Declaration

The following study, in its entirety, is my own work. I declare that this work was carried out in accordance with the University of Bristol's regulations. The work is original and has not been submitted or published elsewhere. The views expressed in this dissertation are completely my own and do not represent those of the University of Bristol. This work has not been presented to any other university or institution.

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Perceptual Austerity and Intensity

Transcendental Spectatorship in the Films of

Robert Bresson and Stan Brakhage

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Introduction

The term ‘transcendental cinema’ is often associated with stillness, stylistic minimalism, and spiritual restraint. In film theory, this is most comprehensively articulated in Paul Schrader’s (2018) account of transcendental style, which identifies a set of formal strategies, including narrative withholding and temporal suspension, through which cinema may evoke an encounter with the *Wholly Other* (Otto, 1924). The core of Schrader’s framework is the idea that transcendence is not directly represented but suggested through a gradual destabilisation of ordinary reality, achieved by removing cinema’s “abundant” (p. 177) means. Yet while Schrader’s model is foundational to discussions of transcendental cinema, it only defines transcendence in stylistic terms, focusing on what it looks like rather than the effect it produces in the spectator.

This dissertation argues that transcendental cinema should not be thought of solely as the employment of a formal style characterised by austerity and reduction, but as a phenomenon which reorganises the viewer’s sensory perception. Drawing upon phenomenology and theories of embodied spectatorship, it proposes that transcendence in cinema arises through transformations in the viewer’s lived experience of time, sensation, meaning, and perception.

Consequently, this opens up the possibility that transcendental cinema is not confined to just one aesthetic method. While it may operate using the techniques Schrader identifies (and which this study will term *perceptual austerity*), it may equally emerge

through sensory overload, fragmentation, and *perceptual intensity*. The research question at the centre of this dissertation is therefore: how do contrasting cinematic strategies of perceptual austerity and intensity reorganise embodied spectatorship in ways that produce transcendental cinematic experience?

Addressing this question requires close analysis of particular examples from cinema. To reflect on Schrader's conception of transcendental style, the films and written ideas of French auteur Robert Bresson will be examined due to his central position within Schrader's framework, where his work serves as a key example of formal restraint, as well as of spiritual expression in cinema. While Schrader also identifies Yasujirō Ozu as a major figure within transcendental style, this dissertation does not engage with Ozu's work for the sake of simplicity, focusing instead on Bresson as a more direct and theoretically rigorous model for exploring austerity and embodied spectatorship.

In contrast, the films and theoretical writings of American experimental filmmaker Stan Brakhage are introduced as a counter-model, employing a radically different film philosophy and aesthetic sensibility characterised by visual abundance and fragmentation. Brakhage's work bears little resemblance to the transcendental model outlined by Schrader and exemplified by Bresson. It is precisely this dissimilarity that makes his films useful here: by placing them in contrast, this dissertation highlights that transcendental cinema should therefore be recategorised not as a style in itself, but as the careful employment of cinematic mechanisms which reorganise the viewer's perceptual schema.

This dissertation will take the following structure: the first chapter will present and explore the relevant theoretical literature, outlining Schrader's definition of transcendental style along with key concepts from phenomenology and embodied spectatorship from Henri Bergson, Gilles Deleuze, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and Vivian Sobchack. This chapter will establish a theoretical framework through which transcendence will be further evaluated as an experiential, rather than purely formal, phenomenon. The second chapter will study the films and writings of Robert Bresson, who in Schrader's account and in this dissertation serves as an exemplary model, or 'Godfather', of transcendental style. His films, his theories, and Schrader's theories regarding him will be explored through the lens of spectatorship. The third chapter will dissect the cinema of pioneering experimental filmmaker Stan Brakhage, considering its relation to and deviation from the Schraderian model and investigating, with comparison to the formal and conceptual logic established in the first two chapters, how the effects of Brakhage's style can be understood in terms of embodiment that are both perpendicular and parallel to the effects of Bresson. Through the synthesis of findings from close study of these two filmmakers, a number of conclusions can be drawn on the nature of transcendence, temporality, and perception in film.

It should be disclaimed that some of the language in this dissertation will unavoidably read as repetitive. While the frequency of certain phrases has been controlled wherever possible, key theoretical terms such as 'transcendental' and 'temporal' describe very specific things and as such are difficult to synonymise or shorthand without sacrificing accuracy of language. 'Spectator' and 'viewer' are used interchangeably. The terms 'embodied', 'experiential', 'sensory', 'perceptual', and 'cinesthetic' vary slightly but critically in meaning. This disclaimer has been included,

as opposed to awkward circumlocution for the sake of variety, in the interest of academic precision.

Chapter I

Review of Existing Literature

PAUL SCHRADER'S TRANSCENDENTAL MODEL

Paul Schrader's *Transcendental Style in Film* was first published in 1972. In this book, Schrader examines the films of Yasujirō Ozu, Robert Bresson, and Carl Theodor Dreyer in order to define a style of filmmaking characterised by austerity, stillness, and a withholding of conventional narrative and emotional cues. These strategies work together to "create a sense of unease the viewer must resolve" (Schrader, 2018, p. 3), producing a tension between the *everyday* and that which lies beyond it.

Importantly for Schrader, transcendental style does not represent the transcendent, the divine, the ineffable directly; it structures an encounter with it through formal means, guiding the viewer towards the *Wholly Other* - a term borrowed from theology to describe God as incomprehensible, irrational and utterly distinct from human experience (Otto, 1924). Because of this, transcendental style is fundamentally spiritual in nature, but not specifically religious: Schrader quotes Gerard van der Leeuw's point that "art can be religious ... or appear to be; but it can be neither Mohammedan nor Buddhist nor Christian. ... there is only art which has stood before the Holy" (Van der Leeuw, 1963, p. 279, cited in Schrader, 2018, p. 39). Schrader adds that "transcendental expression in religion and art attempts to bring man as close to the ... unknowable as words, images, and ideas can take him" (p. 39).

Schrader argues that transcendental style unfolds through a three-stage progression: the everyday, where banal reality is represented without emphasis; *disparity*, in which a tension arises between surface reality and deeper significance; and *stasis*, wherein narrative movement is suspended. Across these stages, transcendental style is defined by a consistent set of formal strategies: long takes, static camera, sparse dialogue, and a general resistance to dramatic emphasis or progression. Acting is typically restrained and deliberately anti-expressive[1] and editing avoids emotional rhythmic conventions. Combined, Schrader argues, these techniques create an effect of withholding meaning, producing a cinematic experience characterised by slowness, introspection, and ambiguity. As such, there are no usual cues through which meaning is organised, placing the viewer in a state of heightened attentiveness and unease.

While Schrader's framework provides a detailed account of cinematic transcendence, it is primarily focused on stylistic features. He only identifies what transcendental style looks like, offering relatively little insight into how these formal strategies then affect the spectator. The question of how austerity, slowness, and withholding are perceived at the level of phenomenology remains unanswered in his text. Schrader's framework is also limited in its age: a number of relevant theories have been written since its publication over fifty years ago, which will be brought together to explore transcendental style in this dissertation.

[1] Bresson would tell his performers to "speak as if you were speaking to yourselves" (Bresson, 2016b).

HENRI BERGSON AND DURATION

To address these limitations, it is necessary to first establish a phenomenological account of temporality and perception, in order to properly understand how cinematic time as an experience operates in terms of spectatorship. Foundational to this is Henri Bergson's concept of *durée*, which challenges conventional understanding of time as something that can be measured and divided. In *Time and Free Will*, Bergson distinguishes between 'spatialised' or 'clock' time - which he identifies as quantified, segmented, complete, and external - and lived time, which is qualitative, continuous, and inseparable from subjective consciousness (Bergson, 2013). Rather than unfolding as a sequence of discrete units, *duration* is experienced as a flow wherein the past and present interpenetrate.

As Bergson argues, "pure duration is the form which the succession of our conscious states assumes when our ego lets itself *live*" (p. 100). Time, therefore, is not simply something that passes us by; it is necessarily something we feel, and which relates fundamentally to our experience as selves.

Duration cannot be reduced to any sequence of separate moments without losing its essential, experiential character. For Bergson, time should not be conceived of spatially - consciousness does not move through time as though along a series of fixed points; it endures time, bringing with it traces of the past into the present and on to the continually-becoming future; it is fluid. This challenges linear and mechanistic notions of temporality, highlighting the fluidity and subjectivity of lived experience.

In relation to cinema, Bergson's theory provides an important distinction between the measurable, sequential time-sense of a film and the way it is actually experienced by the spectator. While it is easy to think of film as unfolding in definitive clock-time (even divided into twenty-fourths of a second), its perceptual and affective qualities align more closely with durée, as the viewer experiences temporal flow as a continuous process, always in the ever-moving present. Cinematic strategies that employ slowness or rapidity, repetition or withholding, or temporal disruptions can be understood as interventions into the spectator's experience of time itself; into the conditions under which meaning is formed.

GILLES DELEUZE AND THE TIME-IMAGE

Gilles Deleuze's exploration of cinematic time in his two-volume work, *Cinema*, can be used to develop this understanding of experiential time in cinema. Building directly on Bergsonian duration, Deleuze places temporal logic at the centre of film experience. *Cinema 1* (1986) defines the *movement-image* of classical cinema, which organises time according to action, subordinating it to movement. Continuity editing is governed by a causal relation of events with each image following logically and seamlessly from the last.

In *Cinema 2* (1989), Deleuze distinguishes between this and the modernist *time-image*, where time is presented as a direct phenomenon, disrupting conventional structures of meaning. There is no straightforward link between on-screen perception and action, and images are instead related through association, juxtaposition, and their relative and combined duration. In the time-image, Deleuze argues that the

“sensory-motor link [is] broken” (p. 34). Editing no longer follows logically from situations, and narrative coherence is either weakened or suspended.

Not governed by action and reaction, images instead open up durational states of contemplation and uncertainty for the viewer. As a result, time can no longer be directly inferred through movement; it becomes a feature of the image in its own right. Time “increasingly appears for itself” and “is out of joint” (Deleuze, 1989, p. xi), experienced as disjunction and delay. This extends Bergson’s conception of lived time as continuous and qualitative into a specifically cinematic context, with Deleuze arguing that films which use the time-image do not just represent time differently, but allow it to be directly experienced.

Crucially, this transforms the role of the spectator who, no longer guided by clear narrative progression, must engage with the film in a more active and perceptual manner, inhabiting its temporal flow rather than simply following its events. Thus, Deleuze’s time-image provides a necessary bridge between Bergsonian duration and phenomenological spectatorship, emphasising cinema as an experience of time rather than a representation of it.

MERLEAU-PONTY AND EMBODIED EXPERIENCE

These ideas of time as qualitative and experiential align with the phenomenological theories of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, who argued against the notion of Cartesian dualism: the idea that the mind, which is immaterial and internal, and the body, material

and external, are two entirely distinct substances that can exist independently of one another. Instead, Merleau-Ponty suggests bodies are not something we have, bodies are fundamentally what we are; “the body is our general medium for having a world” (2002, p. 169). As such, all perception necessarily happens through the body, and sensory experience, time, and space are all lived conditions of consciousness, not just abstract concepts.

This corroborates Bergson’s duration, in which time is understood not as an objective sequence, but as something felt and inhabited. Merleau-Ponty similarly states that “time is not a line, but a network of intentionalities” (p. 484), meaning that time is fluid, shaped by perception, and requires a bodily subject to experience it. This rethinking of perception has significant implications for cinema. If perception is fundamentally embodied, then the sensory experience of engaging with a film cannot be understood as a purely cognitive or receptive act.

In *The Visible and the Invisible*, Merleau-Ponty argues that the perceiver and the *visible* (the perceived world) are “of the same flesh” (1968, p. 248). He defines this “flesh of the world” as the underlying, primary fabric of reality from which subjects and objects stem. In cinema, the spectator and the film should not be understood as two totally separate entities - the experience of a film is co-created in their interaction. Consequently, any account of transcendence in film must consider it as something that happens through the experience of the spectator, and not only within the formal strategies employed by the filmmaker, which Schrader fails to do.

VIVIAN SOBCHACK AND THE CINESTHETIC BODY-SUBJECT

Film theorist Vivian Sobchack brings Merleau-Ponty's embodiment theory explicitly into cinematic experience. In *Carnal Thoughts*, she describes the body as a "sentient, sensual, and sensible ensemble" (2004, p. 2). For Sobchack, the spectator is not a detached observer, but a *body-subject*: an entity that is at once perceiving, feeling, and physically engaged with the visible. Therefore, cinema addresses the whole body, not just the intellect, operating on a visceral as well as cognitive level.

Sobchack also argues that meaning does not begin with interpretation but with immediate sensory experience; understanding only emerges after an initial, embodied encounter with rhythm, duration, and texture. The viewer does not decode a film first and then respond to it. Rather, the viewer feels a film before making sense of it. As such, cinematic experience unfolds as a collaboration between sensation and thought. It is on this level that transcendental cinema can manifest itself.

Sobchack further challenges the assumption that, despite being a 'visual medium', cinema is exclusively visual. In *The Address of the Eye* (1992) and later in *What My Fingers Knew* (2000), she argues that film experience is also tactile and *cinesthetic*[2]: we do not simply see films but experience them through the body, either literally (such as increased or decreased heart rate) or transpositionally (e.g. feeling the texture of images on-screen). This expanded model of spectatorship will be particularly relevant

[2] Derived from 'synaesthesia', the triggering of one sense by another.

to analysis of Stan Brakhage, whose aesthetic strategies deliberately engage the viewer at a deeply sensory level.

Also, Sobchack frames cinema as a reciprocal relationship: the film addresses the viewer, and the viewer responds in turn through perception. Cinema reorganises the cinesthetic subject's (viewer's) experience of time, perception, and bodily sensation. Transcendental cinema, then, is cinema which realigns this experience towards an encounter with the Wholly Other.

TOWARDS AN EMBODIED THEORY OF TRANSCENDENTAL CINEMA

Taken together, these frameworks allow for a reconsideration of transcendental cinema that goes beyond only a stylistic or formal definition. Schrader's model provides a strong starting point, for categorising formal strategies through which transcendental style is structured - mainly slowness, austerity, and withholding - and for also identifying the style, within historical and spiritual contexts, to begin with. However, as established, his account remains largely concerned with recognising and describing these filmmaking strategies in cinema, offering limited insight into how these strategies are experienced by the spectator.

The theories of Henri Bergson and Gilles Deleuze shift the focus towards subjective temporality, reframing cinema as an experience of duration rather than a representation of sequential time. In this context, cinematic techniques of the time-image such as repetition and delay can be understood as interventions into the

viewer's lived experience of time. This is further grounded in the phenomenology of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, which establishes perception as fundamentally embodied, therefore suggesting that cinematic experience is something lived through the body rather than processed by the mind alone.

Building on exactly this, Vivian Sobchack's theories of embodied spectatorship provide a clear account of how meaning is not primarily cognitive in film. By understanding the viewer as a body-subject engaged in reciprocity with the film, Sobchack locates cinematic experience within a dynamic interplay between perception, sensation, and thought. So, transcendence cannot be thought of as a property of the film itself but as an emergent effect of this interaction.

Thus, this dissertation proposes that transcendental cinema does not operate solely through the formal strategies Schrader identifies, but through a restructuring of the spectator's embodied experience of time and perception. Explored in the following chapters through characteristics of austerity and intensity, transcendence in film is more than simply a style; it is the transformation of how the viewer inhabits cinema itself to reveal the numinous.

Chapter II

PERCEPTUAL AUSTERITY

Transcendental Strategies & Temporality in Robert Bresson

CINEMATIC AUSTERITY & THE REJECTION OF THEATRE

Within Paul Schrader's formulation of transcendental style, the cinema of Robert Bresson demonstrates particularly clearly how formal austerity, narrative restraint, slowness, and inexplicit spiritual density may be employed to evoke a sense of the transcendent without directly representing it. As Schrader (2018) identifies, through a progression from the *everyday*, through *disparity*, to *stasis*, Bresson systematically strips away expressive excess, leading the spectator towards an encounter with what lies beyond the visible and comprehensible.

However, while Schrader's account provides a strong description of the stylistic mechanisms involved in transcendental cinema, his analysis of it is largely formalist, and overlooks how these features are received or experienced at the level of spectator. It is here that the limitations within Schrader's model become clear. To address this gap, it is necessary to bring in theories of phenomenology which rethink perception as an embodied, pre-reflective engagement with the world. With this, the austere style of Bresson's filmmaking can be properly understood as more than just as a tightening of film form, and actually as a calculated reconfiguration of the spectator's perceptual

activity - stripping away the familiar in order to compel the viewer to inhabit the film differently through an elevated sense of duration and rhythm.

Bresson's absolute commitment to aesthetic austerity is well documented, both in his films and in his own theoretical writings and interviews. Rejecting the conventions of theatrical performance and psychological realism, he sought to eliminate everything he deemed superfluous or foreign to cinema - expressive acting, expository dialogue, flashy camerawork - in favour of a more distilled form.

He insisted upon casting 'models' rather than actors, characterised by deliberately flat vocal delivery and minimised gesture, out of "refusal to exteriorise interiority through the use of theatrical techniques" (Bresson, 2016a, p.25[3]). This rejection of performance is much more than just a stylistic choice; for Bresson, it is vital to his lifelong project of stripping cinema down to its essential perceptual components.

However, this apparent simplicity is a deception. Bresson explained, "there is, in cinema, a prejudice against simplicity. Every time we go against this prejudice, the effect is stunning" (2016a, p. 24). The austerity of Bresson's method does not result in transparent or easily legible films, instead producing a growing sense of interior tension and ambiguity. Through sparse dialogue, fragmentation, and the withholding

[3] In this chapter, two texts are cited with the same author and year. For absolute clarity, the year will be given in every instance, where '2016a' refers to *Bresson on Bresson*, while '2016b' refers to *Notes on the Cinematograph*.

of as much narrative information as possible[4], his films create what Schrader calls disparity: a distance between the surface-level events and their underlying significance.

For example in *Pickpocket* (1959), much of the narrative happens off-screen or is presented without any explanatory context, forcing the spectator to actively engage in the construction of meaning themselves. Rather than guiding the viewer using the conventional cues of cinema, Bresson demands a heightened attentiveness to character, rhythm, and sound - an attentiveness that is fundamentally perceptual *before* it is cognitive. In this regard, Bresson's films provide a key model of Schraderian transcendental style through which its experiential dimensions can be developed more fully.

PERFORMANCE & INTERIORITY

In a number of interviews, Bresson shared an anecdote supposedly told by Charlie Chaplin, of an actress filming in a hot studio, surrounded by flies, who thought about the possibility of a fly landing on her face. The camera, in Bresson's view, "recorded that thought" (Bresson, 2016a, p. 34). This anecdote is obviously not concrete evidence, but it (and his repetition of it over many years) surely reveals a key component of his approach to performance: that cinema is capable of registering internal states without the need for expressive display.

[4] Bresson once described his writing in *Pickpocket* (1959) as coming "dangerously close to the limit of saying too little" (Bresson, 2016a, p. 60).

As he insists, “interiority leads the way” (2016a, p. 23), a principle that underpins his rejection of performance. Bresson’s primary issue with theatrical acting is exactly that: it is borrowed from the theatre. In all his filmmaking, more than anything, was the assertion that “cinema has its own language” and so “it should not attempt to express itself using theatrical methods” (2016a, p. 48) such as performance that mimics other acting, or relies on manipulation of vocal quality (i.e. projection) or unrealistic gestures.

Bresson, instead, directed his performers by “forbid[ding] them to exteriorise” (2016a, p. 66), rejecting both theatrical expressivity and the conventions of the star system. Rather than on the basis of acting ability or type, his casting decisions were made according to what he called a “moral resemblance” (2016a, p. 66) between the performer (‘model’) and the character. This resemblance is not always immediately legible in conventional terms, manifesting subtly through the body: in the stillness of the face, the neutrality of gestures and movement, and the absence of any psychological signalling. As André Bazin observed, Bresson is “not concerned with the psychology but the physiology of existence” (Bazin, 1967, p. 133).

In *Pickpocket*, Michel’s impassive expression resists interpretation, offering no clear access to his inner life. The viewer is neither told (through narrative or dialogue) or shown (through performance) what Michel is thinking. In *Au Hasard Balthazar* (1966), this is taken to the extreme in the utterly inexpressive visage of a donkey. However, this absence of apparent psychology is not a lack of interiority, it is the displacement of it.

In *A Man Escaped* (1956), there is never psychological explanation, the viewer is given very little insight into Fontaine's interior emotions. The film is decorated with succinct, dry narration understating the events immediately preceding or following: arguably, the most emotion Fontaine ever reveals is with the plainly-delivered line "I laughed nervously which soothed me". This cold, undramatic revelation of character, focusing more on process than psychology, compels the spectator to either infer the protagonist's feelings, project feelings onto him, or remain uncertain of them.

By displacing interiority in his films, asking his performers to "lock themselves in and give nothing away" (2016a, p. 135), Bresson allows interiority to be produced by and in the viewer, creating a cinematic experience which transforms spectatorship from passive reception into active, perceptual engagement.

DISPARITY & INTERNAL NECESSITY

Bresson's approach suggests a deep resistance to explanatory or intellectual meaning. As he writes, "a film is made of so many disparate elements; ... such a wealth of combination and composition, that it can lead to an infernal mess," a danger which can only be combatted with an "internal necessity" which "doesn't divulge its reasons." (Bresson, 2016a, p. 23). This refusal of explicit justification is central to the operation of transcendental style, in which meaning is not communicated in content but in formal structure and withholding.

This raises a question: if Bresson demonstrates that transcendental cinema does not communicate meaning explicitly, then where is it apprehended? At the level of perception. Bresson's cinema demands from the viewer a primarily sensory mode of spectatorship, aligning closely with Vivian Sobchack's (1992) conception that meaning is constituted initially through immediate sensory experience rather than conceptual understanding. Bresson's expression also suggests that to a great extent, this primacy of unconscious meaning was crucial to his method of working[5] and directly influenced how he thought about the audience: "The general public is ready to feel before they understand. I love it when my films are received by way of the senses, and the intelligence doesn't intervene until after" (2016a, p. 71).

Through austerity and withholding, Bresson sought to reveal within the everyday the Wholly Other. As he suggests, "what is beautiful in a film... is a journey towards the unknown. The audience has to sense that I'm heading toward the unknown, that I don't know in advance what will happen" (2016a, p. 50). This insistence on balancing uncertainty, in which the everyday is disrupted by a growing sense of something unresolved, is what Schrader means by disparity: "spiritual density within a factual world creates a sense of emotional weight within an unfeeling environment" (Schrader, 2018, p. 104). However, Bresson's formulation pushes this further: more than just narrative absence, the "unknown" is an active presence within the film's makeup, produced through *internal necessity*. As such, Bresson shows that disparity is not merely a downplay of meaning but a sustained encounter with the ineffable.

[5] Suggested by his motto: "work first, think after" (Bresson, 2016a, p. xii).

Phenomenologically, this encounter cannot be understood as a problem to be solved through interpretation, it must be experienced perceptually. Merleau-Ponty (2002) argues perception precedes and grounds conceptual thought. Bresson's work exploits this by refusing to stabilise meaning at narrative or representational levels, which compels the spectator to engage with the unknown as a tangible reality they are living during the act of viewing the film. The journey "toward the unknown" is taken by the viewer themselves, whose habitual modes of perceiving and understanding are suspended in favour of the immediate, uncertain, and experiential.

TEMPORAL DISRUPTION & DOUBLING

Schrader highlights Bresson's use of *doubling*, a term coined by Susan Sontag (1966) to describe the way the filmmaker often repeats action and dialogue, "making a single event happen several times in different ways" (Schrader, 2018, p. 98). This is most clearly seen in *Pickpocket*, where the events of each day in the film are narrated to us as we watch Michel write the same words in his diary, and we then see the events we've just been told. *Diary of a Country Priest* (1951) and *A Man Escaped* are also narrated in this pointedly tautological way.

But this technique is tactical, and Sontag argues these doublings "both arrest and intensify the ordinary emotional sequence" (1966, p. 183), simultaneously evoking the everyday through the normality and almost tedium of the cold, deadpan narration, and disparity through the un-reality and jarring inefficiency of its formal presentation. In the characters, this opens up an endlessness of interior depth. In the viewer, it provokes them; their "mood becomes wary, expectant" (Schrader, 2018, p. 99).

On a basic level, doubling action reiterates narrative detail, but more importantly, in phenomenological terms, it fundamentally alters how the spectator perceives time. By presenting events first through narration and then through image (or vice versa), Bresson disrupts the linear progression of cinematic time and elevates it to an experience that the viewer must actively negotiate - no longer carried through sequential events, the spectator is required to inhabit a state between recollection and anticipation.

As Merleau-Ponty (2002) suggests, perception is an embodied engagement with the world, not a neutral recording of it. Bresson's use of doubling reorients the viewer's attention to be at once more deliberate and more uncertain. The "wary, expectant" mood described by Schrader, then, is not just psychological, but lived: it is felt as a tension within the act of viewing. In this way, doubling contributes to the emergence of transcendence through a sustained reconfiguration of experiential time.

This doubling has nothing to do with repetitiveness or superfluity, however. Everywhere else in Bresson's style, that which does not need to be said or shown must *not* be said or shown; rigorous austerity is essential. He states in his *Notes on the Cinematograph*, "not to use two violins when one is enough" (Bresson, 2016b, p. 13); and as an example in *Au Hasard Balthazar* where two car crashes occur, we are withheld from seeing one of them because "we've already seen the first, it's pointless to show the second" (Bresson, 2016a, p. 144).

SOUND & OFF-SCREEN SPACE

A Man Escaped demonstrates Bresson's use of sound to create a visceral sense of tension. The confined space and minimal visual variation of the film forces the viewer's attention onto the films' sounds, intensifying active perception. With the camera imprisoned alongside Fontaine in his cell, off-screen space is constructed almost entirely through sound design. We hear the guards before we see them (and we barely see them). Bresson's heightening of scraping, footsteps, keys, and whistles works to equate sound with threat, anticipation, and proximity. As such, the suspense is primarily heard and, subsequently, physically felt rather than seen. The spectator becomes hyperaware, the body responds with tension and bodily anticipation.

This anticipation is sustained and amplified through repetition of sound, routine (e.g. the locking of doors, the emptying of pails), and process (the scraping of wood, the tightening of ropes). Repetition in this way creates Schrader's disparity, where the viewer becomes numbed by the monotony of what is shown, but at the same time increasingly anxious of what remains unseen. In Bergsonian terms, this use of repetition stretches the viewer's sense of time, blurs the past and the present, and puts more emphasis on process than outcome (Bergson, 2013). The viewer is made to endure time, not just follow events, with these effects registering in the body as a cinesthetic engagement in which anticipation and unease are physically felt before they are consciously interpreted.

Along with this, the viewer becomes firmly aligned with Fontaine's body: listening when he listens, waiting when he waits, freezing when he freezes. This cinesthetic parallel means the spectator doesn't simply sit and watch imprisonment and escape as a series of on-screen events, but instead experiences them as lived processes. Bresson creates, therefore, a shared bodily temporality, in which the rhythms of Fontaine's actions and perceptions are directly mirrored in the spectator's own sensory experience.

Time ceases to be something external which unfolds before the viewer, and becomes something endured alongside the character, felt through pauses and repetitions in rhythm. The boundaries between what is spectator and subject begin to blur, aligning with Sobchack's (2004) conception of the viewer as a *body-subject*, for who cinematic experience is both perceptual and physical. It is through this alignment that Bresson's filmmaking moves beyond representation, reconfiguring the conditions of perception, and making possible a form of transcendence grounded in the lived experience of time, tension, and attention.

STASIS, THE TIME-IMAGE & THE SILENCE OF GOD

A key feature of Schrader's model seen in Bresson is *stasis*: a suspension of narrative movement, "the quiescent, frozen, or hieratic scene which ... closes the film" in which "all phenomena are more or less expressive of a larger reality - the Transcendent" (Schrader, 2018, p. 108). Stasis in Bresson's work is the reconfiguration of cinematic time into a condition of duration.

In Deleuzian terms, this is the pure *time-image*: the sensory-motor chain is broken and time appears directly, no longer subordinated to movement or causality (Deleuze, 1989). Events cease to operate as transitions between narrative points and instead assume the status of sustained temporal states. In *A Man Escaped* and *Pickpocket*, this occurs in the repetition of gestures such as writing and observation, which gradually lose any narrative urgency or momentum; they are not ‘stepping stones’, they are what is happening. The end of *Pickpocket* is particularly significant in this regard, as when the viewer expects resolution to the film’s temporal structure, Michel’s arrest only intensifies its suspension. Rather than moving towards closure, the film settles into an extended present where meaning stays postponed.

This aligns, once again, with Bergson’s (2013) concept of duration as a continuous flow in which past and present merge. On top of simply observing Michel’s actions, the spectator *endures* the temporal weight of their repetition. Stasis, in these terms, is the point at which the spectator is no longer oriented by narrative progression, leaving them “frozen” in durational time, where ordinary phenomena begin to register as pointing towards a reality beyond them - what Schrader calls the Transcendent or Wholly Other.

Bresson takes this further with *Au Hasard Balthazar*. The donkey’s passage through a series of owners is structured less by narrative development than by recurrence and the repetition of harm. Each chapter restates a condition of human sin rather than advance a story: being led, beaten, overworked, neglected, and so on. The film’s organisation is episodic but not progressive; it returns again and again to similar

patterns of suffering with no culminating resolution, apart from death. Overall, the story of *Balthazar* reflects the tension between Jansenist predestination and chance (*hasard*) (Bresson, 2016a, p. 152), in which events appear at once arbitrary and yet strangely necessary, as though governed by an unseen logic that exists beyond the world of the film. Balthazar's sequence of owners, from "childhood (caresses); maturity (work, talent, the genius/brilliance of mid-life); and then the mystical period that comes before death" (2016a, p. 145), does not accumulate into moral development or narrative explanation. What changes in each context is circumstance, not condition.

The result is a film in which suffering can be neither resolved or fully rationalised by its own narrative world, or by the spectator. It is precisely this refusal of resolution which opens the film up to the question of transcendence, and which produces Schrader's stasis - a suspension in which phenomena stop functioning as elements of plot, become experienced only as duration, and start suggesting another order of meaning, the Wholly Other.

In *Balthazar*, this "Other" is not explicitly represented as presence; it transpires through withholding, through the refusal to allow the donkey's suffering to take narrative meaning. The film's lack of conclusive resolution to suffering could be read in theological terms as a form of divine silence, in which meaning is simply not disclosed within the visible order of events. Phenomenologically, this silence is a mode of transcendence, evoking the divine through restraint, repetition, and the refusal of explanation. It is this very absence of clarifying context that enables the question of a

higher power, or its[6] withdrawal, to be registered by the viewer as a lived condition of perception, and as such of reality.

[6] The word ‘God’ is not used here to avoid Abrahamic connotations. Referring back to van der Leeuw, there is no religious art, “only art which has stood before the Holy” (1963, p. 279).

Chapter III

PERCEPTUAL INTENSITY

Experimental Transcendence & Embodiment in Stan Brakhage

PERCEPTUAL DESTABILSATION

While Paul Schrader (2018) locates transcendental cinema within a clear cinematic model based on austerity, withholding, and the gradual suspension of narrative meaning, his framework implicitly assumes that such an experience emerges only through processes of reduction. As explored in Robert Bresson, transcendental style (as Schrader defines it) operates by stripping away excess and guiding the spectator towards an encounter with what lies beyond the visible through restraint. Rooted in traditions of European religious art and theological aesthetics, this model favours stillness and disciplined formal minimisation[7].

The films of Stan Brakhage, however, suggest a completely different route stemming from an entirely different set of contexts - American experimental/art film and a more eclectic, post-religious spirituality concerned with perception, consciousness, and the eye-brain relationship itself. Rather than diminishing the perceptual field, Brakhage

[7] Robert Bresson was, himself, a devout Catholic and heavily influenced by Jansenist theology.

saturates it, producing viewing conditions in which transcendence arises through the destabilisation of perception. Schrader even suggests this by mentioning Wassily Kandinsky's idea that "the spiritual could be revealed through a composition with many focus points, so that the viewer could appreciate the "inner relationship" of separate, individual shapes and colours." (Kandinsky, 1964, cited in Schrader, 2018, p. 172).

In Brakhage's cinema, the basic structures that usually organise visual experience are abandoned. In Schrader's terms, there is no *everyday*. There are no stable objects to anchor the gaze, no consistent spatial relations, and no continuity of action through which the viewer's perception can orient itself. Images flicker and dissolve before they can be fully apprehended, thus resisting identification and challenging any attempts to impose coherence. Narrative progression is abandoned entirely, where Brakhage's films are structured more like tone poems than stories; there is no sequence of events to follow, no causal chain dictating the placement of images and through which time can be understood. In these conditions, the spectator cannot rely on habitual modes of viewing, in which perception may be directed towards recognition and narrative comprehension.

This breakdown aligns with Gilles Deleuze's (1989) formulation of the post-modern collapse of the sensory-motor link. In the *movement-image* of classical cinema, perception is organised around action: what is seen leads to what is done, and meaning emerges through this direct relation. In Brakhage's films, this structure isn't just altered as in the *time-image*, it is entirely absent. Perception no longer leads to action, and doesn't resolve into narrative meaning. Instead, it persists as a continuous,

unstable field of visual intensity. The spectator is left stranded in the image, without clear orientation or hierarchy of meaning.

In *Metaphors on Vision*, Brakhage describes this shift as a move towards a form “of knowledge foreign to language and founded upon visual communication, demanding a development of the optical mind” (2021, p. 20). This places new conditions on spectatorship: to engage with Brakhage’s films is not to interpret a represented on-screen world, but to undergo a reorganisation of perception in which the very act of seeing becomes uncertain and immediate and requires a deal of effort. It is within this destabilised perceptual field that the possibility of transcendence begins to arise as a transformation in how the world is experienced.

THE MATERIAL IMAGE

If perceptual destabilisation disrupts the viewer’s ability to organise what they see, Brakhage’s use of the material celluloid image further unsettles any assumption that film functions as a transparent window onto a represented world. In his *Dog Star Man* cycle of films (1961-64), the image does not so much depict a reality as assert itself as a physical surface: scratched and painted directly onto celluloid, layered with superimpositions, saturated with colour produced in processing, and broken into abstractions of grain and light. Instead of imperfections sitting ‘above’ an ‘actual image’, these elements are the very substance of the film. The light of the projector, then, is not illuminating something else; it is what is being seen. In Brakhage there is only “light moving in time” (Wees, 1992, p. 83). The viewer is no longer looking at the illusion of the moving image - as Brakhage highlights, Georges Méliès was a “19th-

century stage magician" (2021, p. 21)[8]. In Brakhage, the viewer is confronted with the image as an object in itself.

This emphasis on materiality aligns with Brakhage's insistence on a purely cinematic mode of expression, independent of representation or imitation (of theatre or literature). As he writes, "all of my experimentation in film has been directed toward the discovery of ways of expression as non-related as possible to other art form expressions" (Brakhage, 2021, p. 35).

In *Dog Star Man*, this results in a visual field that constantly jumps from fleetingly recognisable images (e.g. a man climbing a mountain, a dog, trees) and moments where the image bursts into total abstraction, with flashes of painted colour, abrasive scratches, and pulses of deliberate over-exposure, never resolving into a coherent visual world. Brakhage's images insist on their own presence, constantly working to interrupt any attempt at stable perception.

Phenomenologically, shifting towards this unreserved materiality intensifies the viewer's sensory engagement. Drawing on Sobchack's view of the spectator as a *body-subject* (2004), the material image can be considered something that is not simply seen but felt. The textures of Brakhage's work (density, flickering, etc) register at a bodily level, producing a tactile and *cinesthetic* (Sobchack, 2000) experience of

[8] Georges Mélies, best known for the landmark *Le Voyage dans la Lune* (1902), was a pioneer of cinema often credited with 'inventing' or popularising special effects like stop-motion, double exposure, and time-lapse.

vision where the eye has to actively strain and respond to these visualisations of sensory touch.

Therefore, Brakhage's material practice extends perceptual destabilisation into the very matter of the image itself. By giving primacy to film as a physical medium, he drastically shortens the distance maintained, in the cinematic illusion, between spectator and screen. What remains is a pure, non-representational encounter with light, colour, and movement as they are directly experienced - which situates meaning at the level of sensation rather than interpretation, further dislodging the viewer's perception from its habitual structures.

SENSORY INTENSITY & EMBODIMENT

At the centre of Brakhage's unique film philosophy is his concept of the *untutored eye*: a mode of vision freed from the perceptual habits imposed by language and structural recognition. In *Metaphors on Vision*, Brakhage imagines "an eye unruled by man-made laws of perspective, an eye unprejudiced by compositional logic" (2021, p. 20), which is capable of encountering the visible world prior to categorisation or interpretation. His films are an effort to approximate this condition formally. Rather than organising perception into coherent images and actions, they overwhelm and destabilise it through intense flickering, superimposition, abrupt cutting, and rapid shifts in colour and exposure. This is all with the aim of returning vision to a more immediate and bodily state.

This is evident in the *Dog Star Man* films, where recognisable images (a man, a dog, flames, trees, the sun and moon) continually dissolve into abstract bursts of light, scratched-off emulsion, and densely layered paintings. The viewer's sense of perception is denied any stability, and they cannot comfortably settle into observation or rest on narrative orientation. Instead, vision becomes an active, difficult process which is intensely physical. In *Telling Time*, Brakhage writes that "the eye and the brain are only two organs in the human body which extend identical cellular links to each other: therefore, the eye can be considered the surfacing of the brain" (2018, p. 35). In other words, seeing is not detached optical reception but a total bodily process.

Brakhage's pursuit of the untutored eye reflects Merleau-Ponty's (1968, 2002) phenomenology of perception, in which vision exists prior to conceptual thought or objective knowledge. For Merleau-Ponty, it is incorrect to think of perception as the passive reception of a separate world, but an embodied and incomplete engagement with reality as it emerges through subjective experience.

Brakhage's filmmaking intensifies this condition by stripping perception of all of its usual structures, returning the viewer to a mode of seeing that feels immediate and pre-linguistic. Here, thinking of the viewer as a body-subject again becomes especially relevant (Sobchack, 2004). The speed and density of Brakhage's images are, pre-cognitively, registered somatically (internal to the body). His use of flickering light affects blinking and tenses the optic muscles; intense colour saturation 'burns into' the eyes even after the image changes; rapid montage produces rhythms that are felt in

the body if unnoticed by the intellect. Therefore, his work is experienced rhythmically and physiologically as much as visually.

In *Mothlight* (1963), Brakhage dispenses with the camera altogether. Insect wings, leaves, and blades of grass are pressed directly onto the celluloid, and vision takes on a tactile quality. The viewer does not simply watch the image, but through the materiality and familiarity of the objects, is able to experience its texture and movement as a form of *cinesthetic* contact. The image ceases to be merely representational, and the boundaries between body, world, and film begin to collapse, recalling Merleau-Ponty's claim that perceiver and perceived are "of the same flesh" (1968, p. 248). Watching *Mothlight* therefore produces a strange fusing of senses in which seeing can approximate touch.

Through this sensory intensity, Brakhage expands the transcendental possibilities of cinema far beyond Schrader's model of austerity and stillness. Rather than through reduction or contemplative suspension, transcendence develops in the viewer through the overwhelming reorganisation of sensory perception altogether. While watching Brakhage, the viewer is released from habitual ways of seeing and confronted with an image that is unstable, material, and evocative of other (non-visual) senses.

SILENCE & VISUAL ATTENTION

The majority of Brakhage's films are completely silent. However, this does not amount to a sense of emptiness. Brakhage's silence is another method of taking guidance

away from the viewer. In conventional cinema, sound is used for its effectiveness in organising perception: music signals an appropriate emotional response, dialogue makes for easy communication of meaning, and bridging of sound (J- and L-cuts in editing) establish spatial and temporal continuity. Even in Robert Bresson, sound remains carefully structured to guide attention and produce tension through rhythm and anticipation. In Brakhage, however, this framework is removed altogether. The silence of his films intensifies the spectator's confrontation with the image. Without dialogue, soundtrack, or synchronised sound effects, the viewer loses many of the conventional cues they have come to rely on their ears for.

In *Dog Star Man*, this is especially disorienting, with rapid, violent superimpositions, flickers, and explosions of colour unfolding without any sonic punctuation or emotional anchoring. The viewer cannot retreat into music or dialogue for stability. Rather, visual rhythm becomes total and arresting. It is through this singularity of image that the cinesthesia previously mentioned can operate: by only engaging the eye, Brakhage bypasses its distinction from other senses; it becomes all senses. In *Mothlight*, the absence of sound amplifies the tactile immediacy of the film's textures. Silence in Brakhage does not reduce sensory experience but concentrates and distils it. He himself argues that "the sound sense which visual images always evoke ... often makes actual sound superfluous" (2021, p. 38).

Phenomenologically, this creates a form of perceptual isolation, reflecting Sobchack's (1992) description of cinematic experience as embodied and sensory. The absence of sound prevents perception from dispersing across multiple channels of attention

(senses). The body becomes hyper-focused on image alone: to the details of rhythm, colour, and movement, as directly *felt* phenomena. In Merleau-Ponty's (1968) terms, perception becomes an immediately-experienced encounter with the *visible*. Brakhage's total silence thus produces a heightened form of visual immersion that is both engrossing and unsettling. Similar to in Schrader's *disparity*, the spectator experiences a growing sense of unease, not through withholding, but through direct sensory confrontation.

TEMPORAL COLLAPSE

Furthermore, Brakhage's films do not unfold in the sequential way narrative cinema typically structures time. There is rarely any sense of before and after, no causal progression through which events build towards resolution, and no consistent temporal framework by which the spectator can orientate themselves. Instead, time in Brakhage's cinema is immediate and simultaneous, almost four-dimensional. Images emerge and disappear before every stabilising on screen, often layered on top of one another through superimpositions that fold multiple moments into a single perceptual field.

Referring back to *Dog Star Man*, shots of the climbing man with an axe recur alongside, inside, and outside flashes of fire, trees, stars, and pure abstraction, but these images never organise themselves into a clearly progressive sequence. The spectator experiences an accumulation of visual intensity in which temporal distinctions become increasingly unstable, and increasingly irrelevant to the experience.

This envelops Henri Bergson's (2013) idea of *durée*, distinct from measurable clock-time as lived and qualitative duration in which moments (past, present, future) continually interpenetrate. Brakhage's montage prevents time from dividing itself into distinct units because images overlap, repeat, and become one another too rapidly to be separated. The man in *Dog Star Man*, for example, does not function as a conventional narrative 'character' progressing through time, he is only a recurring visual idea that reappears across an ever-shifting perceptual plane. Celestial imagery, graphic bodily imagery, and abstraction constantly collapse in on each other, producing a sense that past and present coexist simultaneously on-screen. Hence, the film is experienced as a direct visualisation of the purely durational time of conscious experience.

In Deleuzian terms, Brakhage breaks even the malleable logic of the time-image. While the time-image is the result of dismantling the sensory-motor link and time becomes a direct representation of itself, Brakhage renounces logical representation of time almost entirely. What remains are, simply, visual elements which move rapidly and, created by their assembly, perceptual intensity which resists organisation into identifiable temporal structures. Time becomes something encountered immediately through sensation itself. In this respect, Brakhage produces duration through velocity rather than through slowness. If Schrader's transcendental model describes the process of stretching time through waiting and stillness, Brakhage compresses and saturates it until ordinary time-sense begins to fail, reorganising the spectator's lived experience of time entirely.

TRANSCENDENCE THROUGH OVERLOAD

Schrader defines transcendence as emerging through disparity: a growing tension between the ordinariness of the visible world and the sense that something ineffable exceeds it. Brakhage's films create a comparable destabilisation of perception, but through entirely different means. Instead of stripping cinema down to austere essentials, Brakhage builds it up, overwhelming perception through the saturation and fragmentation of images, creating sensory intensity. Although the method is different, the result is similarly disorientating and agitating: the spectator can no longer comfortably organise or make sense of experience through accustomed structures of narrative, representation, or meaning.

Dog Star Man generates this destabilisation through the perpetual collision of images, which are charged with significance but resist being interpreted. Cosmic imagery, flames, the forest as an entity, the unspecified man, internal organs, the baby all continually interrupt one another. At times, the film appears to suggest mythic structures of birth, death, struggle, etc, yet these associations never stabilise; never become symbolically certain. Brakhage himself described the process of making the film as beginning with "material that was incomprehensible" and "work[ing] [his] way backwards" towards form (2021, p. 14), a process reflected directly in the viewer's experience with the work. The film does not guide perception towards resolution; it does not guide the viewer towards meaning whatsoever. It keeps the viewer suspended in its instability and emotional intensity.

The unease this produces can be compared with Schrader's disparity, though generated through confrontation with the viewer rather than withholding from them. The viewer cannot get a grasp of time and space or symbolism within the image, yet it is this uncertainty that also heightens attentiveness. Deprived of cognitive understanding, the spectator becomes unusually receptive to sensation itself: to rhythm, light, texture, movement, and duration as directly lived phenomena rather than rational components of a represented world. Transcendence, then, in Brakhage, comes about as a total transformation of the conditions of perception.

Brakhage relocates transcendence away from the theological stillness in which Schrader place it, and towards perception itself. Linking to the contexts of American experimental film and post-religious spiritual thought[9], his films treat consciousness, vision, and sensory experience as sacred sites of revelation. Similar to Schrader's transcendental style, this is not through representations of the divine, but an expansion of visual awareness beyond the visible. Considering Brakhage in this way therefore extends Schrader's model. Transcendental cinema should not be confined to austerity or restraint, it can also manifest through intensity and saturation, provided it reorganises perception so integrally that the spectator's encounter with the world is tangibly different.

[9] Brakhage's eclectic philosophy, as described in his essays "Exultations of Bruce Elder" and "Having Declared a Belief in God" in *Telling Time* (2018, pp. 121-127, 135-139) combines occultism, Christianity, Romanticism, continental thought, and American Transcendentalism, among other things.

CONCLUSIONS

As explored, Schrader's conception of transcendental cinema defines it as a style based on austerity, withholding, stillness, and stasis (Schrader, 2018). However, his model remains fundamentally descriptive. It gives an explanation of some of the technical attributes involved in creating transcendental films, but doesn't sufficiently investigate how transcendence is experienced by the viewer. In this underdevelopment, Schrader fails to properly pinpoint what transcendence in cinema actually is.

This dissertation has reframed the question of the nature of transcendental film away from its stylistic traits and towards the ways it reorganises embodied perception of experience in the spectator, by bringing Schrader into dialogue with Bergson, Deleuze, Merleau-Ponty, and Sobchack to reframe it as essentially phenomenological. Transcendence, defined simply as the surpassing of ordinary experience towards the *Wholly Other* (Otto, 1924), in cinema materialises through a transformation of habitual modes of perception upon which ordinary cinema operates.

Robert Bresson's films exemplify the stylistic devices determined by Schrader and highlight an approach to transcendental viewership which, in this dissertation, has been termed *perceptual austerity*. Across films such as *A Man Escaped* (1956), *Pickpocket* (1959), and *Au Hasard Balthazar* (1966), Bresson systematically and consistently removes the expressive and narrative conventions that ordinarily dictate cinematic experience through a set of refined formal mechanisms. These include

restraint, doubling, withholding, flattened performance, temporal suspension, and sparsity of sound. Combining these mechanisms creates, in the spectator, the effect of slowing down perception, heightening attention and engagement, suspending narrative orientation, and forcing upon the viewer an embodied sense of unease and waiting. In doing so, his films categorically transform viewing from passive observation into an active perceptual experience.

This becomes particularly clear when considered through a phenomenological lens. The concept of *durée* helps explain how Bresson's manipulations of time (e.g. repetitions, delays) interfere with measurable clock-time and instead immerse the spectator in lived temporal experience (Bergson, 2013). In *A Man Escaped*, repetitive actions such as scraping wood or listening for guards cease to function merely as narrative steps towards escape and instead become durational states which the viewer must endure alongside Fontaine, placing them firmly with him. Similarly, Deleuze's *time-image* illuminates how Bresson's methods weaken the sensory-motor structure of classical cinema, suspending action and allowing time to present itself directly through the employment of anticipation and stasis.

On top of this, Merleau-Ponty (1968) and Sobchack (1992) reveal that the experience of film is fundamentally embodied. Bresson's withholding of psychological explanation and minimisation of performance prevent the viewer from engaging with characters through conventional identification. Meaning in Bresson is apprehended sensorially and pre-reflectively through rhythms, pauses, sounds, and gestures. The spectator, then, encounters transcendence as a phenomenon; as an experiential condition of this

austerity. It becomes clear then that Schrader's *disparity* operates perceptually as well as stylistically, creating a growing tension between the ordinariness of the visible world and the uncertain sense that something exceeds it.

Transcendence in Bresson arises through techniques of absence, restraint, and suspension and is grounded in European traditions of religious ascetic art. By emptying cinematic experience of familiar narrative and emotional structures, his films reveal to the spectator a divine order of meaning which cannot be articulated or represented: the unknown (as he calls it), the Wholly Other (as Schrader calls it), or in more philosophical terms, the ineffable[10].

While Bresson approaches transcendence via perceptual austerity, Stan Brakhage demonstrates that transcendental modes of spectatorship can also transpire through what this dissertation has called *perceptual intensity*. When considered in relation to Schrader's model, his films radically challenge it and expose its limitations and bias. Brakhage shows that transcendence is not dependent upon reduction and restraint, but may surface whenever habitual perception is fundamentally reorganised.

In *Dog Star Man* (1961-64) and *Mothlight* (1963), Brakhage overwhelms the viewer with flickering montage, superimpositions, violent colour, abstractions, materiality, and

[10]Though not discussed in this research, Jacques Lacan's psychoanalytical concept of the Real could also be considered in relation to these terms.

the complete abandonment of narrative shape. Where Bresson slows perception down, Brakhage intensifies it to the point where ordinary modes of seeing start to fail.

This visual excess produces a distinct but comparable form of perceptual destabilisation to the one Schrader outlines. Brakhage's cinema denies the viewer stable spatial relations, coherent temporal movement, and accessible symbolic meaning. Images flash by, charged with profound significance yet resist interpretation, preventing the spectator from fully grasping or organising what they see. The result is an experience where perception itself is volatile and newly immediate. Through Bergson (2013), this can be understood as a cinema of intensified duration; distinctions of time collapse into a continuous present of overlapping visual sensations. Deleuze's (1989) sensory-motor link is broken down even more drastically than in the time-image, as Brakhage abandons even representation itself, leaving nothing but flows of light, colour, rhythm, and visual stimulation.

Phenomenology is again essential for understanding how this constitutes transcendence, and how it is experienced. Brakhage's concept of the *untutored eye* closely mirrors Merleau-Ponty's (2002) claim that perception is pre-cognitive and embodied. His films attempt to return vision to a state prior to representational and linguistic systems, where seeing is tactile, physical, immediate, and a phenomenon itself. Sobchack's concept of the *body-subject* (2004) can be applied to further explain how Brakhage's formal methods are registered physiologically and *cinesthetically* as much as purely visually.

Brakhage's moves transcendence away from theological stillness and towards the ontology of perception itself. Rooted in American post-religious spiritualism, his films treat consciousness and experience as sites of revelation of the ineffable; of the Wholly Other. Transcendental cinema, therefore, has to be reconsidered as occurring through more than one means (i.e. the austerity of Schrader's model) of disrupting perceptual logic, that it can also occur through the overwhelming disruption of perceptual logic.

Although Bresson and Brakhage's formal methods and philosophies are wildly different, this dissertation has argued that both filmmakers ultimately work towards a mechanically similar reorganisation of spectatorship. Their cinemas occupy polar opposite perceptual extremes: Bresson, through austerity, and Brakhage, through intensity. In both cases, habitual sensory-motor relations break down, tangibly transforming the viewer's experience of time and meaning.

This shared disruption reveals the limitations of Schrader's original transcendental model. While Schrader correctly identifies disparity as a central feature of transcendental cinema, this dissertation demonstrates that disparity is not exclusive to the definition he gives, nor is it exclusive to the style he examines. Rather, it develops whenever cinema unsettles the spectator's perceptual relation to the screen. Bresson achieves this through withholding, while Brakhage uses symbolic ambiguity and sensory overload. Both ultimately place the viewer in a heightened state of attentiveness in which reality no longer appears fully stable or comprehensible. Transcendence cannot solely be located within the image itself or reduced to a fixed

stylistic formula, as Schrader has it. It manifests phenomenologically through altering the spectator's sense of time, embodied sensation, and reception of meaning.

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Filmography

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