Transcendental Style in Film

Ozu, Bresson, Dreyer

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With a New Introduction:
Rethinking Transcendental Style

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Rethinking Transcendental Style

What became of transcendental style? What in the 1950s began as art house cinema has blossomed into the hydra-headed creature we call slow cinema. Bresson and Ozu, seen as esoteric and slow, now are audience friendly compared to the multi-hour epics of Béla Tarr and Lav Diaz and Pedro Costa. A theater experience for art house customers morphed into marginalized audio-video presentations shown only at film festivals and art galleries.

What happened? Gilles Deleuze happened. So did Andrei Tarkovsky. And slow cinema was soon to follow.

I WRITE A BOOK

In 1971, at the age of 24, a grad student a UCLA film school, I had the temerity to write and publish a book titled *Transcendental Style in Film.* Forty-five years later I found myself on a panel at the annual convention of the Society for Cinema and Media Studies titled "Rethinking Transcendental Style: New Approaches in Spirituality and Cinematic Form."

So I started rethinking. How did I come to write the book in the first place and how does its premise hold up after forty-five years?

I wasn't drawn to the topic out of academic obligation or desire to publish. I had a problem and I was looking for an answer. It was the same impulse that caused me to write a screenplay two years later.

I was a product of the Christian Reformed Church in Grand Rapids, a Calvinist denomination which at that time proscribed theater attendance and other "worldly amusements." So naturally I was drawn to the forbidden—not the forbidden forbidden, of course, but the acceptable forbidden. I wanted to square my love of movies with my religious upbringing. *Through a Glass Darkly* (1961) was the point of entry; *Viridiana* (1961) was the counterpoint of entry.

That didn't last long. Two years later it was 1968 and I was in Los Angeles in full pursuit of the profane. Calvin College was a memory.

Then, as a film critic for the *Los Angeles Free Press,* I watched the LA release of Robert Bresson's *Pickpocket* (1959). And wrote about it. And saw it again. And wrote about it again. I sensed a bridge between the spirituality I was raised with and the "profane" cinema I loved. And it was a bridge of *style,* not content. Church people had been using movies since they first moved to illustrate religious beliefs, but this was something different. The convergence of spirituality and cinema would occur in style, not content. In the How, not the What. Susan Sontag was for me (and many others) the first to shine a light in this murky ideological expanse. Her essay on Robert Bresson in *Against Interpretation* (1966) and the "Aesthetics of Silence" in *Styles of Radical Will* (1967) jolted me into thought.[1] Pauline Kael had inspired my first love of popular cinema; Sontag took my appreciation to the next level. Film could and did operate on a spiritual plane.

Yasujiro Ozu was using techniques similar to Bresson in Japanese family dramas. And to not dissimilar effect. These techniques were neither parochial nor Christian nor Western. They were spiritual (related to the spirit as opposed to matter). So I cautiously—and with the generous help of scholars far more knowledgeable than myself—began to explore how such a style worked. I was curious. That curiosity grew. I realized I was far too young to write such a book. But I also realized that nobody else was writing it. I was in a unique moment of transition: my love of movies was full blown and my knowledge of theological aesthetics still intact. In a few years I would not be able to devote a year to writing a book that produced no income. If I didn't write it now I never would. And neither would anyone else. Sontag, ever voracious, had moved on.

University of California Press was kind enough to publish *Transcendental Style in Film.* Two years later I stopped writing regular criticism and focused on film-making.

ENTER DELEUZE

Transcendental style can be seen, forty-five years later, as part of a larger movement, the movement away from narrative. A way station, if you will, in the post–World War II progression from neorealism to surveillance video.

In 1971, struggling with the concept of transcendental style, I sought to understand how the distancing devices used by these directors could create an alternate film reality—a transcendent one. I wrote that they created disparity, which I defined as "an actual or potential disunity between man and his environment," "a growing crack in the dull surface of everyday reality."

By delaying edits, not moving the camera, forswearing music cues, not employing coverage, and heightening the mundane, transcendental style creates a sense of unease the viewer must resolve. The film-maker assists the viewer's impulse for resolution by the use of a Decisive Moment, an unexpected image or act, which then results in a stasis, an acceptance of parallel reality—transcendence. At that time, I had little idea how the phenomenology of such a process would work. I posited that the psyche, squeezed by untenable disparity, would break free to another plane.

Ten years later French philosopher Gilles Deleuze wrote two groundbreaking works on cinema *(Cinema I* and *Cinema II)* and by 1989 both were published in English translations.[2] Deleuze explicitly addressed the phenomenology of perception through time.

To grossly simplify Deleuze, he contends film history falls into two perceptual periods: (1) movement-image and (2) time-image. Movement-image began with the origins of cinema and was the dominant perceptual principle until after World War II. It's the action of a projected image. Such movement perceived on screen continues in our minds. We're hardwired for it. Even after the image of the running man is cut on screen, the viewer still imagines the runner completing his task. Deleuze references Aristotle and the notion of the first mover to explain how our mind continues a movement even after the image has gone. "Light is stronger than the story," he wrote.

World War II dates the rough demarcation of a shift, more in Europe than America, from movement-image to time-image. Screen movement still occurred, of course, but it was increasingly "subordinated to time." What does that mean? It means that a film edit is determined not by action on screen but by the creative desire to associate images over time.

The maid strikes a match. From *Umberto D.*

Man exits one room, enters another—that's movement-image editing. Man exits one room, shot of trees in the wind, shot of train passing— that's time-image editing. Man exits one room, the screen lingers on the empty door. That's time-image editing. Deleuze called this the "non-rational cut." The non-rational cut breaks from sensorimotor logic. Deleuze first sees this in the deep-focus films of Welles but, for practical purposes, it comes to the fore in walking/wandering films like Rossellini's *Voyage in Italy* (1954), Antonioni's *L'Avventura* (1960), Resnais's *Hiroshima Mon Amour* (1959) and *Last Year at Marienbad* (1961). The time-image reached first full expression in the films of Yasujiro Ozu. "The vase in *Late Spring* (1949)," writes Deleuze, "is interposed between the daughter's half smile and her tears. . . . This is time, time itself . . . a direct time-image which gives change unchanging form."[3] 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."

Deleuze opens *Cinema II* with a description of the four-minute maid sequence in De Sica's *Umberto D* (1952), the scene which had so impressed André Bazin eighteen years before.[4] The young girl, a minor character, gets up, comes and goes into the kitchen, hunts down ants, grinds coffee.

Béla Tarr's cows. From *Sátántangó*.

Where Bazin emphasized the scene's realism, Deleuze focused on its use of time. The young maid strikes a match against the kitchen wall three times; it fails to light. *She gets another match and strikes again.* Without cutting, without comment. Irrelevant action in real time. This is a defining moment in cinema. Just as the runaway baby carriage of Eisenstein's *Battleship Potemkin* (1925) epitomizes the movement-image, the "little maid" and her match strikes exemplify the time-image.

Another way to put it: Deleuze feels that "mature cinema" (post-WWII) was no longer primarily concerned with telling stories to our conscious selves but now also seeks to communicate with the unconscious and the ways in which the unconscious processes memories, fantasies, and dreams.

Bergson's concept of duration is crucial to Deleuze's concept of time-image. Time allows the viewer to imbue the image with associations, even contradictory ones. Hence the long take. What began as a four-second shot of a passing train in Ozu grows to eight minutes of meandering cows in Béla Tarr.

Deleuze is getting at the nuts and bolts of transcendental style. This is what I was struggling to apprehend. Our minds are wired to complete an on-screen image. We create patterns from chaos, just like our forefathers did when they imagined stars in the form of mythic beasts. We complete the action.

Film artists realized from the beginning they could use this neurological predisposition to manipulate the viewer. Cinema, after all, is only still images projected in rapid succession. The spectator will imagine the gun firing, the monster emerging from the cave, and so forth.

Postwar film-makers realized that just as movement-image could be manipulated to create suspense, time-image could be manipulated to create introspection. We not only fill in the blanks, but we create new blanks.

Introspection has always been a goal of art. What film-makers (and, as a consequence, Deleuze) came to realize was that introspection created by a moving photographic image is unique. It's not like the introspection evoked by a sculpture or painting or passage of music; it is the by-product of a changing image. Cinematic introspection can be molded to a greater extent than introspection caused by a singular image, say, a Rothko canvas or Zen garden. It can vary. It can change. The film artist molds introspection via duration. Duration can evoke Deleuze's "memories, fantasies and dreams." Duration can peel back the social veneer of an activity. Duration can invoke the Wholly Other.

In the past fifteen years the new field of neuroesthetics, pioneered by Semir Zeki, has sought to scientifically explain what Deleuze theorized. Combining science and aesthetics, neurobiologists use brain scans to study which areas of the brain perceive visual stimuli and how they process it—how in fact, the brain determines whether something is beautiful. ("Can an aesthetic judgment ever be quantified," Zeki rhetorically asks. "The answer is yes."[5]) No one has yet explained how the brain processes slow cinema, but I expect the answer will be as satisfying as knowing how many angels can dance on the head of a pin.

In *Transcendental Style in Film* I wrote about hierophanies evoked by style. Deleuze attempted to explain how that actually works.

TARKOVSKY IS THE FULCRUM

Like Deleuze, Russian director Andrei Tarkovsky sensed a shift in the cinematic winds. He and Deleuze were simultaneously working on the same paradigm shift. Both understood that the use of time in movies had evolved.

Tarkovsky directed five films from 1962 to 1986. He was not interested in the spiritual per se; although he often spoke of the spiritual nature of film art and employed religious imagery, his primary interest was in cinema's ability to evoke poetry and memory—more pantheistic

than theistic. (A disputable opinion. Joseph Kickasola, a theological film scholar, describes Tarkovsky as "one of the most directly religious film-makers ever."[6])

Tarkovsky was an aesthetician as well as a film-maker. His theoretical writings echo his journey as a director. He came of film-making age during Deleuze's postwar second era of cinema. Tarkovsky admired Mizoguchi's long slow takes, Antonioni's de-dramatized narrative, De Sica's emphasis on mundane reality, Bergman's use of ordinary sounds, and most of all, Tarkovsky admired Robert Bresson's "unity of theory and practice." On the surface Bresson's and Tarkovsky's films are quite different. Critic Fredric Jameson wrote that Tarkovsky likes to gorge the spectator's eyes whereas Bresson prefers to starve them.[7] But both artists felt the keys to the artist's kingdom lie in the application of style over content. It's the form of things that makes you free.

Tarkovsky rejected the Soviet school of montage in favor of André Bazin's "ontology of the photographic image" and Bazin's advocacy of the Italian neorealists. Bazin felt that with the invention of moving photographs, the age-old artistic desire to represent reality had reached its apotheosis. Cinema was "as complete an imitation as possible of the outer world." Sergei Eisenstein felt that the power of cinema was in its ability to orchestrate reality. Bazin said it was just the opposite: the power of cinema was not to manipulate reality. Neorealism revealed "the aesthetic implicit in cinema." "Neorealism knows only immanence," said Bazin. "It is from appearance only." For Bazin the long take favored by the neorealists enabled spectators to choose what they wanted to see rather than what had been dictated by montage.[8]

Tarkovsky embraced Bazin. Then he turned neorealism on its head. Bazin had written, "The photographic image is the object itself. The object freed from the conditions of time and space that govern it. Viewed from this perspective, the cinema is objectivity in time. Now, for the first time, *the image of things is the image of their duration*" (italics mine).[9] Of the duration of the Eskimo waiting for the seal in Flaherty's *Nanook of the North* (1922), Bazin said, "The length of the hunt is the very substance of the image, its true object."[10] But for Tarkovsky duration was more than mere waiting. It was Henri Bergson's *"durée,"* duration, time itself, the vital force governing and meditating upon all organic life.

Tarkovsky stands in a line of documentary observers of life. Also in the line are contemplative stylists Ophüls, Mizoguchi, Rossellini, Resnais, Dreyer, Bergman, Ozu, Bresson. What exactly makes him so special?

IT'S ABOUT TIME

Here's what I think is the difference: Ozu, Bresson, Dreyer, Mizoguchi, De Sica, and the rest used film time to create an emotional or intellectual or spiritual effect. Tarkovsky used film techniques to study time. For Tarkovsky time was not a means to a goal. It was the goal.

The manifestation of time on film is the long take. Not the fancy out-the-door-down-the-street long takes of Orson Welles or Alfonso Cuarón—no, even though those takes run long in screen time, they are little different than conventional film coverage. They are driven by the logic of edits: wide shot, over-the-shoulder, close-up, point of view, two-shot.

The Tarkovsky long shot is more than long. It's meditative. The psychological effect of slow cinema's "long take" is unlike any other film technique. Film techniques are about "getting there"—telling a story, explaining an action, evoking an emotion—whereas the long take is about "being there." Julian Jason Haladyn in *Boredom and Art* compares the effect of the long take to a train journey, an early symbol of modernity.[11] The train journey places emphasis on expectation rather than presence. The traveler's mind is focused on the destination, not where he or she is here and now. Travelers can't appreciate being in the present because their perception of time and space is constantly shifting. Motion pictures, like modernity itself, embraced this constant flux. Slow cinema, specifically the long take, sought to reverse the headlong impetus of technology in favor of the present.

Andrei Tarkovsky stands at the fulcrum of an aesthetic paradigm shift. His earlier films, *Ivan's Childhood* (1962) and *Andrei Rublev* (1966), although slow-paced and replete with associative imagery, adhered to chronological narrative. As he evolved as an artist, Tarkovsky realized that what he was really after was more akin to boredom (my choice of word, not Tarkovsky's) than slowness. He called it "time pressure."

Toward the end of his life (he died at age 54) Tarkovsky organized his thoughts in a book appropriately titled *Sculpting in Time*. "The cinema image," he wrote, "is the observation of a phenomenon passing through time. Time becomes the very foundation of cinema. . . . Time exerts a pressure which runs through the shot. . . . Just as a quivering reed can tell you about the current or water pressure of a river, in the same way we know the movement of time as it flows through the shot."[12]

The long take gives time power. It intensifies the image. Jonathan Rosenbaum referred to this moment as the "pedal point. . . . When you hold a chord for a long time it becomes meditative, because it gives you

time to think and almost makes a demand on your imagination."[13] Watch an image long enough and your mind goes to work.

"The pauses," director Theo Angelopoulos contended, "the dead time, give the spectator the chance to assess the film rationally but also to create, or complete, the different meanings of a sequence."[14] The long take demands a viewer involvement—pro or con. "Dead time" *(temps mort)* is predicated on the active viewer. It seems counterintuitive to say that slow cinema requires more viewer involvement, but that is exactly the point. Pedro Costa, a third-generation slow director, made a documentary about Jean-Marie Straub and Danièle Huillet, second-generation slow directors, titled *Where Does Your Hidden Smile Lie?* (2001), in which Straub describes dead time as "a reduction, only it's not a reduction—it's a concentration and it actually says more."

This was a crucial transition in Tarkovsky's work: from narrative digression to dead time. There is a fundamental difference between being slow to create mood and being slow to activate the viewer. What Bresson and Ozu were moving toward, Tarkovsky brought to resolution. Delayed cuts were extended indefinitely. Ozu's "pillow shots" (still-life images) became entire scenes.

The opening of Tarkovsky's *Nostalghia* (1983) speaks volumes. A static shot of a foggy landscape. A compact green car enters screen right. The camera slowly pans with the car. The car exits screen left. The camera holds on the foggy landscape. Will the car re-enter? It does. A couple emerges from the car; they talk, walk into the fog. In that moment—when the car exits and there is no splice—Tarkovsky's work segued from delayed cut to dead time, from transcendental style to slow cinema.

Tarkovsky didn't innovate in isolation. In 1967 Pasolini described the long take as "a search for relations among discontinuous meaning, . . . the schematic and primordial element of cinema."[15] Antonioni, Miklós Jancsó, Chantal Akerman, Jean Eustache, and others were all pushing the boundaries of contemplative cinema. But it was Tarkovsky's international success that legitimized slow cinema. He was a regular presence at the Cannes and Venice film festivals. Each year brought new honors. By the time he died, he was the poster child for slow cinema.

Tarkovsky's success was the tipping point in the movement toward slow cinema. There is a before-Tarkovsky and an after-Tarkovsky. Before was art house cinema. After was film festival and art gallery cinema. Before was slow cinema predicated on paying viewers. After was slow cinema underwritten by arts organizations. Tarkovsky was not a "pure" slow cinema stylist—he was more interested in poetry than

stasis—but he made slow cinema fashionable. He made Béla Tarr possible.

WHAT IS SLOW CINEMA?

"Slow cinema" is a fairly recent term used to designate a branch of art cinema which features minimal narrative, little action or camera movement and long running times. Harry Tuttle listed the four criteria for slow cinema as plotlessness, wordlessness, slowness, and alienation.[16] Many terms have been used to describe this phenomenon: stasis, contemplative, austere, abstract, landscape, meditative, "deliterate," organic, expanded, and, yes, transcendental—all of which in certain cases are accurate. Which is why a multipurpose term like "slow cinema" is useful. It's malleable.

In the last fifteen years slow cinema has exploded. Slow movies are now being made faster than we can see them. There are slow cinema websites, slow cinema conferences, slow cinema blogs, slow cinema books, slow cinema film festivals, and even a slow cinema VOD website. Forty to fifty slow films were premiered last year, primarily in festivals. They are rarely shown in theaters. Their reach extends to film schools, cinematheques, and art museums. They come from every nation in the world.

Slow cinema has a fundamentally different attitude toward time. The promise of motion pictures was that of a river on which you could float images. Photography through time. Cinema itself was narrative, even if the image was the arrival of a train: there was the first appearance of the train, the train stopping, passengers getting out, and so on. Attach that image to second, and a story begins. Time serves storytelling.

Slow films invert this relationship. Time becomes the story—or at least its central component. Slow cinema examines how time affects images. It's experiential, not expositional.

"Time becomes story." How can time be the story? One has to be careful because it's so easy to slip into jargon when analyzing film. (What is time? What is story?) Let's go back to the beginning: the Lumière brothers 1895 *Arrival of a Train at La Ciotat.* The first movie. A steam train pulls into a station. A fifty-second snippet of time from 120 years ago. Eight hundred still frames projected sequentially.

But what if that clip were projected in a loop for five minutes? Five hours? What if the film were slowed so that it took fifteen minutes for the train to arrive? What would the film then be about? Would it be

about the arrival of the train or about your experience as a viewer watching the arrival of the train? What did you think about for those fifteen minutes it took the train to arrive? This is the question conceptual artist Gordon Douglas posed in *24 Hour Psycho* (1993), a version of Hitchcock's *Psycho* projected at two frames rather than twenty-four frames per second, causing it to run twenty-four hours.

Stripped of aesthetic jargon, this then is the definition of "slow cinema": making something take longer than we have been conditioned to expect.

Slow movies have exploded multidirectionally. Not all slow cinema is the same. This is why discussions of slow cinema are so problematic. Not all directors use "slow" techniques for the same purposes. Although it seems logical to discuss directors such as Lav Diaz, Béla Tarr, and Tsai Ming-liang in the same context because they employ similar stylistic devices, their intentions and films are in fact quite dissimilar.

There are many types of slow cinema, but only, I believe, three tendencies. If one accepts that the natural state of cinema is narrative—not necessarily the case, but a defensible premise given that movies are connected images seen over time—then three different branches of slow cinema can be seen to move away from narrative in three different directions, each with a different destination. More on this later.

WHAT ARE THE TECHNIQUES OF SLOW CINEMA?

The techniques of slow cinema may seem arbitrary, but they are practical. They all have the same purpose: to retard time. They withhold the expected.

The *long take* is the sine qua non of slow cinema. These are not the complex long dolly and tracking takes of film school lore; no, these are for the most part static frames, sometimes abetted by languorous pans or dolly moves. The seven-and-a-half-minute opening shot of Béla Tarr's *Sátántangó* (1994), which intermittently studies and follows cows in a barnyard, has become the textbook example of slow cinema. Tarr's last film, *The Turin Horse* (2011), features thirty-one shots over 146 minutes, approximately four and a half minutes per shot.

But a long take need not be of Olympian length to serve its purpose. It just needs to be longer than expected. A static shot of someone, say, making coffee would dramatically require ten to fifteen seconds of screen time. If that shot is held for thirty seconds, it has another effect. Held for a three minutes, quite another. Thirty seconds, however, are

sufficient to create a dissonance between time and narrative, between the narrative time requirements of a particular shot and the actual amount of time allotted to the shot.

Other film techniques reinforce the dissonance:

Wide angles are favored by slow cinema. A tableau, whether exterior or interior, offers multiple points of interest. One can see the action, the surroundings, the people talking, the people listening, the weather, and so on. The frame doesn't direct the viewer's gaze; it frees it to wander.

Static frame. A locked-off camera position is often employed in conjunction with the long take. "Sometimes when you are very still," film-maker Nathaniel Dorsky (*Love's Refrain,* 2001) explains, "you feel things that are hidden. I think [the static frame] has to do with seeing how deeply you can go."[17] There variations of the static frame technique. In *Ida,* (2013), Pawel Pawlikowski used a static 1:33 frame but composed for the lower half of the frame. Cristian Mungiu (*4 Months, 3 Weeks and 2 Days,* 2007), like a number of his fellow "New Romanian" directors, pushed the action to the edges of a frozen frame, leaving the center vacant.

Minimal coverage. "Coverage" refers to the different angles a director uses to capture a scene: two-shot, over-the-shoulder, single, close-up, cutaway, and so on. Coverage guides and governs the viewer's attention. The film-maker manipulates the audience's reaction by editing the coverage. Dispensing with coverage, the slow cinema director is left to rely on staging, framing, and length of shot.

Offset edits. When edits occur, they are frequently offset in time—either too early or too late. In normal cutting, a splice is made "on action." If someone leaves a room, the cut is made as the person leaves; if someone enters, it is made as the person enters. In slow cinema the cut is made *after* the character leaves—sometimes much after. I first noticed this tendency in the films of Bresson and Ozu. It threw off the viewer's rhythm—the cut was too "early" or too "late." In this way, the film-maker reorients time. Film scholar Ben Singer described these as "post action lag."[18] Subsequent directors have offset these edits progressively more and more. In 1977 Theo Angelopoulos in *The Hunters* held for multiple beats before and after characters enter and exit. Twenty-five years later Tsai Ming-liang in *What Time Is It There?* (2001) held onto a static frame to the point where the viewer was uncertain if a character would ever enter.
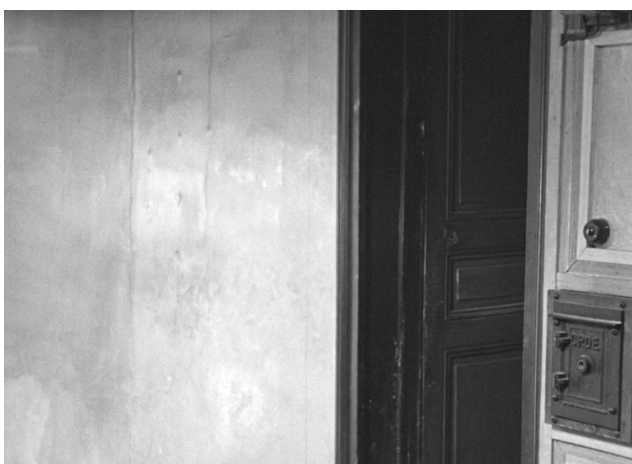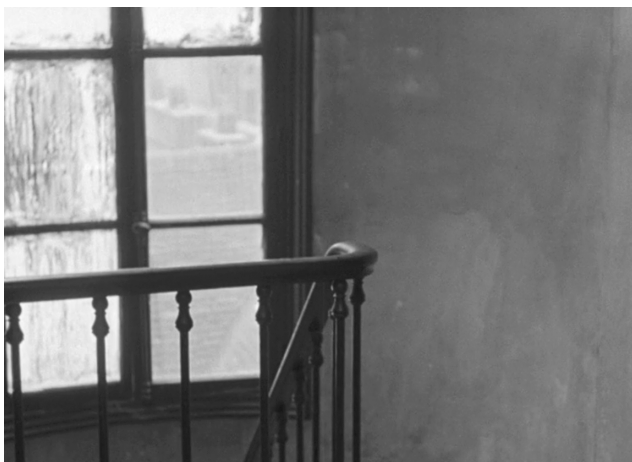
The delayed cut. Beginning, middle, end frames of a shot from
Pickpocket.

Images preferred over dialogue. Slow cinema isn't very talky. There's dialogue, of course, but not as much as in conventional narratives. Human beings are vococentric; our ears prioritize the human voice over other sounds. Slow cinema film-makers intentionally dispense with dialogue to reorient time. If we watch a scene with and without dialogue, the non-dialogue version will necessarily seem "slower."

Highly selective composed music—if any. Slow cinema favors diegetic sound—that is, sound which emanates from the action on screen. Non-diegetic music, composed music, is the most effective way to control film time; it can make a scene seem fast or slow. The absence of film score heightens the sense of being in a specific moment in time; it "extends" time. Bresson was the first codify this rule. "No music as accompaniment, support or reinforcement," he wrote in *Notes on Cinematography*.[19] The more a director is committed to slow cinema, the less he or she uses musical scoring. Andrei Tarkovsky and Theo Angelopoulos, for example, began their careers by using composed music, and ended by using little or none.

Heightened sound effects. Practical sound effects fill the vacuum left by dialogue and music. Keys jangle, chairs scrape, motor engines turn over, clothes rustle, wind blows, and humans inhale, exhale. All these emphasize the quotidian, the banal moment-by-moment reality of any situation.

A visual flatness. Slow cinema eschews drama—visual drama as well as story drama. Visual compositions in slow films tend to be symmetrical, not weighted toward specific visual information—no dramatic foregrounding and oblique angles. Camera movement, when it occurs, is painstakingly incremental and most often at right angles—either side to side or directly forward or backward. Human figures are presented as composition equals with other items on screen. David Bordwell uses the term "planimetric photography" to describe this flatness.[20] Viewers are refused easy entrance to the image, held at a deliberate distance. They are left to assemble their own visual priorities.

Repeated compositions. Ozu incorporated identical shots into his style, planimetric compositions with a central corridor or road leading directly away from the camera. Sometimes characters (full figure) will walk through these compositions. Sometimes not. The effect is to make the viewer aware of context. It was a leitmotif for Ozu. By 1989 such repetitions had become a central motif, as in Hou Hsiao-hsien's epic *City of Sadness,* which returns to the same compositions year after year.

Planimetric composition. From Ozu's *An Autumn Afternoon*; Cristian Mungiu's *4 Months, 3 Weeks and 2 Days*; Bruno Dumont's *Hadewijch*.

Doubling. In my 1972 book on transcendental style, I also mentioned "doubling," by which I meant unnecessarily reiterated information. The example I gave was from *Pickpocket,* in which the main character, Michel, states, "I sat in the lobby of a large bank." (1) The viewer hears this in voice-over; (2) the viewer reads this on screen as Michel writes the words in his diary; (3) the viewer sees this as Michel is pictured entering the lobby of a bank. This overlapping of information is a distancing device.

Non-acting. Barely moving. Bresson referred to his actors as "models," objects in human form. Performers in slow cinema do not "act" or interpret emotions. They are figures in a composed landscape. Not only do these performers not "act," they move slowly. Actors in slow cinema tend to take a while to get anywhere, like mimes in a Robert Wilson opera. If a character in slow cinema enters frame headed right to left, the viewer knows two things: (1) the scene will not end until after the character exits frame, and (2) it will take the character a long time to cross screen.

Color and screen ratio. The choice to use black and white when color is the norm doesn't necessarily retard time but it is a with-holding device. It gives less. Compare for example, Pawlikowski's *Ida* with Margarethe von Trotta's *Vision,* two films about nuns. *Vision* works in warm yellow colors with shifting camera perspective and brisk editing. *Ida* is just the opposite. Similarly, Pawlikowski's use of the restrictive screen ratio of 1:33 gives you less.

Not all these techniques are present in a given "slow film." Some counteract each other. It's a buffet of technical choices. Slow directors mix and match. Different directors employ different techniques. Some are more austere, some less. But this is the menu.

The techniques may be similar, but the intentions are diverse. A quick (alphabetical) look at some of the prominent practitioners of slow cinema reveals an eclectic group: Chantal Akerman, Lisandro Alonso, Theo Angelopoulos, Nuri Bilge Ceylan, Pedro Costa, Claire Denis, Lav Diaz, Bruno Dumont, Michelangelo Frammartino, Hou Hsaio-hsien, Abbas Kiarostami, Kim Ki-duk, Hirokazu Kore-eda, Nicolás Pereda, Kelly Reichardt, Ben Rivers, Alberto Serra, Alexander Sokurov, Jean-Marie Straub and Danièle Huillet, Béla Tarr, Tsai Ming-liang, Apichatpong Weerasethakul. These are very different film-makers with very different artistic intentions.

Yet they all use slow cinema techniques. What unites them is time.

THE VIEWER JOINS THE MOVIE

"How does time make itself felt in a shot?" Tarkovsky wrote. "It becomes tangible when you realize, quite consciously, that what you see in the frame is not limited to its visual depiction but a pointer to something stretching beyond the frame into infinity."[21] The viewer makes time felt in a shot. The viewer is operative; the viewer acts upon the image.

These techniques manipulate the viewer's perception of time. Motion pictures have two essential qualities: pictures and motion. Photographed reality through time. Empathy and action. A photograph creates empathy (or identification, if "empathy" is too strong a word)—that sandwich looks delicious, or the sea creature is frightening, for example. A moving photograph creates empathy over time. Two intercut moving photographs create narrative (the definition I proposed earlier).

So this was what films were really good at: action and empathy. The advances in early film-making were designed to emphasize one or the other. Hollywood specialized in action (the chase), the Soviets in empathy (montage). These were the innovations of early cinema. This was what movies did best.

Slow cinema works against the grain of cinema itself. It turns its back on what movies do best. It replaces action with stillness, empathy with distance. The techniques of slow cinema are all, to varying degrees, distancing devices. They push the viewer away from the "experience," that is, from immediate emotional involvement. This is different from modernistic distancing devices in the other arts to the same degree cinema is different from earlier art forms.

Expectations are turned in on themselves. There is no music to guide emotions, no close-ups to indicate importance, no acting to affect feelings, no fast motion to distract the eye.

Slow cinema is passive aggression par excellence. The slow cinema director says, "I know what you want; I know what you expect; but I'm going to do the opposite." Why? "Because I'm after something else and will use your expectations to get it." Roles are reversed. The film-maker, instead of creating a film world in which the viewer needs only to surrender, creates a world which the spectator must contemplate—or reject out of hand.

In her review of Alain Cavalier's *Thérèse* (1986), Pauline Kael complained: "Watching *Thérèse* is like looking at a book of photographs of respectfully staged tableaux and not being allowed to flip the pages at your own speed. You have to sit there while Cavalier turns them for

you, evenly, monotonously, allowing their full morbid beauty to sink it. You're trapped inside his glass bubble."[22] *Exactly.*

But isn't this manipulation of another sort? Isn't passive aggression another form of aggression? What is the difference between manipulating film time to create suspense and manipulating time to create boredom?

A lot. Take, for example, the difference between a *smash cut* and a *delayed cut.* Both are manipulations. The smash cut jumps ahead of the viewer's expectations, delivering an action before it is expected. A western saloon: a cowboy's hand hovers over his pistol and—suddenly—a shot has been fired and his opponent lies dead. That's a smash cut.

The same saloon. The cowboy holsters his gun. The cowboy exits—but the camera doesn't cut. It waits at the static empty saloon door for two, three, four, five beats before the scene changes. Time is arrested. A manipulation just as much as the smash cut. But with a diametrically different effect.

The smash cut depreciates the viewer's participation; the delayed cut demands it. After the smash cut, the viewer is propelled unthinking through the ongoing narrative. After the delayed cut, the viewer is frozen outside the narrative. The empty saloon door. Five beats of dead time. *Temps mort.* And during this dead time the spectator is left alone to think or reflect.

In that reflection lives the concept of slow cinema.

Another example serves to demonstrate the intricacies of slow time. Early in Abbas Kiarostami's *Close-Up* (1990), Kiarostami pans with an aerosol can accidentally kicked by one of the characters. The frame holds on the can as it tumbles down the sloping pavement. The drama stops to watch this. Then, just as the can comes to a stop and is about to exit frame, he cuts back to the story he was telling. This is quasi slow cinema. Kiarostami creates a contemplative pace by focusing on an irrelevant action. But he wants to distance the viewer only a little. If he had wanted to really slow time, he would have held on the empty frame after the aerosol can exited. Kiarostami's end game is humanistic, not spiritual, so, having made his point about the need to process information in an unhurried manner, he returns to more conventional narrative.

A final example. Imagine a frozen frame: A bucolic countryside. Fields, two dirt roads. A wooden barn on the right, a flock of goats on the left. Fluffy clouds above. A Béla Tarr frame. We wait; then a man enters from upper frame right and begins to cross the landscape. Slowly. He heads toward lower frame left. The viewer, familiar with the Tarr aesthetic,

The wayward canister. From *Close-Up*.

knows there will be no cut until the man exits lower frame left, however long it takes, three minutes, four, five. So what does the spectator do? Well, look at those clouds—the sun has moved, the shadows have changed. What's that sound? Is a car coming? If so, on which road? The sound passes—no car, but now the goats have moved. Some have left the frame. Will they come back? Oh, look, the sun has reappeared—new cloud patterns. Some goats have returned. Is that a plane overhead? And still the man is only halfway across the screen. (This is an exaggerated example of the opening shot of Bruno Dumont's *Humanity* [1999], which watches a distant character cross the horizon in the upper quadrant of the screen for a minute and twenty seconds.)

What is happening here? A new movie is being created. A simultaneous movie. The spectator's movie. Bazin scholars describe this as "the democracy of the eye"—given opportunity, the eye will explore. The film-maker has forced the viewer to enjoin the narrative process, creating his or her own narrative. The two films overlap: the director's tableau and the spectator's meditations on that tableau.

Humanity, opening shot.

BOREDOM AS AN AESTHETIC TOOL

Deny the viewers what they seek. Deny, deny, deny. Why would a viewer put up with such abuse? Such boredom?

Well, most viewers don't. Most slow films are in fact "boring" (a subjective judgment, but there it is), and the lovers of slow cinema are relatively small in number.

Some slow films have the opposite effect. They hook the viewer. They calculatingly use boredom as an aesthetic tool. Boring morphs into mesmerizing. These are the truly important films.

Why do we take it? The boredom. The distance. First, because effective slow cinema film-makers are masters of anticipation. Employing striking visuals and auditory tricks and bits of activity, the slow film director keeps his viewer on the hook, thinking there is a reward, a "payoff" just around the corner. It's adroit blackmail. If I leave, I'll miss what I've been waiting for. Even the seasoned viewer of slow cinema anticipates *something*. Some moment. Some unexpectation. The wait will be worth it.

Second, because something *is* happening. Cinema lets us look around. Good slow cinema gives us something to see when we do.

The third reason has to do with the act of theatergoing. Going to a film is like going to a church. A commitment is made. "I've come here of my own will and I accept the rules." One doesn't leave a church service after half an hour because it's boring. Slow films prey upon this pact between the viewer and the viewed.

Fourth is what Haladyn called the "will to boredom."[23] This results in the "passionate *yes*"—the Nietzschean yes—"that endures while standing before the meaninglessness of a subjective world in the hopes of seeing more . . . of creating meaning where none exists."

Slow cinema's not for all viewers. It alienates. It distances. A brief tour through comments on various film blogs demonstrates the anger slow cinema can generate. (A polite example from the blogger "The Swede": "There is simply no functional reason and no intellectual justification to hold on a shot 10 times longer than the action it's depicting. It's amateurish."[24]). Slow directors, in fact, are known to respond to the limited acceptance they receive by creating even longer, slower films. Tarr's *Sátántangó* (1994) runs 7 hours 12 minutes; Diaz's *Evolution of a Filipino Family* (2004) clocks in at 10 hours 47 minutes, and the year 2020 promises to bring Anders Weberg's *Ambience* at 720 hours (30 days)—the 7-hour trailer was released in 2016.

But when it works, it works. "No good movie is too long and no bad movie is short enough," wrote Roger Ebert.[25]

WHERE DOES TRANSCENDENTAL STYLE FIT IN?

Transcendental style is not slow cinema. It's one of several precursors to slow cinema. Bazin's neorealism was another. As were Antonioni's soulful meanderings. Transcendental style evolved as "time-image." Filmmakers in different places and different traditions understood they could slow movies down to create a new reality, to explore memory, to beget contemplation, and in some rare cases simulate transcendence.

Transcendental style as I described it forty-five years ago still exists, although it's as rare now as it was then. The mechanics of transcendental style—the everyday, disparity, decisive action, stasis—can be seen in films like Alain Cavalier's *Thérèse,* Alexander Sokurov's *Mother and Son* (1997), Carlos Reygadas's *Silent Light* (2007), Bruno Dumont's *Hadewijch* (2009), Jessica Hausner's *Lourdes* (2009), Eugène Green's *La Sapienza* (2014), and Pawel Pawlikowski's *Ida.*

Dietrich Brüggemann's *Stations of the Cross* (2015) is a striking recent example. Brüggemann's film consists of fourteen planimetric tableaus, one for each station of the cross. The frame for each is static. As in *Ida,* there is no camera movement until the very end. *Ida* ends with an eye-level tracking shot. *Stations of the Cross* ends with a crane up to God's POV. Pawlikowski concludes with non-diegetic music à la Bresson; Brüggemann

concludes without music. I asked Brüggemann why he didn't do the "Bresson thing" and hit a music cue during the transgressive final crane shot. He replied, "As we were addressing music as such in the story, I felt it was wiser not to use it. If the priest had talked about camera movements, we'd probably refrained from doing those [camera movements] we did."

All of these examples involve films with religious characters or themes. This brings up the question of whether transcendental style is tied to spiritual themes. My answer: In theory, no. In practice, more often than not.

To test this point, let's theoretically set two silent films made six years apart side by side: Andy Warhol's *Blow Job* (1964) and Larry Gottheim's *Fog Line* (1970). Both are static shots lasting ten minutes. The first is the face of a young man receiving oral sex. The second is an obscured landscape as the fog slowly clears. Which image is more transcendent? Art history, practice, and good taste says the latter. But then transcendence is in the eye of the beholder.

Transcendental style directors are deceptively difficult to emulate. *Une Simple Histoire* made in 1959 by Marcel Hanoun is a direct imitation of Bresson's style, yet it is "off," not quite right—too much of this technique, too little of that. Hou Hsiao-hsien's "homage to Ozu," *Café Lumière* (2003), seems a bloodless exercise; on the other hand, Hirokazu Kore-eda's *Still Walking* (2008) finds new life in the Ozu formula. U.S.-born French film-maker Eugène Green is the most successful heir to Bresson's style. *La Sapienza* (2014) uses Bresson's techniques—planimetric staging, flat line readings, offset cuts, bursts of unlikely music—to powerful secular effect. Added to this list must be *Silent Light,* Reygadas's luminescent remake of Dreyer's *Ordet* (1955).

There are also faux uses of transcendental style: films that employ abundant means throughout and then conclude with a decisive action and stasis. The most notable example is Lars von Trier's *Breaking the Waves* (1996), which after two and a half hours of action cuts, jittery camerawork, and tempestuous drama concludes with a static "holy image." In the interest of full disclosure, I should mention my perhaps problematic decision to attach the ending of *Pickpocket* to *American Gigolo* (1980) and *Light Sleeper* (1992), films which otherwise bore no evidence of transcendental style.

To my mind, Andrei Tarkovsky was not interested in the transcendental style per se. He had religious themes, obsessions, and characters. He was austere. He employed distancing devices. But his intent was different. A transcendental guide or guru or film director self-effacingly seeks to escort the respondent to another level of consciousness, a

The Miracle. From *Ordet* and from *Silent Light*.

Wholly Other world. The transcendental film director is a "spirit guide." Tarkovsky was more interested in passing through the portal himself than he was in escorting his viewer. This seems clear in *Nostalghia*. At the end of the film, Dominic, a deranged mystic, immolates himself. In response, Andrei, the film's protagonist and Tarkovsky's surrogate, fulfills a promise to Dominic to carry a lit candle across the waters of a mineral pool. The pool is empty but Andrei struggles against

Two endings. Bresson vs. Tarkovsky. From *Nostalghia.*

wind and failing health to complete his task—back and forth, back and forth. Andrei places the flickering candle on a stone ledge and dies off camera. This is stasis, the end point of transcendental style. It's a Bressonian ending. It's the last shot of *Diary of a Country Priest* (1951); it's the last shot of *Trial of Joan of Arc* (1962).

But Tarkovsky doesn't end *Nostalghia* there. It concludes with a black-and-white image of Andrei resting beside his dog outside his

ancestral home before a reflecting pool, poetic images from Tarkovsky's repertoire. The camera pulls back to reveal that Andrei and dog and house are all on a grassy field inside a ruined cathedral. Snow falls, folk music plays. The intent is not to namelessly escort the viewer. This is the artist's self-apotheosis. This is not about the Wholly Other. It's about Andrei Tarkovsky.

THREE DIRECTIONS

When cinema broke free from the iron nucleus of narrative, when time became an end rather than a means, when Aristotle's formulations yielded to Deleuze's, it headed one of three directions.

Imagine cinema as an atom, a tight nuclear ball of neutrons and protons bound by the glue ("strong force" in physicist speak) of narrative. Nuclear narrative glue holds the medium in place. But a particle breaks free. And spins off with great energy. Which direction does the errant particle go? One of three anti-narrative directions.

The further the particle breaks free, the farther it flies, the closer it comes to time itself. "I despise stories," Béla Tarr stated. "They mislead people into believing something has happened. In fact, nothing really happens as we flee from one condition to another. All that remains is time. This is probably the only thing that's still genuine—time itself: the years, days, hours, minutes and seconds."[26]

Direction One: The Surveillance Camera

A primary impulse of non-narrative cinema is toward *quotidian,* day-to-day reality. Turn the camera on, let it record. This is what excited Andre Bazin about neorealism. "All the arts are based on the presence of man," he wrote. "Only photography derives an advantage from his absence."[27] Real time equals real cinema. Cinema's ability to record an event over time, its ability to "imprint of the duration of the object,"[28] elevated it above photography. Vittorio De Sica's *Bicycle Thieves* (1948) was "one of the first examples of pure cinema. No more actors, no more story, no more sets, which is to say that in the perfect illusion of reality there is no more cinema."[29] An article in *Esprit* after Bazin's death quoted Bazin as saying: "The year 2000 will salute the advent of a cinema free of the artificialities of montage, renouncing the role of 'art of reality' so that it may climb to its final level on which it will become once and for all 'reality made art.'"[30] Today we call this a surveillance camera.

Although Bazin understood the uniqueness of cinema (its "ontology"), he overstated its importance. A cinematic frame is ipso facto a human intervention. A choice. Even without edits, the long take expresses "presence of man," the presence of the observer.

By 1975 the young maid in De Sica's *Umberto D* had grown up and become Jeanne Dielman, the single mother in Chantal Akerman's *Jeanne Dielman, 23 quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles,* who spends thirty minutes at a stretch on household tasks. In an interview Akerman objected to the "hierarchy of images" that gives a car accident or a kiss greater importance than an image of washing dishes. By 2009 Jeanne Dielman had evolved into the family members of Jiayan Liu's *Oxhide II,* who prepare and eat dumplings over the course of her 132-minute, nine-shot film. The everyday: grinding coffee, preparing meat loaf, making dumplings.

Another manifestation of non-narrative quotidian is the "walking" film. Characters walk around. Matthew Flanagan has traced the roots of this subgenre, beginning with Rossellini's *Viaggio in Italia* (1954) to Antonioni's *L'Avventura* (1960) proceeding to Gus Van Sant's death trilogy—*Gerry* (2002), *Elephant* (2003), and *Last Days* (2005)—and arriving at Tsai Ming-liang's *Walker* (2012), in which a Buddhist monk silently walks around Taipei for a half hour.[31] Avishai Sivan's *The Wanderer* (2010) uses a static camera to observe a young yeshiva student's aimless meanderings in Tel Aviv replete with repeated compositions and offset edits. Laura Marks uses the word "vestibular" to describe this type of film, meaning its sensibility is based on the sense of balance provided by the inner ear—which I think is a clever perspective.[32] A Walking Film, however, is not a road movie, which uses the trope of a travel route to attach narratives like beads on a string. The walking film is an anti-narrative road movie.

Another variant: direct cinema, an "anthropological" cinema developed by Jean Rouch in France and refined by Frederick Wiseman in the United States. In *Chronicle of a Summer* (1960), Rouch chronicled day-to-day events without editorial comment. Chinese director Wang Bing carries this type non-narrative film to extreme lengths with his observational documentaries such as *Crude Oil* (2008), a fourteen-hour film that monitors Inner Mongolian oil field workers as they go about their daily routine.

Realistic non-narrative films have also turned their attention to history, beginning with Roberto Rossellini's historical re-creation *The Rise of Louis XIV* (1966), Jean-Marie Straub's *Chronicle of Anna Magdalena Bach* (1968), and Cavalier's *Thérèse.* Most recently this tradition has

Vestibular cinema. From *Elephant, Walker,* and *The Wanderer.*

been carried forward by Spaniard Alberto Serra in *The Story of My Death* (2013) about Casanova and, in a nod to Rossellini, *The Death of Louis XIV* (2016). Rossellini deserves special mention in any discussion about films that push non-narrative boundaries. He was a pioneer of neorealism (*Rome, Open City* [1946]), meditative realism (*Voyage in Italy* [1954]), and historical realism *(The Rise of Louis XIV)*. Three groundbreaking trends. Rossellini led the way in each.

All realistic non-narrative films vector the same direction. The more pure they become, the less editorial, the more objective they are; the more they resemble the surveillance camera. That is the end point of Bazin's "objective reality." The unending, all-seeing eye of the closed-circuit camera. "Pure cinema."

Direction Two: The Art Gallery

A second direction cinema can go after it escapes the nuclear glue of narrative is toward pure imagery: light and color.

This type of non-narrative film has existed from cinema's inception. It was termed "experimental" and derived from various artistic movements—abstraction, Dadaism, cubism, surrealism, and constructivism. Hans Richter hand-animated shorts; Oskar Fischinger employed abstract patterns; artists such as Germaine Dulac and Jean Cocteau used photographed images as abstractions.

These avant-garde exercises were outside the realm of "the movies." They were "experimental shorts." Not until they grew to feature-film length were experimental films recognized as a branch of theatrical cinema. Maya Deren was instrumental in the post-WWII shift of experimental cinema toward long form. *Meshes in the Afternoon* (1943), replete with dream imagery—mirrors, wind, staircases, rain, knives—held together by, connected by unconscious associations, ran fifteen minutes. It set the stage for longer and more abstract non-narrative films. Deren argued that the "transfiguration of time"—slow motion, reverse motion, stop motion—was the center of the cinematic art, but her concept, P. Adams Sitney pointed out, was unlike Tarkovsky's. "Deren has a magical view of the manipulation of time"; Tarkovsky's film concepts were based on "the exfoliation of time within a shot."[33]

It's not coincidental that Deren came upon the film scene the same time as neorealism and the period Deleuze identifies as the transition from the movement-image to the time-image. Richter completed *Dreams Money Can Buy,* a feature-length surrealist trance film in 1947. The same year

Amos Vogel founded Cinema 16 as a birthing facility for American experimentalism. In 1966 Stan Brakhage released *Dog Star Man* (1963), a sixty-six-minute assemblage of paint on celluloid, fast-cut abstract images, collages, and multiple exposures. Eventually it grew to four hours in length.

The "light and color" movement has several iterations. There is dream (also called oneiric) cinema. There is structural cinema. There is abstract cinema.

Dream cinema, a collage of associative imagery, begins with Jean Epstein's *Fall of the House of Usher* (1928), continues through Maya Deren and Jean Cocteau, to Sergei Parajanov's *Shadows of Our Forgotten Ancestors* (1965) and Sara Driver's *You Are Not I* (1981). Today oneiric cinema is best represented by the late works of Jean-Luc Godard, such as *Goodbye to Language* (2014) . There's a branch of dream cinema that deals with childhood memories, exemplified by Bill Douglas's *My Childhood* (1972), Terence Davies's *The Long Day Closes* (1992), and Terrence Malick's *Tree of Life* (2011).

Structural cinema, which evolved in the 1960s, pursues a predetermined stylistic path—the shape of the film the crucial, the content peripheral. Michael Snow (*Wavelength* [1967]), Hollis Frampton (*Zorns Lemma* [1970]), and Ernie Gehr (*Serene Velocity* [1970]) were structural cineastes par excellence. In the conclusion to *Transcendental Style in Film,* I described them as "stasis artists," a description I would now amend. Stasis artists in fact follow the third non-narrative direction, the mandala.

Abstract cinema, which began as what Walther Ruttman called "painting in time" ("Malerei mit Zeit"), follows a line from Fischinger to Norman McLaren's film scratches to Ken Brown's psychedelic 8mm light shows. Jordan Belson led the movement toward computer abstract films in the 1960s. Abstract computer visualizations are now omnipresent and, in the case of software artist Scott Draves's *Electric Sheep* (2005–200?), collective. Draves's program is "run by thousands of people all over the world," interacting with participant computers to create ever-evolving abstractions.[34]

What all these iterations have in common is their end point. The end point is the art gallery. The end point is light and color. Follow this non-narrative direction to its logical conclusion and you encounter artists like Bill Viola and James Turrell who describe their artistic medium as light itself.

The end point of this non-narrative vector is Tony Conrad's magisterial *Yellow Movie* (1973–infinity). Conrad sought to create a movie that

would never end. To do that, he filled a 1:85 frame with cheap white house paint that would yellow over the decades, thus creating an unending film. Tony Conrad died in 2016, but his *Yellow Movie* is still playing.

Direction Three: The Mandala

A third direction an image electron freed from the narrative nucleus can head is toward meditation. To my knowledge there are no early examples of meditative cinema. The notion that cinema could be used to evoke quietude is a fairly recent one. Static street shots from the silent era may seem meditative today but that certainly was not their original intent.

Film theorists such as Bazin, Jean Mitry, and Deleuze paved the intellectual path for a new cinema: a cinema of inaction. And Bresson may be the prototypical director of inaction. Before Bresson, I can think of no director who proposed inaction as cinematic tool. Bresson made "waiting" a verb. Transcendental style is a mile marker on the journey toward stillness.

There are also iterations of meditative cinema. In the realistic vein, Philip Gröning's *Into Great Silence* (2005) did for Carthusian monks what Wang Bing did for Inner Mongolian coal workers with a very different result. Wang's film is sociological, Gröning's spiritual. Zhang Yang's *Paths of the Soul* (2016) has a similar impact. It follows eleven Buddhist pilgrims as they trek twelve hundred miles over the course of a year, purposefully falling to the ground every few steps, touching their foreheads to the earth.

There are also imagistic voyages such as those by Godfrey Reggio (*Visitors* [2013]) and Ron Fricke (*Samsara* [2011]). There are seasonal traverses like Kim Ki-duk's *Spring, Summer, Fall, Winter . . . and Spring* (2003) and Michelangelo Frammartino's *Le Quattro Volte* (2010).

Growing quieter, there is what Michael Walsh called "durational cinema," films that observe to the point of trance. Warhol pioneered this subgenre with academic exercises like his eight-hour observation of the Empire State Building, *Empire* (1964). Larry Gottheim's aforementioned *Fog Line,* ten minutes long, demonstrates how magical waiting can be. James Benning's *Twenty Cigarettes* (2011)—106 minutes of close-ups of people smoking—is the current exemplar of this tradition.

I would place Abbas Kiarostami's *Five* (2003) in this category as well. Also titled *Five Dedicated to Ozu,* the film contains five static, dialogue-free shots near the ocean. People passing by, driftwood afloat, ducks

passing by. The fifth shot is a black screen accompanied by the sound of frogs. Moving clouds reveal the reflection of the moon on black water. Twenty-seven minutes later the screen begins to lighten. A rooster crows. Kiarostami's career, like that of Rossellini, traces an arc through the history of observational cinema. He began in the 1970s making neorealist documentary shorts for the Institute for Intellectual Development of Children and Young Adults. He transitioned to feature-length depictions of the lives of common people (a schoolboy, a tax collector). His work assumed soul-searching dimensions in *Taste of Cherry* (1997) and found an end point with moonlight reflected on water in *24 Frames* (2017).

Does durational cinema strive for the surveillance camera or the mandala? Is it an unremittingly open eye or the source of enlightenment? It depends on the observer. One viewer watching the fog drift from the mountains might find it an exercise in contemplative boredom; another might experience it as transcendental meditation.

All meditative cinema shares an end point. It is silence. It is the candle, the rock garden, the flower arrangement. It is the mandala. One can meditate upon a mandala for hours on end. There's nothing more a movie can offer.

A FINAL NOTE

In 2011, film director Martha Fiennes created a first-of-its-kind installation, titled *Nativity,* which combined all three tendencies: the surveillance camera, the art gallery, and the mandala. Using SLOimage software, Fiennes filmed a nativity scene based on Renaissance paintings. The cast of characters (the Holy Family, shepherds, Magi) are entered into a multilayered computer program that self-generates slow-motion movement both randomly and perpetually. There is no beginning, middle, or end, just a tableau that transforms itself continually like a sophisticated visual version of iTunes shuffle. With 500,000 permutations it is unlikely that this moving painting, this motion picture, will ever end or repeat itself.

The effect is mesmeric. An unending movie.

A DIAGRAM

So much for rethinking. I have a deeper understanding of what interested me forty-five years ago, although the heart of transcendental style remains a mystery.

THE SURVEILLANCE CAM

Wang Bing

Ben Rivers

Zhengfan Yang   Michelangelo Frammartino

Alberto Serra

Lav Diaz   Bela Tarr

Tsai Ming-liang

Pedro Costa

Straub-Huillet   THE TARKOVSKY RING

Valerie Massadian

Gus Van Sant

Chantal Akerman

Theo Angelopoulos   Hou Hsaio-hsien

Abbas Kiarostami   Alain Cavalier

New Romanian   Hirokazu Kore-eda
Cinema

Italian Neorealism   Avishai Sivan

Pier Paulo Pasolini

Andy Warhol   Kelly Reichardt   (N) Roberto Rossellini   Andy Warhol

Luis Buñuel   Yasujiro Ozu   Jessica Hausner

Dietrich Brüggemann   Carl Dreyer

Kenji Mizoguchi

Michelangelo Antonioni

Lisandro Alonso   Nuri Bilge Ceylan

David Lynch   Robert Bresson

Jim Jarmusch

Sara Driver   Bruno Dumont   Sharunas Bartas

Eugene Green

Terrence Malick

Sergei Parajanov

Alexander Sokurov

Maya Deren   Andrei Tarkovsky

Jia Zhangke

Michael Snow   Apichatpong
Roy Anderson   Weerasethakul

THE ART GALLERY   Godfrey Reggio   THE MANDALA

Stan Brakhage   Mark John Ostrowski   James Benning

Nathaniel Dorsky   Ben Stamper

Tony Conrad

In order to better understand the ground field of non-narrative cin-
ema, I've created a diagram. The narrative nucleus ("N") lies at the
center. Errant electrons run one of three directions: the surveillance
camera, the art gallery, the mandala. These electrons pass through the
"Tarkovsky Ring" separating theatrical cinema from film festival and

art museum cinema, on their journey to pure concept. The placement of various film-makers in the diagram is subjective and to some degree arbitrary. Directors are represented by the films discussed rather than by their body of work. Not every slow director is included. Transcendental style occupies a bit of space just inside the ring.

And somewhere in the expanses, each artist finds a place.

Notes

RETHINKING TRANSCENDENTAL STYLE

1. Susan Sontag, "Spiritual Style in the Films of Robert Bresson," in *Against Interpretation* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1966), 177–95; and Susan Sontag, "Aesthetics of Silence," in *Styles of Radical Will* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1967), 3–34.

2. Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema I: The Movement-Image,* trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam (London: Athlone, 1986); and Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema II: The Time-Image,* trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta (London: Athlone, 1989).

3. Deleuze, *Cinema II,* 17.

4. Ibid., 2; and André Bazin, *What Is Cinema?,* vol. 2, ed. and trans. Hugh Gray (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 81.

5. Semir Zeki, interview by Ard Louis and David Malone, "Can You Measure Beauty?," 18:41, in *Why Are We Here?,* n.d., https://www.whyarewehere.tv/people/semir-zeki/.

6. Joseph G. Kickasola, "Schrader's Transcendental Style and the Challenge of Tarkovsky" (paper, Society for Media Studies Conference, Atlanta, GA, April 1, 2016).

7. Fredric Jameson, *The Geopolitical Aesthetic: Cinema and Space in the World System* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press and London: British Film Institute, 1992), 93.

8. Bazin, *What Is Cinema?,* vol. 2, 64.

9. André Bazin, *What Is Cinema?,* vol. 1, ed. and trans. Hugh Gray (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967), 14.

10. Ibid., 26.

11. Julian Jason Haladyn, *Boredom and Art: Passions of the Will to Boredom* (Alresford, Hants, UK: Zero Books, an imprint of John Hunt Publishing, 2015).

12. Andrei Tarkovsky, "Imprinted Time," chap. 3, in *Sculpting in Time* (London: Bodley Head, 1986), 67; and Tarkovsky, "The Film Image," chap. 5, in *Sculpting in Time,* 120.

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