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Citation

Verstraten, P. W. J. (2021). "Words don't come easy": the transcendental style of Paul Schrader's first reformed. *Image And Narrative : Online Magazine Of The Visual Narrative*, 22(1), 70-81. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/3158637>

Version: Publisher's Version

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Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

“Words Don’t Come Easy”: The Transcendental Style of Paul Schrader’s *First Reformed*

Peter Verstraten

Abstract

Whereas the films by the screenwriter and film director Paul Schrader lack the rigorous formal choices of the transcendental style he ascribed to Yasujiro Ozu and Robert Bresson, no film of his as a director has been closer conceptually to this sort of style than his twentieth feature, *First Reformed* (2017). He made this picture during the same period as his essay “Rethinking Transcendental Style”, written as an introduction to a new edition of his 1972 study *Transcendental Style in Film: Ozu, Bresson, Dreyer*. Here *First Reformed*, which has received more positive accolades than any of Schrader’s other films, is read as a reimagining of Ingmar Bergman’s *Nattvardsgästerna* (*Winter Light*, 1963) and as a work manifesting key influences from two films by Robert Bresson: *Journal d’un curé de campagne* (*Diary of a Country Priest*, 1951) and *Pickpocket* (1959). This article aims to articulate the stylistic influences informing *First Reformed*, paying particular attention to the dissonance between word/text/voice and image. It reflects upon the sparsity of words in Ozu, the monotonous voices in Bresson, the speech acts in Carl Theodor Dreyer’s cinematic oeuvre, and the fruitless verbosity in Bergman’s so-called trilogy of faith.

Keywords: transcendental style in film; Paul Schrader; *First Reformed*; inspired by Bergman and Bresson; dissonance between words and image

Resumé

Alors que les œuvres cinématographiques tournées par le scénariste et réalisateur Paul Schrader ne font pas les mêmes choix formels rigoureux du style transcendantal qu’il attribuait à Yasujiro Ozu et Robert Bresson, aucun film réalisé par lui ne fut plus proche de cette théorie que sa vingtième production, *First Reformed* (*Sur le chemin de la rédemption*, 2017). Il a tourné ce film à l’époque où il écrivait l’essai “Rethinking Transcendental Style” (“Repenser le style transcendantal”), en guise d’introduction à une nouvelle édition de son étude *Transcendental Style in Film: Ozu, Bresson, Dreyer*. *First Reformed*, qui a reçu davantage de réactions louangeuses qu’aucune autre œuvre tout au long de sa carrière, est considéré comme une manière de réimaginer *Nattvardsgästerna* (*Les communiantes*, 1963) d’Ingmar Bergman. D’autre part ce film emprunte des scènes clé à deux films de Bresson *Journal d’un curé de campagne* (1951) et *Pickpocket* (1959). Le présent article vise à formuler les influences stylistiques de *First Reformed*, en prêtant une attention particulière à la dissonance entre parole / texte / voix et les images. Il réfléchit notamment à la rareté des mots chez Ozu, les voix monotones chez Bresson, la langue parlée dans le cinéma de Carl Theodor Dreyer et la verbosité infructueuse dans ce qu’on appelle la trilogie de la foi de Bergman.

Mots-clés: style transcendantal au cinéma ; Paul Schrader; *First Reformed*; influences de Bergman et Bresson; dissonance entre les mots et les images.

In his seminal study *Transcendental Style in Film: Ozu, Bresson, Dreyer*, originally published in 1972, Paul Schrader, then a graduate student at UCLA film school, celebrated the austere work of the Japanese filmmaker Yasujiro Ozu and the French director Robert Bresson. The family-office cycle of Ozu's last thirteen films – from *Banshun* (*Late Spring*, 1949) to *Sanma no aji* (*An Autumn Afternoon*, 1962) – and the prison cycle of Bresson's middle-period films are “prescriptive” of what Schrader dubbed the “transcendental style”, a mode that “seeks to maximize the mystery of existence” in three distinct stages (42). First, the films of these directors represent the “dull, banal commonplaces of everyday life” in a deliberately anti-dramatic style (67). The camera is usually static: pans, dollies and zooms are nearly completely absent. Most of the shots are at the chest level of a standing person (Bresson) or from the seated tatami perspective (Ozu); many shots are frontally staged. Both filmmakers prefer to use regular, unostentatious cuts and avoid dissolves. Moreover, the characters behave in a “non-expressive”, even automaton-like manner. In a Bresson film, they simply enter the frame, perform an action, and exit (95).

Schrader had learned from Susan Sontag's essay on Bresson that to discipline the emotions – as Bresson did in *Journal d'un curé de campagne* (*Diary of a Country Priest*, 1951), *Un condamné à mort s'est échappé* (*A Man Escaped*, 1956), *Pickpocket* (1959), and *Procès de Jeanne d'Arc* (*The Trial of Joan of Arc*, 1962) – is simultaneously to arouse them. Conventional films often use violins on the soundtrack to underscore a dramatic scene. A common fallacy holds that such a device exhausts the emotions. But according to Sontag, and this point is supported by Schrader, a detached style which works to downplay the emotions of characters is an appropriate way to intensify them for the viewer (Sontag 180).

The second stage is marked by “disparity”, which Ozu and Bresson achieve in almost opposite ways. Ozu, steeped in an Eastern/Zen culture which seeks “nature within man” (Schrader 82), nonetheless relentlessly focuses on a continuous present – or on an “eternal now” (59) – in his film, which illustrates that unity has vanished. In principle, life itself is simple but, as is evident in Ozu's films, it has been complicated due to modern-day tensions between home and office, parent and child, the old and the new Japan (Schrader 48). Such disparity is then followed by the third step, “stasis”. In Ozu's case, the conflict is resolved neither through a conversion nor a change of heart but simply because the polarized parties each realize that they had (temporarily) forgotten that they both “share a deep sense of *mono no aware*” (65). According to this notion, the characters, old and young alike, accept with “sympathetic sadness” that the (nature of) beauty cannot last and that the circle of life inevitably runs its course. In *Banshun*, a film in which key narrative moments are elided, a 27-year-old woman lives comfortably at home with her aging, widowed father. She is reluctant to find a husband because she will then have to leave him, but they both know that their close attachment must be exchanged for a new, married life for her. Their final night spent under the same roof is famously punctuated by a ten-second shot of a vase, a still-life view which is to be interpreted as their mutual quiescent acceptance of the new phase they are entering.

In contrast to the Eastern preoccupation with reconciling nature and man, Western culture, according to Schrader, aims to overcome nature. But Bresson's characters understand that they will fail in this endeavour, either because of bodily frailty and/or an environment that proves to be too hostile to them. Such overarching

coldness is conveyed by “an overemphasis of the everyday”, when ordinary actions happen twice or three times (98–99). In *Pickpocket*, the protagonist Michel writes in his diary, then reads aloud what he has written (“I sat in the lobby of one of the great banks of Paris”). Later we actually see him sitting in this particular lobby. These sorts of repetitions serve to gradually alienate Michel from the community. The religiously obsessed country priest in *Journal d’un curé de campagne* thinks that his far less pious parishioners are against him: his overwhelming passion separates him from them (102). It is not so much the community rejecting him as it is the priest abandoning *them*. The furtive Michel in *Pickpocket* lacks a clear motive to steal but, presuming that he is above the law, he cannot resist the urge to pickpocket, an act consisting of ritual gestures. Bresson’s protagonists, Schrader argues, “respond to a special call which has no natural place in their environment” (103). Such disparities culminate in another instance of “stasis”, as illustrated, among other examples, by the ending of *Journal d’un curé de campagne*, in which we see, for more than one full minute, the shadow of a black cross on a white wall. Estranged from his surroundings, the deathly ill priest, this self-proclaimed “prisoner of the Lord”, finds peace in escaping that other prison, his body. In a voiceover accompanying the shot of the shadow, a vicar tells us that the priest’s last words were “All is grace”. In Schrader’s analysis, such closure reduces the film to stasis, the moment when the image stops and the dispassionate tone enables the viewer to take over.

There are instances when Ozu and Bresson articulate the stage of disparity differently, but Schrader was intrigued to find that these distinctive expressions were “unified in stasis” (83) thanks to their stylistic similarities, such as their “use of off-screen space, narrative ellipses and low-key acting” (Hodsdon). It would be expected that when Schrader started writing screenplays – he produced no less than four scripts for Martin Scorsese pictures¹ – and turned to directing movies, these efforts would very much be informed by his admiration for Ozu and Bresson. However, as Ian Murphy explains in *Corporeal Prisons* (2015), his dissertation on the mise-en-scène in three Schrader films, Schrader’s debut feature *Blue Collar* (1978) is firmly rooted in the tradition of “gritty social realism”, whereas his *Hardcore* (1979) is rendered using oblique camera angles and expressionistic lighting schemes (14). His third feature, *American Gigolo* (1980), is much closer to a Bresson film, thanks to its loner protagonist with a detached demeanor who begs comparison with the alienated “man in his room” from *Pickpocket*, but the cinematic image of Schrader’s picture is nonetheless too “lushly composed, designed and stylised”, underscored by a frequently moving camera (Murphy 43). Whereas the characters with their blank stares in Bresson’s minimalist films do not reveal their interiority, *American Gigolo* still relies upon the “expressionistic capacity of colour, décor and lighting” (ibid.). Though the protagonist is enigmatic and emotionally numb, we get a clear glimpse of his narcissistic persona via his fashion choices, his chic apartment, his physical exercise. And as Schrader has himself mentioned, the ending of *American Gigolo* clearly alludes to the stasis evident in *Pickpocket*, but his film does not bear any evidence of transcendental style (22).

Although Schrader’s own films lack the rigorous formal choices of the transcendental style ascribed to Ozu and Bresson, no picture of his as a director has been closer conceptually to this sort of style than his twentieth feature, *First Reformed* (2017), made during the period of his essay “Rethinking Transcendental Style”, composed as an introduction to his 1972 book on that style as it is expressed in Ozu’s and Bresson’s films.² Even as Schrader believed that *First Reformed* would be his sole venture in transcendentalism, the film received more positive accolades than any of his other films – to his surprise, “because I set out to make a cold

¹ *Taxi Driver* (1976); *Raging Bull* (1980); *The Last Temptation of Christ* (1988); *Bringing Out the Dead* (1999).

² Schrader has also recounted how the viewing of Pawel Pawlikowski’s *Ida* (2013) prompted him to make *First Reformed*. After having dinner with the Polish director, he thought to himself: “You know, it’s time. It’s time for you to write one of these movies” (qtd. in Anderson).

film and now I'm getting a hot reaction" (qtd. in Blessing). This article aims to articulate the stylistic influences informing *First Reformed*, paying particular attention to the dissonance between word/text/voice and image.

Speech Acts in Dreyer's *Ordet* and *Vredens dag*

In his "Rethinking" essay Schrader reflects upon the now fashionable term "slow cinema", in which "time becomes the story" because something takes "longer than we have been conditioned to expect" (8–9). Many of its techniques overlap with those of the transcendental style – static frame; repeated compositions; a visual flatness – but, as Schrader emphasizes, they are not the same. A restricted number of (contemporary) films should be categorized as examples of "transcendental style"³ but, in many cases, these is "too much of this technique, too much of that" (22). Andrei Tarkovsky would seem to fulfil the required criteria with his distancing devices and spiritual themes, but he in fact takes a different route. Unlike the transcendental style of Ozu, marked by "pillow shots"⁴ – cutaways to seemingly random everyday objects – Tarkovsky habitually presented "dead time" via extreme long takes: when a car has exited the screen, there is no cut, but we await its return. Tarkovsky's slowness is meant "to create mood" (9) and, additionally, to reveal his own musings as a maker, or, as Schrader remarks in relation to Tarkovsky's *Nostalghia* (1983), the ending is the "artist's self-apotheosis" (25). By contrast, transcendental style is based upon a willingness to eschew one's personality entirely and to "namelessly escort the viewer" (25).

Along with Ozu and Bresson, Schrader had discussed Carl Theodor Dreyer as a third spirit guide in his 1972 book, but he examined the work of the Danish director in order to elaborate on the difficulty of purely applying the everyday-disparity-stasis formula. Despite Dreyer's sparsity of means and his preference for "perpetual disparity" (157), his films are completely devoid of stasis, the key element in Schrader's definition of transcendental style. Dreyer's *Ordet* (*The Word*, 1955) "comes the closest in technique and effect to the work of Ozu and Bresson" (153), but its ending spoils things in this regard. Johannes, the oldest son of three, presents himself as a reincarnation of Christ but his relatives consider him mad. When Inger, the wife of middle son Michael, becomes seriously ill, the erratic Johannes gets on everyone's nerves. After a temporary departure, he returns to find the dead Inger in her coffin. One of Inger's young daughters, who had expressed her belief in Johannes's extraordinariness, takes his hand and requests that he speak "the word". Encouraged, he asks Inger in his monotonous voice to stand up, and to the astonishment of the small assembled group his sister-in-law resurrects. Had *Ordet* continued to focus on Johannes's divinity and martyrdom after the miracle, Dreyer's film as a whole might have been forged in the true spirit of the transcendental style, Schrader argues, but instead the emphasis shifts to Inger's corporeality. Johannes's "contented smile on his face" offers a clear hint that he is happy to have been adopted back into the family. The film's ending is used "to reaffirm humanity; it does not disembodify the passion; it reembodies it" (Schrader 156). The transcendental style displayed through *Ordet*'s "use of everyday and disparity" gives way to the mechanisms of a "psychological drama, a Kammerspiel" (ibid.).

The key moment in Dreyer's film is arguably the scene when Johannes speaks his words (or Word), the source of the film's title. His call to Inger to rise is a textbook example of a performative speech act: the

³ Schrader mentions, among other films, *Mat i syn* (*Mother and Son*, Aleksandr Sokurov, 1997), *Stellet Licht* (*Silent Light*, Carlos Reygadas, 2007), *Hadewijch* (Bruno Dumont, 2009), *Lourdes* (Jessica Hausner, 2009), *Ida* (Pawel Pawlikowski, 2013), *Kreuzweg* (*Stations of the Cross*, Dietrich Brüggemann, 2014), *La Sapienza* (*Sapience*, Eugène Green, 2014) (21).

⁴ "Pillow shots" is a term coined by Noel Burch.

content of the utterance changes the social reality as if by magic. This particular speech act's aftereffect spoils the film's stylistic consistency. It raises the questions as to what extent verbal expressions problematize the transcendental style and how (spoken) language affects its mechanisms.

Considering that "Zen dislikes any appeal to words" (Schrader 46), it is little wonder that conversations are reduced to a minimum in Ozu's films. Zen art "brings out the quality of the void" (57). A small drawing made in the corner of a sheet of paper is transformative: the emptiness of the remainder now becomes significant. Similarly, a selective use of sounds and of dialogue gives meaning to silence. It is a token of the kind-hearted nature of characters in Ozu's cinema that they neither talk about trivial issues nor discuss matters of the past.

Unlike Ozu, Bresson uses spoken language abundantly and to the benefit of his "doubling" technique. We see a specific action, then we hear the character describe it in voiceover, or vice versa: first the internal narration, then the visualization. In *Pickpocket*, Bresson even "triples" this procedure: the viewer sees the protagonist write in his diary (printed word), then reads the entry in voiceover (spoken word), and finally the action is shown. As already explained, this "doubling" or "tripling" device is used in the service of disparity.

According to Schrader, Dreyer's cinema has the potential to belong to the transcendental style, predominantly because the director's mise-en-scène, in which "large chunks of space" are pitted against each other (163) "present man's existential disparity in an agonized, unflinching manner" (164). The conversations and debates in Dreyer's last three films – *Vredens dag* (*Day of Wrath*, 1943), *Ordet*, and *Gertrud* (1964) – do not diminish this potential. Take the first half of *Vredens dag*, in which the old and misshapen Herlofs Marte is accused of witchcraft. She denies the indictment vehemently but to no avail. The inquisitors extract a confession through torture and thus she is condemned to burn at the stake. The point is that this episode has no "dramatic conflict" and proceeds no matter what the "spectator's feelings" might be,⁵ for the fate of Herlofs Marte, sealed by her forced and therefore insincere speech act, had been predetermined from the start.

If the first half of *Vredens dag* addresses the question "Are there such things as witches?", the second half turns the film into a psychological drama centred on the dilemma of Anne, the young wife of Absalon. Informed by Herlofs Marte that her mother was a witch, Anne starts to think that she possesses the ability to invoke the Evil One herself. After she has expressed her wish that Absalon die, the old man suffers a fatal heart attack. Anne feels guilty to have had this desire: she needed only speak the formula and her wish was realized. Whereas the film's first, transcendental part consisted of false and insincere phrases, the second half, when Anne's "personality is 'at stake'" (152), is structured around her sincere speech act.

Schrader regards Bresson and Dreyer to be equally accomplished, viewed strictly as filmmakers, but as transcendental artists, he believes Bresson to surpass Dreyer. The latter excels in practicing the "art of disparity", which is why he is included in Schrader's book, but Dreyer failed to achieve stasis (167). This "failure" is due to the sort of turning point that occurs in films such as *Vredens dag* and *Ordet*. As soon as a verbal utterance makes a particular wish come true, the transcendental disparity gives way to an all-too-"human" drama.

⁵ Schrader (149) quotes these terms from an article by Robert Warshow.

In *Transcendental Style in Film* Schrader provides no clear-cut answer to his question why he preferred Ozu over Mizoguchi, Bresson over Resnais, Dreyer over Bergman (169), but the reasons for such preferences are not difficult to guess. Though Schrader described Bergman, and *Såsom i en spegel* (*Through a Glass Darkly*, 1961) in particular, as his “point of entry” into cinema (2), preceding his discovery of Bresson, Bergman's cinema is antithetical to the transcendental style. Unlike the deadpan attitudes of Bresson's protagonists, drained of all emotion, a Bergman film is too expressionistic: their characters endure mental breakdowns and explicitly reflect upon existential issues. The reason why Schrader became fascinated with Bergman regardless, I presume, resides in the latter's particular handling of language.

Every account of Schrader mentions his devout Calvinist upbringing, which held an audiovisual medium such as cinema to be forbidden fruit. As is mentioned in Kevin Jackson's *Schrader on Schrader*, the belief reigned in his family that “ideas were the province of language, and that if you had something to say you used words to say it” (26). Calvinists have always been encouraged to read scripture, in light of John Calvin's claim that the New Testament excels in clarity of expression, enabling an “immediate experience of truth” for believers (McGrath, 159). Calvinists prefer word to image because they presume that, unlike pictures, texts can be crystal clear; the words in the Bible can be boiled down to a single, unambiguous message. Calvinists suffer from iconophobia, believing that images, in contrast to the presumed unequivocality of texts, are essentially indeterminate. As Christopher Collins has asserted, images can unleash “an uncontrollable imagination” (1) because they open up a space for ambiguity. Images, always representing more than meets the eye, invite the viewer to add meaning to them – an invitation lying at the root of the Calvinist distrust of images.

The cinema of Bergman is verbose and seems reliant on text. In *Smultronstället* (*Wild Strawberries*, 1957), the 78-year-old professor Isak Borg, during the long car trip en route to accept an honorary degree for his contributions to medicine, has conversations with his daughter-in-law, three young hitchhikers, and a bickering married couple, and he pays his elderly mother a visit. These talks prompt Isak to reflect upon certain unfortunate moments in his life that have been marked by a lack of empathy – an apparently hereditary deficiency, for (as dawns upon him during the encounter with his grumpy mother) it runs in the family. While on the road the professor also has a dream about a medical examination, in which, to his astonishment, linguistic terms written on a blackboard are all gibberish to him. This dream scene foreshadows the theme of language's inadequacy as a communication tool, which can be found in many of Bergman's pictures. The theatre actress in *Persona* (1966) falls mute at the beginning of the film and will only utter a single “no” after she has been put under pressure to speak. Her taciturnity is amply compensated by her nurse, Alma, who chatters excessively; but since Alma seems to suffer from delusions, we lack any grounds for deciding which of her statements and stories are true. If *Såsom i en spegel* impressed Schrader, it probably made its mark because the referential function of language had there become problematic, a view at odds with the Calvinist belief that language can communicate in a straightforward fashion. In a key scene from Bergman's film, the first of his so-called trilogy of faith, Karin describes her horrific vision of God entering the room in the form of a giant spider. We do not see her visualization of the scene and only hear her describe it. Her vivid account of this impossible appearance functions as an affirmation that her schizophrenia has returned.

In the two subsequent films in the trilogy, *Nattvardsgästerna* (*Winter Light*, 1963) and *Tystnaden* (*The Silence*, 1963), language functions as a smokescreen, anything but a vehicle of clear-cut messages, as Calvinists would have it. In *Tystnaden*, two sisters stay in a foreign hotel, prevented from further travel

because of Ester's deteriorating health. Since Ester is a translator by profession, it is significant that she – and not Anna, who prioritizes body language over words – is ill. Anna is happy that she and her local lover cannot understand each other's languages and thus she cannot talk with him, since the conversations they might have might bore her tremendously. It suffices for her that they only make love. The country's inhabitants speak an unfamiliar language, and even Ester, her experience as a translator notwithstanding, can understand no more than a minimum of terms. Moreover, the film's title, *The Silence*, refers to the fact that people anxiously await a sign from God: how to keep one's faith in times of despair when His existence has not even a snippet of proof? This question of faith is paramount in the second instalment of the trilogy, the film that directly inspired Schrader to make *First Reformed*.

Priests in Crisis

Nattvardsgästerna opens and closes with services led by the pastor Tomas Ericsson in two different churches, the first in the presence of very few people and the second with yet even fewer in attendance. Bergman's film scrutinizes four characters undergoing serious crises. Jonas Persson is morose because he has an unsubstantiated fear that another atomic bomb, made in China this time, will be deployed. During a conversation with protagonist Tomas, the latter speaks comforting words that are belied by a close-up of the pastor's hand, the first sign that his utterances are insincere. Tomas tells Jonas that he used to think God spoke to him in private, but once he realized the selfishness of this assumption, he became a sceptic. He can only admit that humankind's cruelty is difficult to reconcile with the idea of a merciful God. Lacking proof of God's existence, the pastor has started to doubt his faith. Soon thereafter, on hearing that Jonas killed himself immediately following their encounter, Tomas's ongoing crisis is further aggravated by a sense of guilt.

In addition to the awkward conversation that failed to lessen Jonas's despair and the mental anguish due to God's silence, there is a third linguistic "problem". Märta Lundberg, a substitute schoolteacher, has written Tomas a lengthy letter, and after he reads the first two lines aloud, Märta herself takes over in frontally staged shots.⁶ It is clear from the account that Märta has feelings for Tomas, but she knows they are not requited. She reminds him that he was unable to pray for her, repulsed as he was by the rash on her hands and body. Märta accompanies him after Jonas's suicide, but Tomas can only humiliate her: he detests the gossip about a possible relationship between them, since Märta is no match for Tomas's late wife and, moreover, he hates her constant chatter. The episodes with Märta are rooted in a threefold failure of words: her illness prevents him from saying his prayers; the tittle-tattles in the community have a negative impact on him; and her incessant attempts to please him are counterproductive.

What is more, the handicapped sexton Algot Frövik tells Tomas that Jesus's physical suffering on the cross was not as bad as his awareness that his messages had fallen on deaf ears. Jesus spent three years with his disciples but they misunderstood his significance: one of them disowns him, another betrays him, and, when he asks in total solitude, "God, my God ... why hast thou forsaken me?" there is no reply. Despite the many dialogues in *Nattvardsgästerna*, the conversations cannot solve the people's misery. Moreover, Bergman's film registers some serious deficiencies in language, even as Sven Nykvyst's cinematography, by contrast, is crisp and clear. The style of the film, shot in black-and-white with a 4:3 aspect ratio, is relatively austere. There are some occasional pans and zooms to mark visual emphases; lap dissolves are used only during wordless transitions between scenes.

⁶ Märta had preferred writing a letter to engaging in a direct conversation in order to "avoid too much irony".

Schrader's *First Reformed*, though set against the backdrop of ecological issues, can to some extent be termed a reimagining of *Nattvardsgästerna*. Its protagonist, Reverend Ernst Toller, has been installed at First Reformed Church in upstate New York, performing weekly, sparsely attended services, assisting a youth group via spiritual talks, and welcoming tourists. The choir conductor, Esther, plays a role similar to Märta's in *Nattvardsgästerna*. Esther yearns for Ernst's affection, but their brief affair, now over, was insignificant to him. After she has informed the local hospital about the pastor's upcoming gastroscopic exam, he tells her that he is fed up with her "constant hovering"; she is a "constant reminder of his personal inadequacies and failings".

The counterpart to the desperate Jonas from Bergman's film is the radical environmental activist Michael Mensana. At the request of his wife Mary, a Christian, Michael shares with Ernst his worries about an impending grim future due to climate change. Now that Mary is pregnant, Michael is depressed by the prospect of a devastated planet in the foreseeable future and wonders whether it is now unethical to bring a child into this doomed world. To counter Michael's lack of hope, Ernst offers a personal story. Years ago, he had encouraged his son to enlist to fulfil his patriotic duty, only for him to die, six months later, in Iraq in a war that had "no moral justification", as Ernst says. His wife then separated from him, and Ernst felt lost. This trauma, however, taught him that courage is the solution for the problem of despair. During the conversation with Michael, we hear Ernst, in voiceover, comment upon the awkwardness of their exchange: "Every sentence, every question, every response, a mortal struggle". When Ernst receives a text message summoning him to the edge of a forest, he is led to discover the corpse of Michael who, just like Jonas, shot himself in the head.

Ernst's failed attempt at offering counsel will be used against him. Respecting the wishes of the deceased, Ernst functions as a pastor during a "protest" memorial at a toxic waste site. His participation angers Ed Balq, whose charitable contributions are indispensable for First Reformed to survive, though Balq's factory is a notorious polluter. Balq tells Ernst not to criticize others when he himself cannot be a comfort to his parishioners. This rebuke follows upon rhetorical questions raised by Ernst, such as "Will God forgive us for what we did to His creation?" and "Who profits when we soil our own nest?" In an allusion to Tomas's self-critical remark about his egotistical relation to God in Bergman's film, Balq asks Ernst, in a sarcastic tone: "You spoke to Him, personally? He told you His plans for Earth?" The dialogue ends in a deadlock, but it will be obvious that Ernst feels compelled to yield to the demands of the church's financial backer so as not to jeopardize First Reformed's survival.

First Reformed borrows not only from Bergman but also from Bresson's *Journal d'un curé de campagne*. Ernst suffers from stomach cancer, like the country priest in Bresson's film. Even more important is the experiment undertaken by Ernst, a twelve-month journal written "in longhand" so that "every word scratched out, revised, is recorded". For him, such writing is a "form of prayer [...] without abnegation", but he will later remark in voiceover that the "journal brings no peace", for his experiment is "self-pity, no more". And like Bresson's country priest, Ernst has come to experience his environment as increasingly hostile, with one exception: Michael's widow Mary. The role of Jonas's widow Karin, pregnant with her fourth child, was fairly marginal in *Nattvardsgästerna*; she contacted the pastor on behalf of her husband and we only see her again when Tomas brings her news of Jonas's death. Mary's presence, however, is seminal for what Schrader called "decisive action" in his study of the transcendental style.

According to the mechanics of transcendental style, decisive action follows the phase of disparity and is an “unexpected image or act” resulting in stasis, in a state of acquiescence (Schrader 3). Such an unexpected image or act is heralded by a deviation from the aesthetic film style. *First Reformed* is shot in a 4:3 aspect ratio, using static shots, and the colours are predominantly desaturated.⁷ But there are two pans, one to the right and the other to the left, and they both involve Ernst’s visit with Mary. The first pan precedes Mary’s discovery that Michael had kept a suicide vest, detonators, batteries, and tubes of explosive jelly in his garage. The camera also moves when Mary and Ernst make a bicycle trip, scrutinizing the bare branches of the trees above them. Most significant is the scene when Mary proposes that Ernst lie on the floor so that she can – both remaining dressed – cover his body with her body. A magic moment of levitation ensues, and while the camera is moving in a quarter-circle to show their feet, the room changes into a parallel universe.⁸ As the camera tracks forward, they seem to float over mountains, forests, highways. While Ernst and Mary have vanished below the frame, we are given a series of lap-dissolves of shots of industrial waste. Whereas Schrader’s film offers practically no emotional signposting to its viewers, owing to its austere style and the lack of facial expressions, the few shots that break the “rule” of the overall static camerawork prepare us for Ernst’s “decisive action”.⁹

Acceptance of grace

In his chapter on Bresson, Schrader explains the logic of decisive action. Due to the style of restraint, “the viewer’s feelings have been consistently shunned throughout the film (everyday), yet [the viewer] has ‘strange’ undefined feelings (disparity)” (Schrader 107), as the viewer understands that the male protagonist is being confronted with a cold environment. The decisive action “then demands an emotional commitment which the viewer gives instinctively” (ibid.): in the case of Schrader’s film, there is a desire to share in Ernst’s grief and anger. In spite of the minister’s overall blank expression, the viewer understands that Ernst feels guilty because the story of his own mourning process did not prevent Michael from taking his own life. Moreover, he has reason to hold a grudge against the arrogant Ed Balq, who interpreted the memorial service held for Michael as a “political act”, while his superior, feeling anxious about the potential loss of financial support, refuses to defend Ernst’s position. The pans and the subsequent levitation scene emphasize his kinship with Mary: she is a Christian who shares Michael’s beliefs. Ernst apparently decides to make a violent statement as if he were her husband: he has access to Michael’s computer and is in possession of all the explosive materials. Ernst has asked Mary not to attend the reconsecration service of First Reformed and while he prepares for the church’s 250th anniversary ceremony, with Ed Balq slated to be a prominent speaker, he puts on Michael’s suicide vest. It is clear that he takes seriously Michael’s earlier comparison between religious martyrs and radical environmental activists. Both sorts of figures die for a purpose, according to Michael, the former because they refused to renounce their faith and the latter for their attempts to protect the environment. *First Reformed* is about to conclude with a moment of direct and violent action, and (therefore) not with stasis. In Ernst’s choice to set off an explosion and thus not to give himself over to resignation, Schrader’s film will lack the final stage of the transcendental style. But there is a twist.

⁷ The scenes with blood stand out because of their redness: the blood in the snow as a result of Michael’s self-inflicted gunshot; the blood tapped from Ernst’s veins in the hospital; the blood, in the final part, on Ernst’s priestly robe.

⁸ This magic moment is inspired by levitation scenes in Tarkovsky’s *Zerkalo* (*Mirror*, 1975) and *Offret* (*The Sacrifice*, 1986). Schrader adds: “[I]nstead of having them just levitate, like Tarkovsky, I’ll take them on a tour. It’s like the Boschian triptych, *Garden of Earthly Delights*. You start with Eden, you go into the present, and you end up in the underworld” (qtd. in Blessing).

⁹ Schrader told Joe Blessing: “Well, with the transcendental style you always break a rule at the end. Whether it’s music or whatever, like in *Ida*, the last shots are moving, moving, moving when the whole film has been static”.

Once Ernst has prepared himself for his martyrdom, he sees from the window in his room that Mary has arrived to attend the ceremony. He takes a step back, then removes his vest and wraps himself in barbed wire. While Helen has already started to sing the opening hymn, “Leaning on the Everlasting Arms”, in the adjacent church, Mary enters Ernst’s room as blood, caused by the barbed wire penetrating his flesh, seeps through his alb. The two embrace each other in *First Reformed*’s final shot, Helen still singing on the soundtrack. The detonation of a bomb has been postponed, and probably abandoned.

Two formal aspects need to be taken into account as a supplement to this endpoint of narrative closure. First, the camera circles around Ernst and Mary as they kiss, a movement that can be taken to allude to a similar embrace between Scottie and Judy/Madeleine in *Vertigo* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1958). Scottie had left the police force due to his fear of heights. Thereafter, his old friend Gavin Elster asked him to tail his wife because he was concerned about her behaviour. Ultimately, Scottie is unable to prevent her fatal leap from a bell tower because he could not climb the steep stairs to prevent her from jumping. After Madeleine’s suicide, Scottie feels guilty and suffers from acute melancholia. Then he starts to stalk the brunette Judy – and finds out that she had been impersonating the blonde Madeleine. At the point of the embrace in *Vertigo*, he has come to understand that he had played the unwitting role of the key witness to a presumed suicide, which in fact had been a cover-up for a murder. Scottie realizes how both he and Judy have been misused as pawns in the cunning plan that Gavin has concocted. Scottie cannot hold his old friend accountable for his actions, because by the time he discovers that the suicide was a fake, Gavin has already vanished without a trace.

I would entertain the hypothesis that the circling camera pinpoints a parallel between the Scottie-Gavin relationship and the one between Ernst and God. As a practicing Christian, the reverend has always believed that humans do not know the ultimate meaning of life but have to trust that God has a purpose. In his eyes, we must have the courage to accept that we are only pawns in His plans for Earth, but Ernst has started to doubt this belief: how can God remain aloof while we destroy His creation? Ernst had always felt “His holy presence” everywhere but, in the terms of Bergman’s trilogy, he finds it difficult to bear God’s silence ever since his encounter with Michael. Just as Gavin is revealed to be a (largely) absent schemer, in whom Scottie had put great trust, so God has become an absent schemer in Ernst’s eyes. The solution for the priest Tomas in *Nattvardsgästerna* was to continue to fulfil his duty, against his better judgment. In contrast, Ernst was on the brink of committing a violent act, but the proximity of Mary gave him the “courage” to refrain from doing so.

If Mary’s intervention has prevented an explosion, however, violence is nonetheless transposed to the film’s all-too-abrupt ending, the second formal aspect I want to highlight. While the camera is circling around the couple, there is a sudden cut to black and Helen’s loud singing stops mid-sentence: for no less than ten seconds, there is total silence, whereas the screen remains pitch-black before the credits start to roll. The embrace with Mary is then to be taken as the film’s “decisive action”, demanding an emotional commitment from the viewer, whereas the brusque blackness can be regarded as the film’s stasis. This brusqueness signifies Ernst’s resignation that God will remain silent and that he should not be a judge on His behalf over other people’s vile deeds. Due to his worries over worldly matters, such as climate change and the lobbying efforts of big corporate polluters, Ernst finds himself to be in a double bind, but it is suggested that in the end his duty to forgive prevails over his urge to act. At the same time, it is tempting to read this conclusion in a similar vein as the ending of Bresson’s *Pickpocket*, when Michel, though imprisoned, tells Jeanne: “What a strange road I had to take to reach you”. This exchange is not punctuated as a romantic gesture, and neither is the embrace in *First Reformed* (nor in *Vertigo*), owing to the barbed wire piercing Ernst’s body and the sudden cut to black. For Schrader, Michel’s statement marks his “acceptance of grace” (117), and one can regard the conclusion in

During his talk with Michael, Ernst had already said that “grace covers us all”, but the phrase made little impact upon his listener. The quote is an unmistakable reference to the final line from Bresson’s *Journal d’un curé de campagne*: “All is grace”. As a follower of the doctrine of predestination, the concept of grace was seminal to Bresson. According to this doctrine, God has always-already decided that some are among the elect, while others are doomed to damnation. The outcome of one’s life path is determined in advance, and one cannot influence its course. According to this logic, one is truly “free” once one submits to “something superior” (Schrader 116). Paradoxically, the acceptance of a predestined grace implies that one is free the moment one surrenders one’s “freedom” to the free will of God. The country priest in Bresson’s film had achieved this point of liberatory surrender, and hence, “all is grace” can be the film’s final line. The idea of grace as a “special gift”, which resonates at the closure of *First Reformed*, is the pinnacle of transcendental style, for, as Schrader argues, grace “allows the protagonist and the viewer to be both captive and free” (119).

Conclusion

Cinema differs from previous artistic media with regard to the proportional relation between sparse and abundant means. A description in a novel requires that a writer build sentences from scratch. For instance, a garden is depicted: the trees, the flowers, the vegetables, and so on, have to be mentioned explicitly in order to be made present in the reader’s mind. The means are sparse – a writer can use only words – and the effect can be abundant only on the condition that the description is exhaustive. By contrast, a single film shot suffices to show the entire garden. One reason why film has been identified with an “obsession with reality” has to do with what Seymour Chatman termed “over-specification”, a plenitude of visual details (126): in one split-second, the viewer can be given an entire overview of scenery. The employment of abundant means is inherent to cinema, and the trick of transcendental style is to gradually replace these available devices with sparse means. Whereas “religious” cinema – and Schrader mentions *The Ten Commandments* (Cecil B. DeMille, 1956) as a classic example – tends to “overuse” the abundant means by creating the most spectacular scenes (180), transcendental style gradually progresses from abundant artistic devices towards a “cold, sparse stylization” (179). In the case of “religious” cinema, the viewer is “encouraged in his desire to identify and empathize with character, plot, and setting”, resulting in an emotional experience (which often quickly evaporates as soon as the film is over). The transcendental style, on the contrary, becomes so utterly bare and sparse that any such dramatic dénouement seems out of place, but with the auspicious effect that the “spiritual momentum” of stasis will resonate after the ending of the film.

One aim in this article was to reflect how language is embedded in these films. In comparison to the sparsity of words in Ozu and the monotonous voices in Bresson as exemplars of transcendental style *pur*, the characters in the cinema of Dreyer and Bergman are loquacious. But language in the films of these latter directors exerts either a miraculous or a counterproductive effect. Both Anne in *Vredens dag* and Johannes in *Ordet* know how to do things with words but, due to the expressivity of the characters in these works, Dreyer’s films do not achieve stasis, the required final stage of the transcendental style. Bergman’s cinema can be considered as a companion piece to Dreyer’s, but with a crucial difference. Speech acts in Dreyer’s films can be successful, whereas Bergman’s trilogy of faith hinges upon the failure of language time and again as a medium of communication: conversations are given to misunderstanding. Moreover, the One who is supposed to have the answers to the meaning of human existence remains silent throughout, to the despair of His mortal

subjects. Despite this difference in the effectiveness of language, Bergman's psychological dramas lack, just as Dreyer's films lack, the austerity of the everyday-disparity-stasis pattern – and are thus transcendental style “lite”, so to speak.

My second aim here was to discuss *First Reformed* as Schrader's clearest attempt to shoot a film in the vein of his theory about transcendental style. And though *First Reformed* is to a great extent a reimagining of *Nattvardsgästerna*, in which the main characters struggle with God's silence, Schrader's film also crucially borrows from Bresson's *Journal d'un curé de campagne*. In both films, the protagonist writes a diary and aims to be a good shepherd to their respective parishioners, but the people they counsel most intensively, it turns out, commit suicide. In Bresson's film, the country priest helps a countess find salvation during a nocturnal conversation. After he has persuaded her to have faith in the divine, she finally has the courage to take her own life. Whereas the pastoral characters in these films want to make themselves understood – perhaps, most explicitly in the talkative cinema of Bergman – their words too often result in a widespread sense of bafflement, as if they are uttering nothing more than the sounds of silence.

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