard images of these ten chapters shows that deep bonds of sympathy connect human beings with each other and with the animals, the plants, and the earth itself. At the point at which the viewer feels that he can bear no more, he has been confronted with the grisly images of Varanasi, forcing him to confront the reality of death, his own death. This is the “occasion” or the “decisive action,” which constitutes the third step of the transcendental style and demands the viewer’s full emotional output. This scene triggers the transcendent experience or stasis, depicted in the last two chapters of the film. The predominant emotions here are joy, compassion, sadness and acceptance, experienced simultaneously with the discovery that all phenomena are more or less expressive of the transcendent, that all earthly glory is transient, and that death is necessary for eternal life.

By the end of the film, the viewer may have been startled into an awareness of another level of existence, quite different from everyday life and yet inextricably linked with the everyday, the realm of the eternal. Having had this insight into reality, the viewer may now desire to live in harmony with the basic spiritual truths of existence, frequently the fruit of the transcendent experience. A film that fills the viewer with peace and joy and exaltation is a blessing, indeed.

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