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Framing Immanence in Carl Theodor Dreyer's Ordet and Carlos Reygadas's Stellet Licht

Abstract

My article proposes the notion of the immanent frame to productively address film-theoretical and theological concepts at stake in Carl Theodor Dreyer's *Ordet* (1955) and Carlos Reygadas's *Stellet Licht* (2007). I believe my intervention to be significant for it shows how both films are not only related in their religious subject matter but negotiate it in formal terms through the notion of the immanent frame. Although both films have been analyzed alongside one another in the past, my article is the first to address the Mennonite migration history and notion of secularization (Taylor) to explain the function of the time-images (Deleuze) in Reygadas's film. I show that its miraculous effects of "place- and timelessness" are based on a history of migration and colonization.

Keywords

transcendental cinema, immanent frame, Reygadas, Dreyer, Taylor, Deleuze, Schrader

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This article negotiates the relationship between immanence and transcendence in Carl Theodor Dreyer's *Ordet* (1955) and Carlos Reygadas's 2007 *Stellet Licht* (*Silent Light*) by using the concept of secularization and what Charles Taylor calls the immanent frame. Taylor refers with the immanent frame to the condition of secularism according to which everything we experience is constituted by causal relationships and as such is part of a natural order that is comprehensible without reference to any spiritual entity. At stake for Taylor and, as I argue, for both filmmakers, is the question of religious experience under secular conditions. Taylor's concept of the immanent frame will serve to analyze techniques of narrative and visual framing employed by Dreyer and Reygadas. I will complement this application of the immanent frame as a film-theoretical term with Paul Schrader's concept of the transcendental style and Gilles Deleuze's time-image. Parallel to this theoretical discussion, I will historicize the religious discourse on which both films are based and show they are related through a colonial religious aesthetic, which transposes the European Protestant interiority at stake in Dreyer's film into the colonial imagination of the Mennonite settlers in Reygadas's film. Through the discussion of both films, I ultimately aim to point at a colonial dialectic between immanence and transcendence on the one hand and migration and colonization on the other.

Since the release of Carlos Reygadas's *Stellet Licht* in 2007, it has not escaped any commentator's attention that the Mexican filmmaker located himself in the tradition of Carl Theodor Dreyer and his 1955 film *Ordet*. Although these films are frequently read together in terms of aesthetics, the continuity of post-secular concerns in both films is often disregarded. The present article argues that the structure of religious interiority in Dreyer's film defines the dimensions of space and time in Reygadas's 'quasi-sequel' beyond the miracle or resurrection. While the Mennonites featured in *Stellet Licht* had left the shores of the North Sea already in the

16th century and followed a global path of migration and colonization, the Protestant sects in conflict with each other in *Ordet* are integral to 19th century Danish nationalism and as such bound to the territorial confines of Denmark.[1] Dreyer sets his film almost entirely in the interior spaces of the Danish homes, which is where the Protestant doctrines are confronted with a miracle. Reygadas, on the other hand, shows the expansive Mexican landscape as a site of enchantment, which is, as I argue, the result of Mennonite colonization.

Ordet is a story of two families in the Danish countryside of Jutland set in the 1920s. The Borgen family is of Grundtvigian confession and has a pragmatic, if not instrumental, approach to faith, as exemplified by the remark of the Borgen patriarch Morten: "If we help Him—(*pointing upwards*)—and He helps us, everything will come right."[2] On the other side is Peterson—Reuben, in Kaj Munk's play *Ordet* on which Dreyer's film is based—who is the local leader of the Inner Mission, a fundamentalist current within the Danish National Church. Conflict ensues as their youngest children intend to marry and Peterson makes it a condition that Anders Borgen convert to the Inner Mission, which offends his father Morten. The two competing confessions are put to the test by the figure of Johannes Borgen, Morten's second son, who takes himself to be Jesus Christ and walks around in a trance-like state demanding that they believe in the truth of his existence. His brother Mikkel remarks at one point that Johannes's condition is the result of reading too much Kierkegaard, while in Munk's play it is suggested that he is mourning the death of his wife. We meet Johannes wandering around the dunes giving speeches to an imagined audience or—similar to Nietzsche's "madman"—lighting candles against the nihilist darkness. His sister-in-law, Inger, signals the general disbelief by blowing out the candles, but also wonders whether "Johannes is perhaps closer to God than the rest of us."[3] At the end of the movie, it will be the fate of Inger that throws both families into a crisis of faith when she dies after an abortion. The only

one who believes in resurrection is Johannes who—at a point when he no longer identifies with Jesus—then performs the miracle of raising her from the dead.

Carlos Reygadas's "adaptation" of Dreyer's film runs deeper than the obvious citation of the miracle and the symbolic around it. It does so by choosing a Mexican Mennonite colony for the setting of his film. Beyond his explicit references to Dreyer, Italian neorealism, and European postwar cinema in general, Reygadas's film projects, as I will show, a European, secular condition onto the Mexican, colonial landscape. Though it is a conservative religious sect that prohibits photographic representation,[4] Reygadas regards the colony as a prime example of secularization and a Weberian work ethic.[5] Secularization is constitutive for what Charles Taylor calls the immanent frame and also for the theological disputes in *Ordet* that are framed as closed interiors in which, qua miracle, an instrumental understanding of faith prevails. In *Stellet Licht*, the crisis of faith as a problem of interiority and subjectivity is inverted and turned into a colonial gaze onto the enchanted landscape of the "New World." While the Inner Mission cultivated a spiritual interiority that is reflected by Dreyer's interior settings in which most of *Ordet* takes place, the Mennonites that constitute the cast in *Stellet Licht* project that inner spirituality onto the "God-given" land that they colonize, which is how the northern Mexican landscape is portrayed in Reygadas's film. The inward perspective of *Ordet* is thus turned outward in *Stellet Licht* and onto the colonial territory.

Historical neighbors to the Danes, the Frisian Mennonites had been on the move since the 16th century before arriving in Mexico in the 1920s. Most of the cast of *Stellet Licht* are descendants of these colonizing migrants, including Cornelio Wall, who plays the protagonist Johan, and his children. *Stellet Licht* is Reygadas's third feature film, preceded by *Japón* (2002) and *Batalla en el Cielo* (2005), both of which featured indigenous actors. In the neorealist tradition,

these films employ almost exclusively non-professional actors, which is often in contrast with the highly aestheticized and defamiliarizing strategies used in the film. *Stellet Licht* portrays the family life of the Mennonite farmer Johan, who has an extra-marital affair with the waitress Marianne. Johan's wife Esther is aware of her husband's mistress but tries to suppress the pain it causes her. At a crucial point in the story, Esther dies, presumably of a heart attack, after debating her marriage with Johan. During the successive funeral, a miracle occurs. Johan's mistress Marianne kisses the dead wife of her lover and thereby reawakens her to life. The composition of the scene not only imitates Dreyer's *Ordet* but also echoes the questions of faith and doubt in Dreyer's film in a colonial context. This structural reference is more than a nod by Reygadas to one of the masters of the transcendental style in cinema,[6] as it is a projection of the metaphysical questions raised in Dreyer's *Ordet* onto a colonial landscape where the spiritual enters the immanent frame—an ambiguous term that allows for both the theological and film-theoretical meaning.[7]

Set in a Mennonite colony in the northern region of Chihuahua that the settlers occupied since the 1920s, *Stellet Licht* focuses almost exclusively on their community and the only language spoken is their low-German dialect (*Plautdietsch*). Mennonite migration history is too long and complex to be adequately addressed here, but their settler colonialism in Mexico will be sketched out in the second section of this essay and only to the extent that is relevant for the discussion of Reygadas's film. For the purpose of my argument, it should suffice here to stress that as a community their lifeworld—that is, their shared world of experience—is defined as the space in which faith and religious freedom can be exercised without interference from the outside world. However, their religious regime as colonizers is constituted not merely by occupying space, but also by the establishment of their own temporal order.

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Transcendental Cinema

Before Gilles Deleuze provided the now canonical theoretical framework for cinema's attempt to capture time in a way that is not dictated by action, i.e., the time-image, Paul Schrader identified a "common film form" that he calls the transcendental style that aims to express what lies behind the world of appearances.[8] Schrader responds to the long-standing aesthetic paradox of how to visually represent what is invisible with his term of the transcendental style. According to him, there is a distinct use of stylistic devices—composition, camera movement, editing, music, acting, dialogue—that gives the Transcendent a "general representative form."[9] Yasujirō Ozu and Robert Bresson are the key representative directors of this style, while the work of Dreyer fits the term only in part, but most notably in his 1955 *Ordet*. Dreyer's *The Passion of Joan of Arc* exemplifies the features of the transcendental style to a lesser degree due to its characteristics as an expressionist chamber play.[10] Despite their differences, these filmmakers proceed in three steps that for Schrader constitute their transcendental style. Their foundation is the focus on the everyday, which they show through "a meticulous representation of the dull, banal commonplaces of everyday living."[11] The second step in Schrader's stylistic sequence is what he calls disparity or "the growing crack in the dull surface of everyday reality."[12] This disparity between the emotionally voided or agonizing world of the everyday and the viewers' "boundless compassion" leads to a "spiritual schizophrenia" that manifests itself as dissonance.[13] The tension between everyday reality and what in Schrader's account seems to be a religiously infused emotional state culminates in a "decisive action" in which the filmic technique allows for a previously withheld expression of emotion that is met with the viewers' anticipation and leads to the final step of the stasis.[14] The height of emotional involvement is followed by a static imagery in which the passions come to rest and accept a purified reality that has been penetrated by the Transcendent.

While the stages of the everyday and the disparity are experiential, the final stage of the stasis is purely formal. As Schrader insists, only the moment of stasis is able to express the Transcendent as it incorporates the emotional dialectic of the previous two stages—the experience of apathy and empathy—in a reconciled form. "Stasis," he writes, "by showing a static, quiescent, organized scene, reinforces this newfound idea of life. If successful, stasis transforms empathy into aesthetic appreciation, experience into expression, emotions into form."[15] The techniques to achieve this form consist, for example, in slowing the action down, in removing dramatic plot elements and narrative coherence, or in visual reduction and repetition. The form of stasis taken by itself can be found in various stylistic configurations, but, according to Schrader, it is only in the sequence of everydayness, disparity, and stasis that it represents the transcendental style. The form of stasis suggests an objectivity that contains the previous states of being and suggests a view of how things "really are." The ultimate "transcendental end" of this style in the form of stasis appears to give the viewer access to a parallel reality.

Schrader's account of those whose work is exemplary for the transcendental style (Ozu, Bresson), whose style approximates it (Dreyer), or whose films do not belong in that category (Antonioni, Mizogushi) seems eclectic and formalistic in the sense that he seeks to derive a universal form from a particular one, thereby turning them into archetypes. Schrader's language at times resembles that of a religious seeker, and his tripartite structure of a lost faith regained mirrors that. He makes it clear that he sees the transcendental style in continuity with the spiritual in art, and tries to distinguish it from art that entertains religious themes. As Schrader notes in his 2018 introduction, however, the transcendental style coincides with spiritual themes quite frequently.[16] Besides the obviously religiously themed films about Joan of Arc by Dreyer and Bresson, respectively, it is Dreyer's *Ordet* that Schrader considers to be the Danish filmmaker's

most transcendental film. It shows what Schrader called the decisive action in its most drastic form as the actual miracle of raising a dead person back to life. To describe the specific variant of the transcendental style in Dreyer, Schrader introduces the vectors of the chamber play and expressionist aesthetics that are in continuous tension in films such as *Ordet*.[17] In other words, he reconfigures his tripartite structure for the specific style of Dreyer, calling into question the universality of what he described in the examples of Ozu and Bresson. The result of Schrader's schematic approach to Dreyer's films is a perceived "interplay of forces, styles, or schools," in which the transcendental style predominates in the case of *Ordet*. In the end, however, Schrader proposes that Dreyer does not provide the conclusive form of stasis but allows for a psychological reading of his final scene as an alternative mode of the transcendental stasis.[18] Schrader does not tell us, however, what that psychological explanation of the film's ending—Johannes reawakening the dead Inger—would be. Schrader's ideal-typical concept of the transcendental style forces a schematism onto the ambiguities of Dreyer's film that make it appear as a deficient attempt. Despite these structural limitations of Schrader's theory, he is observant of the crucial dynamic in *Ordet*, namely that between transcendence and immanence: "Through the use of everyday and disparity Dreyer gives *Ordet* a spiritual depth it normally would not have; then he turns his depth back to work on the psychological drama. It is as if Dreyer carefully sets the viewer up for the Transcendent, then reveals the immanent."[19] The immanence that is transcended in Dreyer's film consists in the secularized belief systems and their petty instrumentalization within and between the Borgen and Peterson families. It is represented by the suffocating interior spaces whose limitations are questioned by the occurrence of the miracle.

Apart from Johannes's wanderings in the dunes, the film is entirely set in the homes of the two families, which generates not a sense of *hygge*, but of a claustrophobic interiority. Despite the

alternating crosscutting that David Bordwell detected as a typical device of Dreyer and that generates suspense and drives the narrative, the film's frames remain defined by the narrow interior spaces and sparse décor of both houses.[20] The parlor tables of the two families, in particular, are the focal points around which the patriarchal and religious matters are discussed or brooded about. The frames are often crowded, and as the camera follows the movement of individual characters, others disappear and reenter the frame. Only for the insane Johannes is there, occasionally, a way out. He and the other characters show a restlessness that Dreyer regards as characteristic of all good films and for which he aimed as a constitutive part of *Ordet*.[21] The sparseness of the interior is shown, and theatrical movements are captured in long takes that deliberately slow down the narrative pace. Bordwell sees Dreyer's camera wheeling around within the domestic interior that is "thickly populated," often showing all four walls of the crowded rooms.[22] In this confined, yet ambiguous space, the "relative immobility" of the characters is in tension with the "rhythmic ensemble of restlessness" that only achieves closure in the miracle.[23] It is the restlessness of those who assume that God is in the house, but who struggle to find him.

The petty conflict between the confessions reveals an inner emptiness papered over by conventional religion, even in its pietist version of the Inner Mission. Daniel Watts observed in both families an "inability to see the eternal in the finite, the spiritual in the bodily, and the transcendent in the everyday."[24] Even the miracle that Johannes performs is proof that transcendence and immanence are clearly divided here, revealing that the modern condition of secularism applies even to the most devout believers. There is no longer an unquestioned belief under these conditions. As Bordwell analyzed, Dreyer assigns distinct modes of faith with each of his characters (e.g., the overzealous Johannes or the agnostic Mikkel) and aims to resolve socio-religious questions through a narrative structure and its closure as a miracle.[25]

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Dreyer's interiors reflect the immanent frame of secularism and thereby the condition of the audience. Jean and Dale Drum recount that Dreyer "wanted to find out by filming the Munk play if a miracle could be made believable on the screen: if, in fact, the life of Jesus and the biblical accounts of his works could be accepted as reality by filmgoers."[26] The film's narrative foundation, however, is the confessional divide between the right and wrong mode of religious life and religious experience, represented on the one hand by the mainstream Protestant Grundtvigian Borgen family for whom "the value of religion is to be measured by its real-world 'impact,'" and the Peterson's "other-worldly, life-renouncing religiosity, in which everydayness is the enemy."[27] The confessional conflict and the spatial confinement of the families stand in contrast to the open horizons of the dunes, where Johannes often wanders, preaches, and goes missing before Inger's death. Johannes not only often disappears from the frame—most notably at the end after having performed the miracle—he seeks God in the open space of the dunes. He is "out there," and his madness is no different from a religious believer in fundamental doubt about the institutional religion.

The divine intervention thus comes from outside, indicating that there is a space beyond the horizon onto which to project hope. This projection is not part of *Ordet*, but a potential realized in *Stellet Licht*, which transposes the theme of lost faith and a Nordic aesthetic—one may also think here of Ingmar Bergman films such as *Winter Light*—into an American context. The religious conflict between the confessions is resolved and the loss of faith is regained by taking the film outside of the Danish interiors and into the Mexican landscape. The intricate relation between transcendence and immanence is at the center of *Stellet Licht*, which Schrader calls "a luminescent remake of Dreyer's *Ordet.*"[28] Sunlight illuminates a pantheistic nature in Reygadas's film, whereas there are only dimly candlelit rooms in Dreyer, and the cycle of sunrise and sunset

that opens and closes the film juxtaposes a cosmic time with a secular chronology that indicates a divine presence.[29] Although it is not a remake, it does share the key features of a crisis of faith that is resolved by the miracle of raising a dead loved one; but Reygadas's film responds to *Ordet* by turning the relation of immanence and transcendence, which is at the heart of Dreyer's film, inside out.

Mennonite Migration

It is significant that the "remake" of *Ordet* projects faith onto a pantheistic landscape that has been colonized by the migrating Mennonites. Reygadas set his film in the province of Chihuahua, where Mennonite immigration started in the early 1920s, immediately following the Mexican Revolution. The "long durée"[30] of Mennonite migration began right at the inception of the Anabaptist movement in the mid-16th century, starting from Friesland and traveling across northern Germany and Prussia, on to Poland, Ukraine, and Russia in the 18th century and Canada and the United States in the late 19th century. While initially avoiding violent religious persecution was their main motivation to migrate, it was especially important for the more conservative Mennonite groups to preserve their customs, language, and ethnicity against any social influence or political interference. It was the most conservative Mennonite group called the "Old Colony" (named after their first colony in Khortytsia, Ukraine) that negotiated with Mexican president Obregón to acquire land in the province of Chihuahua in 1921. The province had been devastated by the war and Obregón's goal was to generate economic growth through foreign capital and population increase. At the same time, the Mexican government ostensibly wanted to support an agrarian reform that was to redistribute land to the peasantry.

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The Mennonites of the "Old Colony" were motivated to leave Manitoba and find new settlements after the Canadian School Attendance Act of 1916 began to encroach on their granted privileges of religious home schooling. Their proven farming and colonizing skills, which had already led the Russian empress Catherine the Great to encourage them to colonize Ukraine, were also in demand by the post-revolutionary Mexican government. For this reason, the military defended the vast Mennonite acquisitions against Mexican peasants, who were waiting in vain for the revolutionary promise of a land reform being fulfilled. The Mennonites, pacifists by their own definition, thus established their Mexican settlement and came to stay. Their federally granted and literal white privilege (*Privilegium*) of the "Old Colony" (*Reinländer*) reads as follows:

> 1. You are not obligated to military service.
> 2. In no case are you required to make an oath.
> 3. You have the most far-reaching right to exercise your religious principles and the rules of your church, without being in any manner molested or restricted.
> 4. You are entirely authorized to found your own schools, with your own teachers, without the government in any manner obstructing you.
> 5. Concerning this point, our laws are most liberal. You may administer your properties in any way or manner you think just, and this government will raise no objection if the members of your sect establish among themselves economic regulations which they adopt of their own free will.
>
> It is the particular wish of this government to favor colonization by elements of order, morality, and toil, such as the Mennonites, and it will be pleased if the foregoing answers are satisfactory to you, in view of the fact that the aforementioned franchises [privileges] are guaranteed by our laws and that you enjoy them positively and permanently.[31]

The permanent exile of the Mennonites meant that they tried to sustain their early modern lifestyles regardless of their host country, which in return met their needs and welcomed them as white settlers. Since the Canadian government restricted their privileges, Mexico and other Latin American countries received them with open arms in what Royden Loewen described as a "highly racialized policy" that was at the same time hostile to non-white immigrants such as Chinese Mexican merchants.[32] Despite the wide-ranging privileges granted in the decree, they were never

formally anchored in a law, and even contradicted the constitution, thereby leaving the Mennonites' status in question.[33] As Martha Will showed, this only seemingly secure but in fact precarious legal title to the land became problematic in the subsequent years. Mennonite migration to Chihuahua coincided with a period of post-revolutionary reconstruction and led to the colonization of land that was supposed to be distributed to Mexican farmers in an area that suffered considerable destruction during and after the revolution.[34] In particular, the deployment of federal troops in defense of the newly acquired Mennonite property against the Mexican peasants is the clearest mark of the violence necessary to establish the group's white settler colonialism. The Mennonites' pacifist ethics of non-violence and non-resistance were violated if not by themselves then on their behalf. Although acknowledging the difficult position of president Obregón to at the same time keep the promises of the revolution and rebuild and develop especially the northern provinces—as well as to attract foreign capital and investment—Martina Will justifies the Mennonite colonization, even in light of its outright racist underpinnings, as successful and harmonious.[35] Rather than being an isolated instance, the Mennonites' migration to Chihuahua is exemplary for the larger phenomenon of a land rush of white settlers into what they deemed were territories untouched by civilization.[36] As Loewes put it, the Mennonites in Mexico and Paraguay "took possession of the land for their communitarian purposes" as if it "belong[ed] to no one nation, but rather to a wider cosmos."[37]

The idea that the colonized land belonged to a wider spiritual cosmos rather than being a concrete physical reality is contradicted by the necessity of occupying this territory. Instead, the wider cosmos is a metaphor for the Mennonite belief in a transcendence that governs this space as one of divine order. This colonization of a concrete, physical space—that can only be immanent—is necessary for the religious community to exist. The legal title to the land, however contested it

was in this case, codifies that the divine cosmos cannot exist without the solid ground on which the believers settle. As the secular pathway to the divine kingdom, the land had theological significance, since it would have to be governed by the rigorous interpretation of the faith—and, where this was not possible due to government interference, new land had to be colonized. As one of the settlers quoted by Loewes noted in a sermon prior to their departure to Mexico, their faith

> "was so firmly based on the path of the cross that they had no doubt that a pilgrim who had followed the path until the end would finally arrive happily at upper Zion." Like the "thousands of martyrs" of the sixteenth century, the emigrants of the 1920s were following Christ in "footsteps of grief," a pathway that took the Mennonites from one country to another, and ultimately to eternal life in heaven, the figurative "upper Zion."[38]

In this light, every migration is necessary, every colonization always determined by providence. For the Mennonites—as goes for all religious fundamentalists—their own agency in exercising control over the temporal-spatial conditions (i.e., when to go where) was actually God's doing. Their own historical agency needs to be recast as divine providence, since, as John Eicher remarks, "accepting a modern, 'scientific' narrative of progress implicitly acknowledges that humans control time and space, which in turn denies God's authority."[39] Eicher contrasts this way of thinking by the "Old Colony" Mennonites with what he calls "mythological thinking" that is able to integrate history and chronological thinking. However, only history can explain why Mennonites were able to migrate and colonize with government permission over centuries, since their labor force, their agricultural skill, and technology were acquired over the course of time and across the globe. As Mexican authorities characterized them shortly after their arrival:

> Armed with almost unbelievable capacities for sustained, backbreaking toil, an inner peace requiring few diversions, and a skill developed by centuries of devotion to the soil and its fecundity, these people have created an agricultural bread-basket in a region once considered suitable only for pasturage.[40]

As if to describe the ideal type of religious devotion that puts the spirit into capitalism in Max Weber's understanding—who subsumed the Mennonites' "voluntarist inner-worldly asceticism"[41] under the religious sects that inspired capitalist ethics—this description highlights how this most devout religious group is unwittingly secularizing its belief. They are not outside of historical time, then, but rather they are getting caught up in it in an ever-deepening way. Following the path of transcendence, they are captured in the immanent frame.

For the setting of his film *Stellet Licht*, Carlos Reygadas "wanted something as timeless and placeless as possible."[42] That this effect is based on a colonial history that is anything but timeless and placeless should be evident, but more importantly, Reygadas adapts the dialectic of place and time that is inherent to the history of this religion and evokes with his film, and especially with its ending, a miraculous synthesis. Sheldon Penn has argued that "by paring down social context, Reygadas aims to avoid the over-determination of [Mennonite] identity," thereby masking that, as I argue, the socio-historical context—both the particular history of the Mennonites and the larger historical frame of secularization—is the foundation upon which his cinema of immanence rests.[43] The effect of place and timelessness is the result of the context that Reygadas keeps outside of his frame and which thereby defines it. Though apparently unchanged over time, the life of the Mennonites, like that of all Protestants, is structured by secularization, the transformation of eternity into profane, measured time. Reygadas fully recognized this structure in Mennonite life when researching the area. When asked in an interview whether Mennonites are well known in Mexico, he replied:

> Not really. Whenever there's a bad harvest, they go to the cities and sell things at the traffic lights — cheese, for instance. So that's how people think of them. But four years ago when I was in the north and drove through the Mennonite lands, I saw something totally different: that they're really good capitalists, good farmers, and it looks like the United States in the 1970s or Australia today. It's incredible to see how Protestant capitalism creates wealth and Latin Catholicism does not. The

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> Mennonites arrived in north Mexico in 1921 with nothing, and living next to them there are Mexicans with land and some government aid, and now the Mexicans live in the dirt and the Mennonites have all the land and machinery they need and their houses are full of flowers.[44]

By identifying the Mennonites as prime representatives of Weber's protestant ethic, Reygadas paradoxically juxtaposes their supposed timelessness with secularization. What he calls timelessness, is in fact a temporalization of faith. While the term secularization denotes a transition from a spiritual to a worldly level, in a literal sense (lat. *saeculum* = time, age) it means that what is absolute and eternal enters the dimension of time. In this view, timelessness is telos of salvation at the end of time, while faith needs to be converted into secular life shaped by devout labor that constitutes the temporal order of capitalism so concisely framed by Benjamin Franklin: "*time* is money."[45] As Weber also stresses with regards to the Mennonites specifically, "one can make profit and yet remain pious" even to the degree where "especially high profits,
[…] may be the direct result of pious uprightness."[46] In order for time to be converted into money, faith needs to be converted into time first. The Mennonites' "unbelievable capacities for sustained, backbreaking toil" lauded by the Mexican authorities are fueled by faith and create via a time-based economy the timeless reality that Reygadas seeks to portray. The immanent frame that constitutes the landscape aesthetics of the film corresponds to the immanence that is the result of secularization. By the same token, then, the supposed non-place of Chihuahua is not merely occupied territory by white settlers, but also the place where supposed nature is turned into a promised land. Only if the physical land is granted first and cleared for colonization can it become the promised land of the believers. Colonization, then, becomes the spatial expansion of the temporal dynamic of secularization that converts faith into capitalist ethics. The spirit of modern capitalism that Weber described as the Protestant ethic is thus reliant on colonialism as a spatial expansion of faith, which Reygadas portrays as the "non-place" of the Mennonite colony.

One example in the film would be the harvest scene in *Stellet Licht*, which occurs after Johan sought advice from his father on how to resolve his conflict between the two women. Though understanding his dilemma, he reminds Johan of his sacred bond and Esther as a "gift from God." The following scene shows Esther operating a combine harvester slowly moving across the terrain and mowing the corn with deliberate persistence. The camera tracks the vehicle as it moves across the field, then cuts to Esther at the wheel before taking the perspective of the harvester driving forward and collecting the grain, until the horizon over the open field comes into view. It is a telluric aesthetic that shows the cultivation of the land through slow and continuous labor, thereby appropriating the land. As Esther descends from the agricultural machine, Johan interrupts his manual labor of forking hay, and the Mennonite family convenes for a tailgate lunch (corn tacos) at the back of their pick-up truck. The only thing that puts this immanent idyll into question is Johan's departure to visit his mistress, Marianne. The land is theirs only for as long as they steadily cultivate the land through devout labor. The immanent frame is the consequence of the secularization enacted by the Protestant ethic and thus the Mennonites seek transcendence but only find immanence.

Protestant interiority, as depicted in Dreyer's *Ordet* within the narrow confines of the modest Danish households, expands here over the colonized land as Manifest Destiny. In Dreyer's film, the only exteriors we see are the grassy dunes through which Johannes Borgen wanders aimlessly, preaching to an imaginary congregation. Here the spirit is bound to the brooding interior and the attempt to spread Johannes' faith in transcendence across the land fails, while the Mexican Mennonites succeed only by turning their faith into a secular economy that provides the promised land. To the degree that secular and sacred time are related in these two films, so are colonial land and divine nature. Both dimensions coincide in the opening of the immanent frame, which as a

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theological concept, describes the aesthetic of *Stellet Licht* as well as the colonial foundations of this aesthetic.

Time and Transcendence

Despite being a story about three lovers, it is the landscape of Chihuahua that is the main character of *Stellet Licht*, which begins with a panning shot across the starry night sky that continues as an extended, slow tracking shot of the rising sun over the prairie. It is a shot suggestive of both the natural phenomenon of a sunrise in Chihuahua and the infinite, yet divinely ordered cosmos. The starry heavens above are also captured as a reflection of the moral laws within the Mennonite community. The experience of being awestruck by the existence of moral laws in spite of the infinity of the cosmos has been described by Immanuel Kant:

> Two things fill the mind with ever new and increasing admiration and reverence, the more often and more steadily one reflects on them: the starry heavens above me and the moral law within me. I do not need to search for them and merely conjecture them as though they were veiled in obscurity or in the transcendent region beyond my horizon; I see them before me and connect them immediately with the consciousness of my existence.[47]

Kant interrelates the ideas of spatial and temporal infinity to which the starry heaven gives rise with the personal consciousness that derives a moral law from within itself. According to him, this moral law reveals a life that is independent of the sensible spatial-temporal world, equally infinite, and thus transcendent. While Taylor sees the Kantian awe in front of the moral law as a partaking in the process of "immanentizing moral power," Reygadas illustrates this sense of wonder as a force of transcendence. The opening shot suggests transcendence, even though it does not follow Schrader's specific prescription, not merely by the subject of the starry night sky, but by its slow pace. In Kantian terms, he puts his viewers in the specific location where this image of an "unbounded magnitude" presents itself to the cognizant mind as "universal and necessary" and

suggests an image of infinity in which this mind can reflect itself. Kant would later develop this idea further in the analytics of the dynamically sublime. Such reflections may be blasphemous in the Mennonite mindset, but Reygadas's opening shot certainly evokes an aesthetics of awe in the face of inward and outward infinity, and gives his secular audience a glimpse at what religious believers might feel to be true. The opening long take suggests a momentary congruence of both dimensions—inner and outer infinity—as the sun slowly rises and illuminates the earth, while the chirping of the crickets is fading, and the moaning of the cattle becomes audible. The starry heavens above make way for the fertile soil below, which is what morally and existentially grounds the religious world of the Mennonites.

The disinterested spectator of this landscape at dawn may wonder at the "countless multitude of worlds," but only one of such worlds becomes visible in this first shot as Mennonite farmland, while the cows greet the day. In the next shot, we see their milk in the cereal bowls of the family that owns this land, as Johan and his wife Esther sit with their seven children around the kitchen table, silently praying. They are sitting still, yet the camera introduces them animated by a shot of their reflection in the pendulum of a clock on the wall. The measured secular time of the morning routine contrasts with the cyclical cosmic time that is suggested in the opening long take. As secular time, one may understand here the linear, chronological succession of historical events, while cosmic time is the temporal measure of an expanding universe beginning from an arbitrary point in time. The former corresponds to the immanent frame, while the latter suggests both physical theories of the universe and religious ideas about creation. As the pendulum chops away the seconds, it shows us the family reaffirming their faith and the moral convictions that brought them to this land. The clock on the wall secularizes the cosmic time into a structure that organizes the pious lifestyle of Johan and Esther's family.

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Whereas the opening shot materializes transcendental nature as landscape and farmland, this scene secularizes religious beliefs into a life determined by labor and family. Johan is looking at his quietly praying wife, almost skeptically observing the morning grace rather than leading it. Using one of the few Latin words we hear in this movie, the patriarch concludes the prayer with "Amen,"[48] after which we hear the children speak in Plautdietsch, the historic low-German dialect that the Mennonites preserved throughout centuries of migration. *Stellet Licht* is the only feature film in this language and its mostly Mexican cast is joined by native speakers from Canada and Germany.

"Amen." So be it. Or rather, is this it? Not only does Johan's face express doubt; he has, as we later learn, already violated the patriarchal code of the sacred family by having an extra-marital affair with a waitress named Marianne. His wife Esther knows, as he told her right away, and both are well aware that this goes against everything they and their community live for. After Esther and the children leave, Johan sits alone, then steps onto a chair and stops the pendulum of the clock that reminded him of the rhythm of his life as a family man, farmer, and devout Christian. Crying alone in what Jonathan Folz called a "strangely material and creaturely performance" by actor Cornelio Wall, Johan's weeping blends in with the crickets and the moaning cows.[49]

Beyond the charge of adultery, this moral conflict is as old as fiction and marks the universal appeal of Reygadas's story. More specifically at stake, however, is the preservation of the Mennonite lifestyle as the reason for their migration and the basis for their colonial claim to the land. If this erodes from within, there is nowhere else to go. In this sense, the moral law that rigidly prescribes the Mennonite lifestyle is tied to the land that the settlers occupy. In other words, the transcendental being that prescribes these laws is their reason to be, their literal and figurative *Daseinsgrund*.

As if to reassure himself of his existential state, Johan puts on his cowboy hat and drives in his pick-up truck along the fields like he owns them. As he picks up a piece for his tractor at the garage of his friend Zacarias, the two have a conversation about Johan's dilemma: his love to Marianne threatening the Mennonite code. With waving cornfields and cloud-dotted blue skies behind them, Johan and Zacarias lean against the pick-up truck, their faces shaded by their cowboy hats. They are discussing "the powerful thing that has come over" Johan and whether it would be best to suffer in silence or to challenge destiny, which, as the images suggest, is not only Johan's personal destiny but also implies the Manifest Destiny of the community. The land that the two Mennonite cowboys are overlooking is theirs (in their view) only by divine grace, which prescribes monogamy and the sacrament of marriage. Johan feels that Marianne is the "natural woman" for him and Zacarias replies that his "feeling may be founded on something sacred, even if we don't understand it." These two competing concepts of the sacred constitute Johan's tragic conflict, but also offer him a way out of it. For if his feelings for Marianne constitute sacred love, an intervention of fate to correct an error that he made by choosing Esther, then he is not doomed. For Johan, the Mennonite farmer, this means that adultery and divorce would not necessarily exclude him from the divine kingdom of Mennonite Chihuahua. Convinced by his friend to follow his instincts, he sings along to a Mexican country song playing on the radio, *No Volveré* by the Country Roland Band. In the language of the non-Mennonites, an elated Johan sings along to the lyrics about a person leaving their partner for good and not fearing divine judgment.

I swear I won't come back

Even if you tear my life to pieces

If once madly I loved you

From my soul you will already be gone

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I won't come back

I swear to God who looks at me

I tell you crying with rage

I won't come back.[50]

The song momentarily relieves Johan of his existential pains—he described it as the feeling of "lead being poured into my guts"—and lets him utter blasphemous words in a foreign language. Zacarias is an auto mechanic and not a priest, so his advice is more worldly when he tells Johan that it is only up to him (and not to God) to decide. The cheerful melody on his lips, Johan enters his truck and Zacarias shouts rather vulgarly, "the swine's on for a good lay, huh?" which Johan affirms. The masculine banter turns Johan into an animal to which no moral laws apply. With his truck he drives in circles several times before driving off in what looks reminiscent of Werner Herzog's signature shot of circular futility, e.g., at the end of *Even Dwarfs Started Small* (1970) or *Stroszek* (1977).[51]

The moral conflict between a sacred desire and moral law is momentarily resolved when we see Johan stride through tall grass towards a romantic lookout where Marianne is waiting for him. As if energized by the telluric powers of God's land, we see the feet of the two lovers for an extended moment, before their faces appear in front of the sun-drenched landscape panorama. Smiling hesitantly at first, they kiss for minutes in a close-up shot against the sun, producing an intense lens flare encircling the couple. The landscape, the earth, the sky, and the light, are as much part of this intimacy as the two entangled bodies. There is a sense that material and spiritual nature become indistinguishable as they merge in the kiss of the two lovers and the elements surrounding them.

Stretching the duration of a conventional kissing scene, it is shots like this that for many of the film's commentators invoke the notion of the Deleuzian crystal-image. These epiphanic time-images showcase, as Cynthia Tomkins wrote, "the categories of time that Deleuze has identified in film, namely, the crystal-image, peaks of present, and sheets of the past."[52] According to Deleuze, the crystal image reveals the nature of time and crystalizes not only the possible pasts and futures by extended duration, but depicts the foundation of time, which is non-chronological. The *chronos* of the clock that Johan stopped earlier represents his secularized beliefs within the immanent frame, while the sacred love to Marianne suspends chronological time and establishes a transcendent temporality that is eternal.[53] Beyond the mere duration, Reygadas amplifies this suspension of time by the excessive lens flare that creates a colorful sphere of circles around the couple. As Niels Niessen argues, this overabundant luminosity is the silent light that the film's title refers to, an overexposure that highlights the materiality of light as an immanent miracle[54]—a paradoxical term suggesting a material, not spiritual kind of miracle. As Niessen argues, these miraculous effects are not crystal-images by themselves, but part of the miraculous immanence that is framed by the celestial darkness at the beginning and end of the film. The effect in this particular scene is created by the lenses Reygadas used as well as by the panorama angle. Although the entire film employs wide angles, it is specifically in these extended close-up scenes that space seems to bend just as time does. Within this crystal-image, we see not only two temporal orders collapsing, but also the spiritual orders of the transcendent and the immanent. Instead of identifying the spiritual as something above nature or as being identical with it, Reygadas presents us with an immanent frame that is opening and thus allows for the spiritual to become present.

While Deleuze's concept of the movement-image is determined by the dynamic between what is within the frame and what is outside of it or between the images (montage), in the time-

image, each frame has its own reality and its own temporality. Time frames and durations can belong to different realities at the same time, thereby establishing a non-chronological order. Deleuze writes that despite the variations of what a time-image can be, it "always gives us access to that Proustian dimension where people and things occupy a place in time which is incommensurable with the one they have in space."[55] Paul Schrader boiled the difference down to a subversion of logic: "Movement-image is informed by Aristotelian logic: 'A' can never equal 'not A.' Time-image rejects the Aristotelian principle of non-contradiction, posits a world where something and its opposite can coexist: 'A' can be 'not A.'"[56] Associative editing, deep focus, and a static camera are typical features of the time-image that Deleuze historicizes for postwar cinema, such as Dreyer's *Ordet*. The kissing scene between Marianne and Johan is a typical time-image as it is shot in an entirely immanent frame and establishes its own temporality, unrelated to previous or succeeding action. It establishes a spiritual reality that differs from the secularized Mennonite lifestyle and allows for transcendence to enter the frame.

The subsequent sequence shows another example of a time-image. Esther has taken the children to a natural pool, which is surrounded by serene greenery. Johan rejoins them after his secret date with Marianne and, as they wash the children with homemade soap, he compliments her on her soap-making skills. Besides washing off the dirt from a day's hard work, it is a cleansing of the adulterous contamination, which Esther knows but remains silent about. We see her weeping silently before Johan caresses her cheek and takes her out of the frame while the take continues and slowly tracks towards a pink blossom that gradually comes into focus in the space Esther had just occupied. Her tear was wiped away by Johan, but as we see the blossom in sharp focus, the shot rests for almost a minute until a small drop of water gathers at the tip of a petal before falling.[57] The indifference of nature vis-à-vis the marital problems at the same time portrays an existential

crisis of the religious community, as the long tracking shot transcends these different temporalities. Only through an opening of the immanent frame towards cosmic time, it seems, is the crisis of faith to be reconciled.

The Immanent Frame

For Charles Taylor, the immanent frame means to see the world as entirely self-sufficient and without reference to a higher spiritual order, similar to Max Weber's iron cage. For Taylor this view is characteristic of the modern, secular age, but it is not necessarily agnostic or areligious. In *A Secular Age*, he proposes a "third way" between the secular and the sacred, which he describes as a perspective that transcends both strict secularity and religious belief. This "third way" involves acknowledging and valuing both religious and non-religious experiences, allowing for a more inclusive understanding of spirituality that accommodates diverse forms of meaning-making and existential orientation. Taylor suggests that this approach fosters a richer appreciation of the complexity of human existence and the various ways individuals engage with questions of meaning in contemporary society.[58] Reygadas's film—incidentally released the same year that Taylor's book was published—responds to the same question of post-secularism by showing a conservative religious sect that is affected by similar challenges as non-believers to find existential orientation in an immanent world. Taylor's immanent frame is illustrated by the rigid work ethic of the Mennonites. Their custom and dogma seems firm, but Johan's adultery puts the foundation of the community into question. A miracle is needed that transcends the immanent frame around his life and that of his community.

Secularization, as Taylor understands it, transfers what is transcendental into an immanent frame, for example by experiencing the divine in nature or feeling a sense of belonging to the earth

or the native land. For the Mennonites, as for any other Protestant group, this means the transferal of religious belief into labor, of the heavenly kingdom to an earthly kingdom, of the spiritual sphere into the sphere of custom and dogma. Through the preservation of this secularized content and their migration history, this also entails colonization. In fact, it is imperative to establish this immanence by means of occupying and cultivating land. The immanent frame closes around them, be it in Ukraine, Canada, or Mexico. Symbolically, this was the process of secularization that Johan halted, when he stopped the clock. After seeking approval from Zacarias that his love is not a sin, but a divine intervention, we see him and Marianne in that immanent frame as it opens. The divine love that violates the Mennonite doctrine enters the picture. Likewise, the metonymical shot of the blossom that "cries" instead of Esther stresses the other side of that conflict. It is here that the theological concept of the immanent frame turns into a concept of film theory that overlaps with Deleuze's time-image. The duration, the deep focus, and the lens effects invoke the entry of transcendence into the picture, which turns the carnal love between Johan and Marianne into a spiritual one and the colonized land around them into divine, immanent nature.

In Taylor's grand narrative about secularization, we can say regarding the two temporalities of cosmic and chronological time that the former maintains itself independently from human perception while the latter entails a providential social order based on human agency:

> Cosmic orders were inseparable from earlier understandings of higher time. The modern idea of order thus places us deeply and comprehensively in secular time [...] Our sense of being comprehensively in secular time is very much reinforced by the very thick environment of measured time which we have woven around ourselves in our civilization. Our lives are measured and shaped by accurate clock-readings, without which we couldn't function as we do.[59]

For Taylor, the chronological temporal order is based on an instrumental reason that is expressed in the measuring of time through "accurate clock-readings." Time is of the essence for the religious believers who want to use it most efficiently on Earth before being allowed to enter the non-

chronological space of Heaven. The result of instrumental rationality and the pervasiveness of secular time is what Taylor calls the "buffered self," namely the disciplined individual moving within the social construction of reality by means of instrumental reason. This "buffered self" is impervious to any spiritual realm that is incommensurable with rationality. The secular construction of the world that Taylor discusses comes to be seen as the natural order of things in contrast to which there exists a supernatural order. The strict separation of both spheres is what Taylor calls the immanent frame, which defines modern secular existence, including religious life. The foundation of a church based on a particular set of doctrines that govern the life of a religious community effectively separates the enchanted world from the disenchanted one, in order to relate one to the other. In the case of the Mennonites, the privileges they seek to obtain from secular governments establish this immanent foundation without which no transcendence is possible for them. It is crucial for Taylor's "third way" that this immanent frame, which defines existence in the secular age, can open, i.e., admitting the transcendent into the immanent realm. It is only in its closed variation that this immanence entails the, for Taylor, reductionist and materialist view that there is no transcendence beyond that frame.

The representatives "spinning"—as Taylor puts it—the immanent frame in this closed way are the usual suspects (Marx, Nietzsche, Freud) alongside Weber or Camus, while authors able to recognize the inability to sustain any ethical argument in front of a meaningless, hostile, and indifferent universe include William James, Durkheim, or Heidegger. Against the universalized rigorism of modern science, Taylor posits the opening as a "positive set of ways in which the immanent frame may be lived as inherently open to transcendence," or a negative one that can be experienced as a lack ("is that all there is?"[60]). Immanence means not only to use instrumental reason to master nature, but also to experience the feeling of being one with nature. On the other

hand, the sense of belonging to the Earth can also be shared by the religious believer when the demarcation between the physical and the metaphysical is permeable: "It is perhaps precisely the ordinary operation of things which constitutes the 'miracle.'"[61] We experience our belonging to the Earth with a sense of wonder, because this feeling transgresses the limits that are imposed by reason onto nature. For Taylor, a miracle is constituted by an opening of the immanent frame, "a kind of punctual hole blown in the regular order of things from outside, that is, from the transcendent."[62] One could ask: what are the conditions for such an opening of the immanent frame? As Taylor explains, what is needed is a "leap of faith," which he understands as an "anticipatory confidence."[63]

An example for such a leap of faith is Johannes raising Inger from her deathbed in Dreyer's *Ordet.* Schrader described Johannes as a "fool of God,"[64] while we compared him earlier to the Nietzschean "madman," yet he is the one who responds to the crisis of faith with a leap out of perpetual self-reflection and doubt and what Schrader calls a "decisive action par excellence."[65] It was his brother Mikkel's suggestion that studying theology and in particular Kierkegaard confronted Johannes with unbearable doubt about his faith. However, Johannes shows "anticipatory confidence" throughout the film, even after Inger's miscarriage and her death, and it appears as if this leap out of doubt and into faith effects the miracle of Inger's resurrection. This "miracle is unexpected, implausible, and demands commitment from the spectator."[66] Both Schrader and Taylor identify transcendence in the less dramatic events of everyday life, but this pointed opening of the immanent frame illustrates what is meant by the "punctual hole blown in the regular order of things from outside."

Aestheticization of matters of belief is of course inherent in every religion and also in Taylor's analysis of secularism. In order to illustrate what might be called an unconscious

worldview or ideology that is secularism, he invokes Wittgenstein's notion of the picture.[67] According to this notion, we are conditioned to look at things in a way so that they fit into this picture without being able to picture the pictorial form of thought itself. Thoughts that cannot be pictured in this model—Taylor also calls it an "interpretative grid"—must thus necessarily appear as devoid of sense or meaning. That thought is a pictorial, rather than an abstract analytical process, is the aesthetic foundation on which not only Wittgenstein's early picture theory rests, but it also lies at the bottom of Taylor's critique of secularism as constricting us to look at the world through the closed frame of one picture. It is therefore not by accident that Taylor mobilizes the metaphorical register of the pictorial and the imagination when he uses notions like frame or picture to anchor his critique, thereby following a tradition that tried to devalue abstract rational thought with the help of aesthetics. Counterintuitive, then, is his use of the verb "to spin" as the action causing the immanent frame to be open or closed.[68]

This apparent openness, a kind of clearing perhaps in the Heideggerian sense, lets one recognize—if one allows that to happen—that it was a picture that prefigured what one takes to be the natural order of things and that instead of one picture dominating the screen, multiple pictures are possible. Taylor holds on to the narrative metaphor of "spinning" in this pictorial context. Moreover, the thread that is spun, woven, and finally cut also evokes the allegory of destiny represented in the three fates, i.e., a polytheistic model of the relation of immanence and transcendence. No doubt, Taylor did not configure his theory of the immanent frame in light of cinema—though the book is not without references to movies—yet there appears to be an analogy between the immanent frame along with its openings, closings, and spinnings, and the moving pictures. In particular, regarding Deleuze's distinction between movement-image and time-image, and also in relation to Schrader's notion of the transcendental style, Taylor's theological aesthetics

allows for a cinematic application. The movement-image foregrounds action, agency, and development, thereby lending itself to an instrumental narrative logic that is also characteristic of the secularist worldview. As Deleuze argues, under immanent conditions movement is not the privilege of transcendental elements.[69] As the result of modern science, the cinema of the movement-image is defined by "the mechanical succession of instants" that "replaced the dialectical order of poses." Deleuze associates this dialectical order with transcendence and the mechanical movement with immanence. However, cinema is ultimately not bound by this mechanical movement nor by a chronological understanding of time. Instead, it can capture duration and thereby suggest a concept of temporality relieved of the constrictions of measured time.

The basic element of cinema is for Deleuze the closed system of the frame, which corresponds to Taylor's immanence and stands in sharp contrast to what is outside of the frame (*hors-champ*), a dimension that "is neither seen nor understood, but nevertheless perfectly present."[70] Taylor's transcendence can only be removed from the frame and delegated to the out-of-field at the price of being dependent on it. Every frame is by necessity defined by what it excludes and so is the immanent world view conditioned by the forms of belief it delegitimizes. The immanent frame is Taylor's term for the modern, secular condition, in which transcendence has become questionable. This frame can be "spun" in different ways, by which Taylor means to connect it to a larger whole, a universal perspective that either allows for an opening or denies it. In Deleuze's terms, there are also two different aspects of how the frame determines what it excludes. According to him, every frame communicates with the next and each frame is also linked by a thread to what is outside of it. This structure of interrelated sets continues infinitely and thereby generates a universal form of principally unlimited content. The form itself—the infinite

number of frames connected by a thread, which Deleuze calls "the set of all sets"—is not actually unlimited, but defined by a whole that is open.[71] This thread thus prevents the frame from fully closing and establishes a relation to (non-chronological) time and transcendence. This structure is inherent to the form of cinema and it mirrors the existential condition Taylor describes as the immanent frame to the extent that every index within the frame points to a material particle that is in principle related to an imaginary space.

To set up the paradoxical endeavor to film a miracle under secular conditions—an endeavor that Dreyer already undertook—Reygadas prepares the opening of the immanent frame by narrative means, namely the death of Esther. As Johan and his wife are driving in their car, he confesses that he saw Marianne again although he resisted "with all his might." Esther replies "Damn whore!" but with a delay: "Poor Marianne." A thunderstorm looms over the cornfields through which they are driving. As a car passes them, Johan comments, "That idiot's going to kill someone," to which Esther replies with the routine of a wife commenting on her husband's road rage: "Sure, Johan." The "idiot" is indeed Johan, whose adultery is about to kill his wife. Esther's chest hurts and she need to get out of the car immediately, despite the heavy rain. Soaked from the rain and her tears, Esther cries and sinks to the ground by a tree. When Johan finds her moments later, she is already dead. The melodramatic plot is driven to its apparent conclusion, where she has to die for Johan's failings and where the immanent frame knows no immortality of the soul. Esther's death then becomes the condition for the miracle to occur at her funeral.

Framing Closure

The search for openness and liberation from the confines of rationalism inaugurates a formal tradition of slow cinema, which articulates, to cite Lutz Koepnick on the example of Philipp

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Lachenmann's *SHU* (2008), "a plea for a different, more open, and more human conception of temporality, one according to which movement and stasis, traversal and standstill, confinement and transcendence, the ordinary and the unexpected could and should coexist."[72] Lachenmann's film accomplishes an aesthetic effect quite similar to the time-lapse shot with which *Stellet Licht* opens (and closes). In the case of *SHU (Blue Hour Lullaby)*, the starry night sky—according to Lachenmann. inspired by the opening logo of Disney productions—becomes visible over the desert, in which a prison compound for solitary confinement is located.[73] Boundless space is contrasted with extreme, tortuous limitation through the almost motionless passing of time. The utmost closure of the immanent frame around the prisoners is related to the transcendence of space above it.

Although the devastating reality depicted in *SHU* cannot be remotely compared to the story of *Stellet Licht*, the latter film's opening shot also reveals a solitary confinement—Weber's iron cage, Taylor's immanent frame—that is connected to a sphere that transcends it. The interiority of the *Kammerspiel* that characterized the setting of Dreyer's *Ordet* and stood in contrast to the transcendence that Johannes channeled, appears as the confinement of believers in their own institution, while the opening is reflected in the landscape as animated nature. That this seemingly "placeless" landscape is underwritten by a history of migration and colonialism is the trace of secular time from the fabric of which Reygadas's film seeks to present a timeless reality.

Reygadas's film offers these openings of the immanent frame in abundance, or as Niessen contests, "*Stellet Licht* is made entirely of miraculous matter."[74] Instead of a plot-driven story about adultery or loss of faith, this succession of wondrous moments is based on a mode of expression and not representation. The miraculous realism of *Stellet Licht* consist not in the spectacular miracle at the end, Niessen argues, but in the crystal-images in which transcendent

spirit appears to become identical with the immanent nature.[75] Corresponding, then, to this expressive structure would be what Rick Warner identifies as a contemplative mode specific to the type of cinema that *Ordet* and *Stellet Licht* represent. These films let us see and feel, he argues, that "we are contemplated *into* a world, that we are cinematically 'injected' into its relational and creative fluctuation. That we can be made to see in such a way, almost in spite of ourselves, is nothing less than miraculous."[76] What Warner calls contemplation reverses and reduces the mode of contemplation characterized by Lutz Koepnick as attentive spectatorship, since for Warner there is no dialectical relationship between object and subject. Instead, the absorption of elements by the viewer subject is reversed and for Warner the viewer is absorbed by the film, bringing this notion of contemplation closer to what Koepnick identifies as the mode of absorption. In turn, Koepnick's concept of the wondrous as self-reflexive spectatorship that makes us see our own seeing when confronted with, for example, extended shot durations, likewise tries to capture what is miraculous, yet entirely secular, about contemporary slow cinema that "envisions the return of wonder in the form of an aesthetic promise."[77] This insistence to delineate the mode of spectatorship that is actuated by films such as *Stellet Licht* from religious reverie not only confirms cinema as a secular medium, but its capacity to integrate forms of expression and experience once exclusive to religion. The experience of the "wholly other" and the need to express it, was central to Schrader's concern with the transcendental style.

The sense of wonder culminates in the miraculous scene that directly restages the final scene of Dreyer's *Ordet*, when Marianne kisses the deceased Esther in her open coffin and reawakens her. Esther had died from heart failure and is resurrected by Marianne's kiss. In Mennonite doctrine there is the symbol of the "kiss of peace," which signifies communion beyond the "vain walks of life" such as adultery.[78] By reversing this symbol and having the "vain"

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adulteress perform the "kiss of peace" that miraculously brings Esther back to the communion of the living, Marianne also reinstates the Mennonite status quo of the sanctity of marriage. Similarly, when Johannes tells Inger to rise from the dead in *Ordet*, it is an act of faith that affirms secular life. In a reversal of the miracle in *Ordet*, Reygadas's miracle reinstates the religious order and reaffirms the immanent frame as the secular limit of the Mennonites' communal life. In Dreyer's film, the symbol of the clock corresponds to Inger's secular life. It is stopped by her husband Mikkel right after her death, and it is restarted right after Inger regains her senses and utters the film's final word: "Life!" Reygadas's adaptation of this symbol works quite differently. As we have seen, Johan stops the clock in the beginning of the film and before he goes to meet with Marianne, which I have interpreted as the interruption of the secular order by the sacred. While Esther is reawakened from the dead by Marianne, the mourning family sits in the kitchen next door, where Johan's father simultaneously restarts the clock that his son stopped at the beginning of the film. As Niessen notices, the clock indicating 6:27 a.m. and 7:41 p.m. frames the entire action of the film, which takes place over the course of several months at least, as the duration of a day.[79] This structure is made obvious by the opening long take of the sunrise being mirrored by a similar take of the sunset: cosmic time is again framed by chronological time. The religious miracle and the aesthetics of wonder coincide at the moment where the immanent frame closes and secular time restarts. "Johan can be at peace now," says Marianne to the reawakened Esther in her coffin, before leaving the scene and thereby reestablishing the secular, nuclear family. In Dreyer's *Ordet*, Inger's death allows for the previously forbidden marriage of Anders Borgen and Anne Peterson, sweeping aside the previous confessional conflict by the brute facticity of death. Maren, Mikkel Borgen's daughter, shows her faith in her uncle Johannes's powers to resurrect Inger, which then restores the family that is now reformed with a new faith in which miracles have

a place. *Ordet*, then, reveals a logic of female sacrifice between Inger and Maren (and Johannes's dead wife), which is echoed in *Stellet Licht*. Both Esther and Marianne have expressed their compassion for one another indirectly through conversations with Johan ("poor Esther", "poor Marianne"). The miracle is the result of their female coalition, which, however, reinstates the patriarchal Mennonite order of things when Esther awakes and Marianne leaves. As Johan enters, a butterfly exits the room, which we follow out to the open fields, where the sun begins to set and Reygadas replicates the opening long take in reverse. The immanent frame that has opened closes again, indicating that any form of re-enchantment remains confined to these boundaries. Despite its fascination with immaterial presence, for cinema, these boundaries are what is visible. We are left with a sense of wonder, after the miraculous event concludes the spectacle of "miraculous matter" that is *Stellet Licht*, staring at the sun setting over the Old Mennonite Colony, as if it was a spiritual landscape, a timeless, placeless reality.

To conclude, both Dreyer and Reygadas investigate the possibility of transcendence under secular conditions. While in *Ordet*, it is the confessional conflict that drives the action towards the miracle of resurrection, *Stellet Licht* employs the theme of adultery. Both films are centered around religious families whose secularized faith is affirmed by an unorthodox miracle, which in turn reinstates the immanent frame within which they live. As I have shown, the modern secular condition, which Charles Taylor refers to as the immanent frame, is visualized through in different ways, namely as chamber play interiority in *Ordet* and as landscape aesthetic in *Stellet Licht*. That transcendence must appear as miraculous under secular conditions is realized in Reygadas's film through a colonial gaze that turns the Mexican landscape into an enchanted reality where miracles, small and large, are still possible.

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Notes

[1] Denmark had sold most of its colonies by the 1850s when it constituted itself as a modern nation state and constitutional monarchy, mainly inspired by the teachings of N.F.S. Grundtvig.

[2] Kaj Munk, *Five Plays*, trans. Richard Prescott Keigwin (New York: American-Scandinavian Foundation, 1954): 126.

[3] Carl Theodor Dreyer, *Ordet* (1955; Irvington, NY: Criterion Collection, 2001), DVD.

[4] Richard Goodwin, *Seeing is Believing: The Revelation of God Through Film* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2022), 113.

[5] Jonathon Romney and Carlos Reygadas, "The Sheltering Sky" (interview), *Sight and Sound* 18(1) (2008): 43. 43.

[6] Paul Schrader, *The Transcendental Style in Film. Ozu, Bresson, Dreyer* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2018).

[7] I will develop the double notion of the "immanent frame" with regards to secularism and film theory based on the concept by Charles Taylor: Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007).

[8] Schrader, *The Transcendental Style,* 35.

[9] Schrader, 40.

[10] Schrader, 144–148.

[11] Schrader, 67.

[12] Schrader, 70.

[13] Schrader, 71.

[14] Schrader, 74.

[15] Schrader, 77.

[16] Schrader, 22.

[17] Schrader, 136.

[18] Schrader, 143.

[19] Schrader, 156.

[20] David Bordwell, *The Films of Carl Theodor Dreyer* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981), 144.
[21] Dreyer quoted in Bordwell, 160–161.

[22] Bordwell, 153.

[23] Bordwell, 164.

[24] Daniel Watts, "The Fullness of Time: Kierkegaardian Themes in Dreyer's *Ordet*," Religions 10.1, 58: 4.

[25] Bordwell, 146.

[26] Jean Drum and Dale D. Drum, *My Only Great Passion: The Life and Films of Carl Theodor Dreyer* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2000): 223.

[27] Watts, "The Fullness of Time," 58.

[28] Schrader, *The Transcendental Style,* 22.

[29] Goodwin, 140.

[30] John P.R. Eicher, *Exiled Among Nations. German and Mennonite Mythologies in a Transnational Age* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020): 2-6.

[31] Harry Leonard Sawatzky, *They Sought a Country. Mennonite Colonization in Mexico* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971): 40.

[32] Royden Loewen, *Village Among Nations: 'Canadian' Mennonites in a Transnational World, 1916-2006* (University of Toronto Press, 2013): 39. Also: Martina E. Will, "The Mennonite Colonization of Chihuahua: Reflections of Competing Visions," *The Americas* 53/3 (1997): 375.

[33] Will, "The Mennonite Colonization of Chihuahua," 357.

[34] Will, 368–371.

[35] Will, 376–378.

[36] Loewes, *Village Among Nations,* 65.

[37] Loewes, 65.

[38] Loewes, 18.

[39] Eicher, *Exiled Among Nations,* 59.

[40] Will, "The Mennonite Colonization of Chihuahua," 374.

[41] Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. Talcott Parsons (New York: Routledge, 1992), 93.

[42] Romney "The Sheltering Sky"): 42-43.

[43] Sheldon Penn, "The Time-Image in Carlos Reygadas' *Stellet Licht*: A Cinema of Immanence," *Bulletin of Spanish Studies*, 90.7 (2013): 1160.

[44] Romney, "The Sheltering Sky," 43.

[45] Weber, 14.

[46] Weber, 238.

[47] Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, trans. Mary Gregor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015): 130.

[48] Carlos Reygadas, *Stellet Licht* (*Silent Light*, 2007; New York, NY: Palisades Tartan, 2009), DVD.

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[49] Jonathan Foltz, “Betraying Oneself: *Silent Light* and the World of Emotion,” *Screen* 52.2 (2011): 157.

[50] Country Roland Band, *No volveré*. Producciones Fonograficas Jasper, 2004, Accessed September 2022. URL: https://open.spotify.com/track/5Flzi9bf6iXbPbzDHRGZUt (translation AF).

[51] Jonathan Folz argued that this scene the “circularity of autoerotic fantasy” reveals Johan’s narcissism and vanity that is in contrast to the two conflicting notions of love regarding Marianne and Esther. Cf. Foltz, “Betraying Oneself,” 160.

[52] Cynthia Tomkins, *Experimental Latin American Cinema: History and Aesthetics* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2013): 185.

[53] Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997): 98.

[54] Niels Niessen, “Miraculous Realism: Spinoza, Deleuze, and Carlos Reygadas’s *Stellet Licht*,” *Discourse* 33.1 (2011): 49-50.

[55] Deleuze, *Cinema 2*, 39.

[56] Schrader, *The Transcendental Style,* 4.

[57] Folz, 167.

[58] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 302.

[59] Taylor, 541.

[60] Taylor, 545.

[61] Taylor, 548.

[62] Taylor, 547.

[63] Taylor, 551.

[64] Schrader, *The Transcendental Style,* 154.

[65] Schrader, 155.

[66] Schrader, 155.

[67] Taylor, 549.

[68] Taylor, 551.

[69] Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 1: The Movement-Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997): 4.

[70] Deleuze, *Cinema 1*, 16.

[71] Deleuze, *Cinema 1*, 16–17.

[72] Lutz Koepnick, *The Long Take. Art Cinema and the Wondrous* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017): 76.

[73] Koepnick, *The Long Take*, 74–75.

[74] Niessen, "Miraculous Realism," 30.

[75] Niessen, 40.

[76] Rick Warner, "Filming a miracle: *Ordet*, *Silent Light*, and the spirit of contemplative cinema," *Critical Quarterly* 57.2 (2015): 67–68.

[77] Koepnick, *The Long Take*, 16.

[78] Menno Simons, *The Complete Writings of Menno Simons*, trans. John Christian Wenger (Scottdale: Herald Press, 1956): 480.

[79] Niessen, "Miraculous Realism," 43.

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