Searching for *transcendence*: an exploration of spirituality in the films of Andrei Tarkovsky and Terrence Malick

by

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Dissertation presented for the Degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

in FILM AND TELEVSION STUDIES

Centre for Film and Media Studies

UNIVERSITY OF CAPE TOWN

February, 2024

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Dedication

To my plant, Miracle, who has taught me what it means to grow through the seasons. To my mother, Ntombizine (I won't do it) Nkukwana, for your fierce love and the unrelenting fight you put up to get me through varsity, this is our victory. To my father, Mhleli Papama Nkukwana; thank you for opening my eyes to the world around me and challenging me to think deeper. And to both my parents, thank you for letting me finish all the incense sticks and tea in the house, thank you for encouraging me to pursue what I love. To my sister, Olwethu Linda Nkukwana for igniting the love of film that has been with me my entire life; thank you for being there and allowing me to be vulnerable. I appreciate your boisterous laugh and uncanny ability to know when I need a warm embrace.

To my chosen family who gave me the space to *not talk about it but* checked in regardless. Musawenkosi Dyobiso, thank you for being there from the beginning and for the promise of forever. May you be protected in this new chapter of your life. To Anelisa Zungu, thank you for your unwavering (I would go as far as to say, unfounded) belief in me. We survived UCT together, my friend. I don't know how I would've done it without you. To Onthatile Magqoki for all the laughter and constant reminder that *it's never that serious*. Thank you for always lending your (massive) ears to my lamentations. And to Natalia Shakela, thank you for your gentle love that literally nursed me back to health. And all my other friends the word limit will not allow me to thank by name, I love you all.

To my fellow Master's students, thank you for your constant reassurance, insight and support. I have been extremely blessed to be surrounded by such kind, intelligent and resourceful people. Knowing I was not alone made this experience a little less harrowing. I appreciate each and every one of you.

To my supervisor, Dr. Ian-Malcom Rijsdijk for your patience and understanding. Thank you for your genuine passion for film, something that has, and continues to inspire me. Our sessions throughout the year provided me with insurmountable guidance and encouragement.

And finally, to my ancestors,

camagu.

Abstract

The objective of this dissertation is to discuss how spirituality is explored in the films *Mirror* (1975, dir. Andrei Tarkovsky) and *A Hidden Life* (2019, dir. Terrence Malick) through the application of the concept of transcendence. This dissertation approaches transcendence from a spiritual framework (removed from religion and theology) as opposed to the philosophical treatment it tends to receive in other literature. Recent discussions surrounding transcendence in film have been concerned with a films philosophical content, narrative content and aesthetic style and while these have merit, they tend to ignore the unique aspect of cinema that allows one to feel that sensation while viewing. As such, this dissertation identifies mood as the distinctive quality of cinema that allows it to be a medium for transcendence. In order to understand how this may be achieved, I arrive at three conditions of *transcendence* in film; point of view, the revelation as opposed to opposition and externalising the internal. To illustrate how these conditions function in a film of transcendence, I apply them to Russian director Andrei Tarkovsky's film *Mirror* (1975) as well as American director Terrence Malick's *A Hidden Life* (2019) as they are known to have spiritual engagement with the medium, albeit approached differently. By analysing *Mirror* and *A Hidden Life*, this exploration seeks to highlight transcendence's subjectivity and, paradoxically, its universality. I conclude my exploration by summarizing my findings and proposing that future studies be done to test the validity of these conditions.

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Introduction

Russian filmmaker Andrei Tarkovsky proposes that,

> … the goal for all art […] is to explain to the artist himself and to those around him what man lives for, what is the meaning of his existence. To explain to people the reason for their appearance on this planet; or if not to explain, at least to pose the question.[1]

[In this instance], cinema becomes an exploration into the human existence. The aim of this kind of cinema is not to reach an objective truth as is the mission of philosophy and theology, but rather to have a glimpse into what makes the human experience so unique. That is why cinema resonates with us so deeply – and why it has persisted for so long. It is because, when created from a place of spiritual curiosity, a film may reveal a part of our humanity we may only understand spiritually.

Tarkovsky further wrote that,

> The allotted function of art is not, as often assumed, to put across ideas, to propagate thoughts, to serve as example. The aim of art is to *prepare a person for death, to plough and harrow his soul, rendering it capable of turning to good.*[2]

Here, Tarkovsky perceives as cinema as a spiritual task that the filmmaker embarks on to uncover his innermost workings so that he may be freed from the banalities of existence. He views the medium as being capable of reaching beyond stories about life, and utilises cinema to explore existential ideas and themes about life and death. While this approach to filmmaking is not new or unique, it does speak to the desire in some directors to use cinema as a means to tell the stories of their lives in a way that honours the mystery of existence. For Tarkovsky, this practice allows him to "plough and harrow his soul" in hopes of "turning it to good".[3]

This kind of cinema tends to have a particular slow and meditative quality about it that differs from other films. In the introduction of his thesis, Paul Schrader identifies the transcendental style that film has developed[4], this style being the parameters within which I will hold my discussion. While Schrader explored the works of Ozu, Bresson and Dreyer in his thesis, this dissertation will apply the transcendental style to the works of Andrei Tarkovsky and Terrence

[1] Andrei Tarkovsky, *Sculpting in Time: Reflections on the Cinema.* Translated by K. Hunter-Blair, (1985): 36.
[2] Ibid., 43, my emphasis.
[3] Ibid.
[4] Paul Schrader, *Transcendental style in film: Ozu, Bresson, Dreyer.* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1972): 35.

Malick, particularly *Mirror* and *A Hidden Life*. As I will elaborate on further later, these films were chosen specifically due to the ethereal quality of their filmmaking style that finds its roots in exploring the concepts stated above. In these films, both directors employ techniques that seem to invite the viewer into a world that is filled with expressing the Holy or the magnificent of everyday life, extending from the narrative that focuses on the spiritual journey of an individual to the cinematic devices that work in service of enhancing that spiritual parallel that enriches the image.

Early film theory began in the silent era and was primarily concerned with defining the key elements of the medium. It evolved from the oeuvres of Eisenstein and Dulac, amongst others. Film theorists during this time were concerned with how filmic elements differed from human perceptions of reality and should therefore be considered as a valid art form in its depiction of reality. Interestingly, however, it was during this era of filmic enquiry that the discussions surrounding mood in film began to gain traction, which is, in part what strikes me about cinema. In the years following World War II, film critic Andre Bazin reproached this view and argued that the essence of film resided in its ability to mechanically reproduce reality, and not in its difference to reality as scholars of the early era of film theory had suggested.[5]

In the 1960s and 1970s, film theory began including other cognitive disciplines such as psychoanalysis, gender studies, anthropology, literary theory, and semiotics in their analysis of films and subsequently shifted the auteuristic and formal analysis of cinema to a socio-political mode of analysis. Laura Mulvey and Christian Metz were largely responsible for the feminist psychoanalytic framework and film semiotics, respectively, that has since dominated film theory.[6] Regardless, much of film theory since the 1970s has focused on a combination of gender studies and psychoanalysis in film with the dominant theory of the 1990s being of artist and psychoanalyst Bracha L. Ettinger's 'matrixial theory' in which she, put briefly, conceptualises a feminine gaze and has articulated its differences from the phallic gaze and its relation to the feminine.[7] More recently, however, Clive Meyer in *Critical Cinema: Beyond the*

[5] Andre Bazin, *What is Cinema?* Trans. By Hugh Gray. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971)
[6] See Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," *Screen*, no. 16 (1975): 6-18. http://dx.doi.org/10.1093/screen/16.3.6 & Christian Metz, Language and cinema. (The Hague: Mouton, 1974).
[7] Bracha Lichtenberg-Ettinger, The Matrixial Gaze. *Feminist Arts and Histories Network*. (Leeds: University of Leeds, 1995).

Theory of Practice [8] argued for film theorists to re-engage with the specificity of philosophical concepts for cinema as a medium distinct from others.

I have persistently been fascinated with film's ability to breathe life into the image, as well as to create and sustain an atmosphere. Initially, I attributed this simply to the manipulation of cinematic devices; *mise-en-scene*, lighting, camera proximity and angles, the manipulation of sound and music, or the duration of a certain shot. And while all of this remains true, the technical language of cinema alone cannot describe the profound effect that some films had on me. Such films include Stan Brakhage's four-part series *Dog Star Man*[9] that pushes the technical language of cinema to the brink as well as Maya Deren's *Meshes of the Afternoon*[10] which captivated me with its phantasmagorical atmosphere. For Brakhage, the three greatest tasks for film in the 20th century are:

> (1) To make the epic, that is, to tell the tales of the tribes of the world. (2) To keep it personal, because only in the eccentricities of our personal lives do we have any chance at the truth. (3) To do the dream work, that is to illuminate the borders of the unconscious.[11]

Taking this further, my interest in film lay in how it could operate as a vehicle for contemplation, beyond the ideas put forward. Then I watched *Mirror* (1975)[12] and I read *Sculpting in Time*[13] and something internally cracked open. My fascination with cinema was its ability to cause one think, long after the credits have rolled. Tarkovsky's discussions of art as a metalanguage, the logic of 'poetry' as well as the beauty of simplicity, highlighted something about the potential of cinema which allows us to reflect and *transcend*. This encounter enabled me to understand my true interest in cinema. Prior to Tarkovsky, I had never experienced a film that fundamentally changed the way I regarded cinema before, nor had I encountered a film that not only challenged me intellectually but moved me in a way I can only describe as spiritual. Soon after, I discover the rich, cinematic world of Terrence Malick, and I began to understand the potential of film to affect a person in a manner that is deeper than entertainment.

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[8] Clive Meyer, *Critical Cinema: Beyond the Theory of Practice*. (New York: Wallflower Press, 2011).
[9] *Dog, Star, Man* Part I-IV, directed by Stan Brakhage (1961-1964).
[10] *Meshes of the Afternoon,* directed by Maya Deren (1943).
[11] Stan Brakhage, "Telluride Gold: Brakhage meets Tarkovsky," *Rolling Stock*, no. 6 (1983): 11-14.
[12] *Mirror,* directed by Andrei Tarkovsky (Mosfilm, 1975).
[13] Tarkovsky, "Sculpting in Time*"*.

My first encounter with Terrence Malick was his debut film, *Badlands* (1973)[14] and I was taken by his cinematography along with the passive way Holly narrates the egregious events of the film. However, the film that had the most profound effect on me was my second encounter with him, *The Thin Red Line* (1998)[15] an epic war film based on the 1962 novel written by James Jones. I hesitate to call Malick's adaptation a war film as these tend to be characterised by violence, spectacle, and fast-paced action. Malick's rendition of the war film was something I had not encountered before. In place of action and spectacle, he provides us with existential and spiritual enquiry. His rendition of the Battle of Guadalcanal does not choose sides, nor does it glorify the soldier; instead, *The Thin Red Line* poses questions about the meaning of existence through the backdrop of war. These filmmakers to me, Tarkovsky and Malick, present us with works that not only challenge our perception of film and its abilities, but our sense of being in the world, too. They ask us, through their films, to consider what it means to be *human*. There is an inexplicably unique present in a number of their films that has always stuck with me and when I encountered the term transcendence, that ineffable quality to their works began to make itself clear to me.

As such, this dissertation will explore the works of Andrei Tarkovsky and Terrence Malick through the lens of transcendence as they are well-known for their philosophical engagement with film, both aesthetically and in terms of content. With regards to Tarkovsky, I will be looking at *Mirror,* an experimental drama that plays out like a dream. *Mirror* retells the story of Tarkovsky's life as told through his alter ego Alexei as he reflects on his childhood and how it was affected by World War II, his adulthood and the relationship with his mother and ex-wife, as well as his dreams. Tarkovsky uses what he dubs "the logic of poetry" to explore the conscious and makes use of a non-linear narrative structure to convey what he believes is the authentic human experience. Here, Tarkovsky uses the medium of cinema to, not only challenge our idea of how a story may be constructed, but through the story to invite the audience to ponder their own existence. *A Hidden Life*[16], by contrast, is possibly Terrence Malick's most linear film to date. *A Hidden Life* is a historical biopic that retells the story of Franz Jägerstätter, an Austrian man who refused to pledge allegiance to Adolf Hitler. Set during the second World War, *A Hidden Life* chronicles as Jägerstätter is ostracised from his community, arrested and executed by German soldiers for treason. These films are deeply

[14] *Badlands,* directed by Terrence Malick (Warner Bros., 1973).
[15] *The Thin Red Line*, directed by Terrence Malick (20th Century Studios, 1998).
[16] *A Hidden Life,* directed by Terrence Malick (Searchlight Pictures, 2019).

spiritual and transcendent in vastly different ways, and as I will discuss, Tarkovsky's *transcendence* in *Mirror* is, in part, achieved by the poetic logic that he utilises for the film's construction whereas Malick's success in achieving that *transcendent* moment lies in his use of a strict linear model of narrative to 'take us to the end', so to speak.

In his thesis titled *Transcendental Style in Film: Ozu, Bresson and Dreyer* (1972)[17] Paul Schrader arrives at his own working definition of transcendence as an expression of something "beyond normal sense experience" that is achieved through style or a "general representative form"[18]. Similar to David Nichols' intention *Transcendence and Film: Cinematic Encounters with the Real*[19], "the […] project arises out of a concern that the philosophy of film all too frequently falls short of addressing questions about the essence of cinema itself."[20] Using Robert Sinnerbrink's variations of the aesthetics of mood which he outlined in *Stimmung: exploring the aesthetics of mood* [21] as my theoretical framework, I will apply his notion of disclosive and autonomous mood, specifically, to illustrate how mood is a necessary condition of transcendence. Through this, I arrive at three conditions of *transcendence* that I use to analyse how *transcendence* operates in the *Mirror* and *A Hidden Life*; point of view, revelation as opposed to resolution as well as externalising the internal.

I begin my discussion with exploring the concept of mood and the notion of *Stimmung* in art and film. The purpose of this chapter is to situate this exploration as being concerned with the expressiveness of aesthetic aspects of the image. Additionally, I argue that mood highlights film's ability to express its world through a shared emotional attunement with the viewer that transcends the image and narrative content. Moreover, I provide a brief etymological discussion of the term transcendence to bring its association with spirituality to the forefront. In doing so, I establish spirituality as my framework to separate this from a philosophical exploration. I discuss the two ways that transcendence is commonly used in spirituality; the first being the notion that centres a deity and is typically found in religious spirituality, and the second being the potential for self-transcendence which aligns with how I use the term in my discussion. I then arrive at my definition of transcendence in film as at attempt to describe the spiritual atmosphere that pervades certain films. The overarching assumption at play here is that film is

[17] Paul Schrader, *Transcendental style in film: Ozu, Bresson, Dreyer.* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1972).
[18] Ibid., 37.
[19] David P. Nichols eds., "Introduction", *Transcendence and Film: Cinematic Encounters with the Real*. (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2019).
[20] Ibid., 6.
[21] Robert Sinnerbrink "Stimmung: exploring the aesthetics of mood," *Screen* 53, no. 2 (2012): 148–163.

a medium capable of eliciting spiritual experiences in a viewer that is willing to accept its invitation, and this discussion presupposes that film is "sometimes a window that offers valuable philosophical [and/or spiritual] insights."[22] Furthermore, I briefly outline the kind of audience member who is able to feel *transcendence* in film, the "*lived* body"[23] to borrow from Vivian Sobchack. Following this, the exploration outlines particular themes present in a transcendental film as well as identifies three conditions of transcendence; 1. the point of view, 2. revelation as opposed to resolution and 3. externalising the internal. Utilising these conditions, I conduct a close-textual analysis of *Dead Man*[24] directed by Jim Jarmusch as well as Godfrey Reggio's *Koyaanisqatsi*[25] as examples of how a film may have the potential for transcendence but not quite achieve it. In the third and fourth chapters, I apply these conditions to analyse *Mirror* and *A Hidden Life* as examples of transcendental films. And finally, I conclude my dissertation with a summary of the text and highlight possible limitations of my research.

[22] Tom McClelland, *The Philosophy of Film and Film as Philosophy*. (London: University of Sussex, 2011): 11
[23] Vivian Sobchack, "Embodying transcendence: on the literal, the material, and the cinematic sublime," *Material Religion* 4, no. 2 (2008): 194-203.
[24] *Dead Man*, directed by Jim Jarmusch, (Miramax Films, 1995).
[25] Koyaanisqatsi, directed by Godfrey Reggio, (Island Alive, 1983).

Chapter One: Mood, *Stimmung* and transcendence

Stimmung is the soul of every art [...] the air and the aroma that pervade every work of art, and that lend distinctiveness to a medium and a world. - Béla Balázs

1.1. Mood and *Stimmung*

Before we begin our exploration of transcendence in film, it is meritorious to start with a discussion regarding mood in film to understand how film is a medium capable of inviting and depicting a particular experience. We could say that a film make us feel certain emotions, however, as Greg M. Smith points out in *Film Structure and the Emotion System*, it is not quite correct to say that film 'make' us feel anything, rather, they extend an invitation to feel a certain way[26]. For example, take the low-key lighting and tight framing of horror that cues fear and suspense, or the soft, natural light of romance that suggest feelings of joy and admiration, or the rapid editing of action films cue feelings of excitement and thrill – these are all stylistic ways film language elicits affect. Therefore, it more accurate to say that film extends a gentle invitation to experience a piece of that world. However, despite being an integral part of the cinematic experience, this area of film is particularly difficult to define and words tend to fail us when attempting to articulate this in an analytical or abstract manner. As such, we tend to use phrases such as 'atmosphere,' and 'vibration' to describe this affective phenomenon.

As Robert Sinnerbrink remarks, "mood is one of the elements of cinema whose obviousness, like that of the everyday, is deeply mysterious[27]." Mood in cinema describes how a cinematic world is expressed or revealed through a shared emotive attunement that places the viewer inside of that reality[28], we cannot explain how meaning is communicated through composition and style in a film without it. Consider the humorous and quirky atmosphere evoked by a Wes Anderson film, or the investigative, sombre realism of David Fincher that places significance on the insert shot, loading menial objects with sinister meaning. Mood is suggested, established, and maintained through a film's aesthetic style. As Sinnerbrink contends, a cinematic world can be revealed or expressed through mood, and different cinematic worlds each have their own distinct kind of moods[29].

Early theorists acknowledged mood as a key component of cinema aesthetics. German critic and film historian Lotte H. Eisner used the term *Stimmung* – loosely translated to something

[26] Greg M. Smith, *Film Structure and the Emotion System.* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 12.
[27] Sinnerbrink, "Stimmung: exploring the aesthetics of mood," 148.
[28] Ibid.
[29] Ibid.,149

between 'mood' and 'atmosphere' – and attributes the term to the feeling induced by the expressionist play of light and shadow present in German expressionist film. The excessive use of light and shadow used to portray the psychological terror of the monster in the silent film *Nosferatu* (1922)[30] may serve as an example of this. As noted by Janet Ward, "the silent film required the conjuring of *Stimmung,* otherwise we would simply have bare descriptions of characters or events.".[31] And for Eisner, inspired by the works of German romantic poet Novalis, *Stimmung* is a "metaphysical accord" that "hovers around objects as well as people".[32] Poetically, it encapsulates "a mystical and singular harmony amid the chaos of things, a kind of sorrowful nostalgia mixed with well-being, an imprecise nuance of nostalgia, langur coloured with desire, lust and soul."[33] This implies another dimension to the image that goes beyond the actual image on-screen and loads it with meaning and emotion.

As such, *Stimmung* refers to the aesthetic dimensions of the image and is achieved when human figures, places and material objects are given life and expression through the image. Sinnerbrink articulates this as the ability of the image to "conjure up a world revealing the dense materiality of a milieu.[34]" As such, *Stimmung* defines a "cinematic aesthetic with the power to evoke atmosphere or to disclose an experience of world imbued with subtle varieties of mood.[35]" This definition by Sinnerbrink is useful as it moves away from discourses of narrative content and instead focuses on the stylisation of cinematic aesthetic devices. To attribute a film's ability to elicit or invite a viewer to feel a certain emotion solely to its narrative content is to ignore the aesthetic and expressive aspects that constitute a narrative film. As summarised by Sinnerbrink, "it is the entire repertoire of cinematic-aesthetic devices that, in combination, contribute to the expression of a film's style with feeling, sensibility and reflection…"[36]

Mood describes the transcendental quality of cinema that transfigures it from a two-dimensional flashing of images accompanied by score to a three-dimensional experience in which one may affectively participate. In other words, mood is the way in which cinematic elements work in conjunction with one another to create a sense that a viewer cannot explain

[30] *Nosferatu*, directed by Fredrich Wilheim Murnau (Film Arts Guild, 1922).
[31] Janet Ward, "Kracauer versus the Weimar Film-City", *Peripheral Visions: the Hidden Stages of Weimar Cinema,* ed. Kenneth S. Calhoon (Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 2001): 29.
[32] Eisner cited by Sinnerbrink, "*Stimmung:* exploring the aesthetics…", 148.
[33] Ibid., 149.
[34] See note 15 above, 150.
[35] Ibid.
[36] Ibid., 152

but only feel. Mood is a vital component of transcendence as it describes the quality of film to be more than a combination of cinematic devices and techniques. In this way, it transcends the unitive and homogenous analysis of film. Therefore, mood is a condition for transcendence.

From the anticipation and suspense that fills Hitchcock's infamous empty shot of Marion Crane (played by Janet Leigh) taking a shower in *Psycho* (1960)[37], to the soft, beautifying light that adorns Anna's (played by Juila Roberts) face that charges the image with the admiration of someone in love as portrayed in *Notting Hill* (1999)[38], there are numerous ways an image expresses mood. Concerned with the expressive aspects of the image in combination with the narrative content of a film, this paper wishes to explore films that invite the audience to feel something more spiritual in nature. Hence, this dissertation will investigate films in which an atmosphere of spirituality is created in film, naming it transcendence.

1.2. Spirituality as the foundation of transcendence

Before I move further in my definition of transcendence, it is worth discussing the concept of spirituality as it forms the framework of my definition. It has been noted by many writers and scholars that spirituality is an elusive, subjective, and individualistic experience which defies clear definition.[39] Cheryl Gibson notes that when a concept lacks a clear definition, it is up to the individual to give it meaning within the context of their own lives.[40] However, for the sake of this exploration, we will define spirituality as involving the recognition that there exists something beyond the ordinary human sensory experience, and that there is a greater whole beyond oneself that is divine that we can connect to. There are two ways in which spirituality is typically approached in the literature. The first approach is fused with religion and religious commitment. Religious commitment has been defined as, "the participation in, or endorsement of, practices, beliefs, attitudes, or sentiments that are associated with an organized community of faith,"[41] and the majority of this literature, particularly in Western societies, has been focused on Christianity. This type of spirituality is concerned with religiosity and requires that a person subscribe to a particular denomination of faith. Religious spirituality typically answers the question, 'what will happen when we die?' with each religion providing a different answer.

[37] *Psycho*, directed by Alfred Hitchcock (Universal Pictures, 1960).
[38] *Notting Hill*, directed by Roger Michell (Universal Pictures, 1999).
[39] Nik Cawley, "Towards defining spirituality. An exploration of the concept of spirituality," *International Journal of Palliative Nursing* 3 (1997): 31–36.
[40] Cheryl H. Gibson, "A concept analysis of empowerment," *Journal of Advanced Nursing* 16 (1991): 354–361.
[41] Dale A. Matthews., *et al.*, "Religious commitment and health status: a review of research and implications for family practice," *Archives of Family Medicine* 7, (1998): 118–124.

Furthermore, religious spirituality promises an eternal life in paradise after one's passing, providing comfort to the living that there is a utopia waiting for them after life. In cinema, arguably one of the most notable examples of a film that deals with this type of spirituality can be seen in Mel Gibson's *Passion of the Christ* (1994)[42]. The film follows of the crucifixion of Jesus Christ, focusing heavily on the spirituality derived from religious symbolism and imagery. The problem with relying on symbolism to create spiritual meaning is that it relies on preexisting knowledge of the religious symbolism in the viewer. One must know and understand the story of Christ in order to understand the spirituality behind the tale.

The second approach reforms spirituality from a purely theological concern to a concept that can be broadened into social science disciplines. According to Joanne Coyle, this perspective tends to harbour a wider view of 'God' as any firmly held value or principle, which gives meaning and purpose in life.[43] It privileges the individual and the capacity of the soul to expand within and through the world. As early transcendentalist thinker Ralph Waldo Emerson describes,

> Our life is an apprenticeship to the truth, around every *circle* another can be drawn; […] there is no end in nature, but every end is a beginning; that there is always another dawn risen on mid-noon, and under every deep a lower deep opens. [44] (my emphasis)

Briefly, Emerson's circle describes the nature of being, and he theorises that each person is the core of their own circle in life. We make effort to expand our circles which is done by emotional and spiritual growth through education and wisdom. According to Emerson, we draw bigger circles around our old circles as we expand our consciousness and develop our minds. At the centre of each circle is what Emerson calls a 'helm' which is an amalgamation of your thoughts, ideas, emotions, and beliefs that may change over time as your circles expand. The 'helm' could be understood as the soul which changes as we think and experience as well as by what we chose to think and experience. This kind of spirituality, this circularity of being, is concerned with the individual and the spiritual potential of oneself to achieve greatness. The second approach to spirituality recognises the spiritual present in the everyday as well as the magic of nostalgia. This approach centralises what is significant to the Self; be it family, places,

[42] *Passion of the Christ*, directed by Mel Gibson (Newmarket Films, 2004).
[43] Joanne Coyle, "Spirituality and health: towards a framework for exploring the relationship between spirituality and health," *Journal of Advanced Nursing* 37, no. 6 (2001): 590.
[44] Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Circles," *Essays: First Series* (1841): 1. my emphasis.

cherished memories or love, in order to articulate the mysterious Something that connects all these.

Where the first approach to spirituality is centred around a deity that governs one's existence and provides one for the reason of their existence, the latter places human thought, action and self-fulfilment at the centre. Notably, the mode of spirituality focused on the self does not promise an afterlife or sense of immortality, instead it focuses primarily on self-actualisation in life to prepare to transition to death.

1.3. Transcendence

The notion of transcendence has been subject to philosophical debate since Plato and has since been interpreted by theologians, aestheticians, psychologists, anthropologists and has even found its use in medicine. There is no one set definition of transcendence that is universally agreed upon, however, there is widespread acknowledgement of a mysterious Something that extends beyond the normal sense experience.[45] From the Latin prefix '*trans*-' which means "beyond," and the word '*scandare'*, meaning "to climb", to transcend means to go beyond or to exceed the limitations of something. As such, transcendence implies an aspiration for something greater than what is materially available, or immanent. The term has been strongly associated with spirituality as it describes the sort of experience one has when connecting to something beyond oneself.

> It appears as a revelation, as a momentary, passionate wish to grasp intuitively and at a stroke, all the laws of this world – its beauty and ugliness, its compassion and cruelty, its infinity, and its limitations. [46]

Transcendence has been regarded as being an essential feature of spirituality.[47] It describes that experience of opening of oneself to something more. As the word suggests, to transcend is to

[45] See Paul Schrader, *Transcendental style in film: Ozu, Bresson, Dreyer.* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1972).; Robert Johnston (2020) "Transcendence" in Film: An Ongoing Issue. *Journal of Religion & Film* 24. no. 2,12 (2020); Coyle J. (2002) Spirituality and health: towards a framework for exploring the relationship between spirituality and health. *Journal of Advanced Nursing* 37. no. 6 (2002): 589–597.
[46] Tarkovsky, *Sculpting in Time,* 37.
[47] See P.J. Dawson's "A reply to Goddard's 'spirituality as integrative energy'… Nancy Goddard's (1995) paper 'spirituality as integrative energy' in the Journal of Advanced Nursing," *Journal of Advanced Nursing* 25, (1997): 282–289. ; Joyce Hickson and Andrea Phelps, "Women's spirituality: a proposed practice model", *The Family, Spirituality and Social Work* (New York: Routledge, 1998): 43-58.; Amy Fry, "Spirituality, communication, and mental health nursing: the tacit interdiction," *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Mental Health Nursing* 7, (1998): 25–32.; Dorothy C. H. Ley and Inge Corless , "Spirituality and hospice care," *Death Studies* 12 (1998): 101–110.

move, to cross from one state of being to another. When I refer to 'another state of being,' I am not referring to altered states induced by drugs or narcotics but rather the alternate state one experiences when they are most in tune with themselves, perharps such as a moment of meditation. Amy Fry distinguishes between two types of transcendence. The first she calls *transpersonal* transcendence which describes the sense of connection one has to a deity, God or higher power.[48] Similar to the first approach to spirituality, this form of transcendence is experienced by those belonging to communities of faith. The second form of transcendence is *intrapersonal* transcendence and focuses on what Fry dubs the "potentiality of the self"[49] . It may be summarised as the human capacity for inner knowledge and strength, a resource that is ever-present within an individual to overcome life's challenges and achieve greatness. This type of transcendence is one of the ways the concept has been reformed in the social sciences and includes notions such as 'harmonious interconnectedness', 'inner strength', 'being', 'knowing', 'doing', 'spiritual well-being', 'spiritual needs', etc. [50]

Similarly, Robert Johnston in *Reel Spirituality: Theology and Film in Dialogue*, [51] distinguishes between two kinds of experiences one might label as transcendence. The first emphasizes an "encounter with the sacred itself, with that which lies beyond the natural, but which gives meaning to it." [52] In other words, an encounter with the Divine that supports life and fills it with texture, depth, richness, and purpose. He calls this, "Transcendence" (with a capital T). The second description focuses on the possibility of human beings to exceed our limitations, "of experiencing wholeness within brokenness, of glimpsing how life was meant to be, but is not." [53] T.S Eliot expressed it as "the still point in a turning world." This is "transcendence" (with a lower t). Though distinct, these of definitions of transcendence acknowledge a mysterious quality to life that is not necessarily supernatural, but is instead an intuition that there is more to life than what meets the eye. Intrapersonal transcendence is an acknowledgment of the capacity of the human spirit to transcend which occurs as an epiphany or revelation. Combining the ideas of both these scholars, the focus of this dissertation will be that of the expression of intrapersonal transcendence.

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[48] Amy Fry, "Spirituality, communication, and mental health nursing: the tacit interdiction," *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Mental Health Nursing* 7, (1998): 25.
[49] Ibid., 27.
[50] Beverly A. Hall, (1998) Patterns of spirituality in persons with advanced HIV disease. *Research in Nursing and Health* 21, 143–153.
[51] Robert Johnston, *Reel Spirituality: theology and film in dialogue* (Michigan: Baker Academic): 2006.
[52] Robert Johnston, "Transcendence" in Film: An Ongoing Issue. *Journal of Religion & Film* 24, no. 1 (2020).
[53] Ibid.

We may understand transcendence to be the core of spirituality itself. It is an instance of connection to the sublime and a sudden realisation of *existence*; how life cannot come to be without death. Transcendence may be understood as an expression of the process of meditation which requires one to be still to access what may lie beneath the surface of materiality. It is a particularly human experience in which a person *comes into* themselves and the world around them – where the dichotomy between the internal world and the external world destabilizes to encapsulate a wholistic experience of being. In this way, transcendence is also an acknowledgement of one's mortality not met with fear, but acceptance. In its stillness, transcendence is, paradoxically, a crossing over from ordinary reality to a more spiritual state. transcendence as a lived experience, "appears as a revelation, as a momentary, passionate wish to grasp intuitively and at a stroke, all the laws of this world – its beauty and ugliness, its compassion and cruelty, its infinity, and its limitations."[54]

Translated into film, this exploration understands transcendence to describe a style of film that focuses on and portrays "deeper and deeper layers of reality, and higher and higher levels of memory or thought[55] by emphasizes the narrative journey toward spiritual enlightenment and self-transcendence. Works of transcendence seek to articulate the sublime, the glorious and the quiet Mystery of life. Eisner's description of *Stimmung* as "a mystical and singular harmony amid the chaos of things" and T.S Eliot's encapsulation as a "still point in a turning world" both point to there being a mysterious singularity to one's existence that informs how we perceive life. Transcendence in film, then, is an attempt at capturing that inherent quality of existence. Returning to my previous discussion on mood, transcendence functions like mood, however, they are distinct. Where mood describes the emotional affect that cinematic techniques and the combination of devices may have on a person, transcendence is concerned with how a film focuses its narrative and aesthetic style in service of a more meditative and spiritual experience. Furthermore, this definition of transcendence describes a shift that a character undergoes in a film from being trapped by their circumstances to attaining a sense of peace, serenity and calm.

1.3.1. How does transcendence function in film?

Cinema retains a distinctive quality about itself that persists and gives life to the image. As Stanley Cavell argued, "film can perceive the world for us without our meddling selves getting in the way. It can train us to pay attention to it and all its sensory details. Its sounds, its textures.

[54] Tarkovsky, *Sculpting in time*, 37.
[55] Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image* (Minesota: University of Minnesota Press), 69.

Whereas a written account can only describe, film can reproduce."[56] Film, by virtue of being able to elicit mood, is able to facilitate transcendence and is therefore a necessary component of the style. The subjectivity of transcendence makes it difficult to understand in ways that scientific concepts are understood. One cannot explain the experience of the spiritual and sublime by means of empirical measurement or scientific observation. However, whether a director is able establish a mood of spiritual contemplation as well as successfully convey what is *transcendent* to their characters through the medium of film merits exploration.

If we recall, Gibson pointed out that when a concept lacks a clear definition, a person must make sense of it within the context their own lives. It would make sense that expressions of transcendence follow a similar abstract nature. What is important about transcendence in film is a director's ability to externalise the internal world of the protagonist and, through the elements of cinema, articulate what is transcendent to the character and by extension, themselves. "To do this," wrote Nichols "the medium must summon us to an original experience of how the world is at work, an experience that usually eludes us."[57]

Important to my discussion are Sinnerbrink's variations of the aesthetics of mood, particularly his definitions of disclosive as well as autonomous mood. He defines disclosive mood as "a mood that reveals a cinematic world, the 'grounding' mood pervading the film, which attunes us to the various tonal qualities of the narrative, its characters, its generic aspects, and so on."[58] This is important to my notion of transcendence as it describes how the space for spiritual contemplation is initially imparted to extend that invitation for meditation. In the same way that one settles into meditation, transcendence must first be disclosed for it to be maintained throughout the film; in other words, a transcendental character's inner world must be revealed. Therefore, transcendence must be established within the opening scene of a film in order for that atmosphere to pervade within the narrative.

With this being the case, I will be closely analysing the opening scene of each of the films I will be discussing in order to demonstrate how the invitation for transcendence may be extended to the viewer. The opening scene not only provides a narrative setting, "it reveals a complex cinematic world imbued with a certain mood, an atmospheric pathos lending the

[56] Stanley Cavell, *The World Viewed: Reflections on the Ontology of Film* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press): 1971.
[57] Nichols, *Transcendence and Film,* 2.
[58] Sinnerbrink, "*Stimmung:* exploring the aesthetics of mood,", 156.

characters' actions and gestures an expressive sense."[59] Ergo, transcendence must first be disclosed by means of an opening scene that establishes the film as one that will explore philosophical subject matter through a subjective lens. By establishing a character's subjectivity from the beginning, the viewer is able to understand from whose point-of-view the tale is being told.

The autonomous mood describes sequences where narrative meaning is enveloped and transformed by mood and cinematic *Stimmung* triumphs over traditional plot. Sinnerbrink's autonomous mood is accomplished when the filmic world is crafted from the hero's frame of reference; from the score that sonically expresses how the protagonist may be feeling, to the editing that displays how moments are being internalised, transcendence in film occurs when the cinematic language is utilised for the sake of subjectivity and every shot communicates something about the protagonist. Once the aim of spiritual enquiry is established, all the elements of the film must work in collaboration to maintain it. Succulently, when cinema articulates the sublime in the ordinary and offers a glimpse into the spiritual, transcendence in film is achieved. Therefore, transcendence occurs when an internal exploration is established and maintained throughout the film and the spiritual is disclosed and interwoven into the diegesis, crafting an experience that invites the audience to reflect upon their own lives.

1.3.2 Knowing the Unknowable through the *lived* body.

> "When mind knows, we call it knowledge. When heart knows, we call it love. And when being knows, we call it meditation."[60]

Vivian Sobchack acknowledges the phenomenological affect that films may have - they touch us and make us feel, they make sense to us not only textually, but also texturally.[61] She acknowledges that our experience of a film reaches further than an engagement with the text, or the narrative, but rather extends into a phenomenological experience that allows us to feel its texture. According to her, the very meaningfulness of the cinema not only emerges from, but also depends upon our ontological existence as 'cinesthetic subjects'- a neologism she coined by combining 'synaesthesia' and 'cinema'.

> Thus, the cinesthetic subject both touches and is touched by the screen, able to commute seeing to touching and back again without a thought and through sensual and cross-

[59] Ibid.
[60] Osho, *The Book of Understanding: creating your own path to freedom* (New York: Harmony Books, 2006), 68.
[61] Sobchack, "Embodying transcendence: on the literal, the material, and the cinematic sublime," 195.

> modal activity able to experience the movie as both here and there rather than clearly locating the site of that cinematic experience as "on-screen" or "off-screen.[62]

Furthermore, she makes the distinction between lived *bodies* and *lived* bodies that I find useful for my discussion of the type of film viewer needed to experience transcendence in a film. The lived *body* is one that is always grounded in the "radical materialism of bodily *immanence*"[63], one that is concerned with the 'here and now' of our existence. However, the *lived* body has the capacity for transcendence – "for a unique exteriority of being – an *ex-stasis* – that locates us 'elsewhere' and 'otherwise' even as it is grounded in and tethered to our lived body's 'here' and 'now'."[64] It is important to note that Sobchack does not consider these states of being to be distinct from each other, but rather that we are able to access both of these modes in life. As such, for one to understand transcendence occurring in a film, one must watch as a *lived* body.

As such, in order for one to experience transcendence in a film, they must be open to the invitation. In embarking on this exploration, I found myself struggling to find the words to explain transcendence as I am aware that we all experience it differently (or not at all). Osho states that the greatest scientist is aware of the unknowable, that "which will never be known; nothing can be done about, because the ultimate mystery cannot be reduced to knowledge."[65] Or rather, it is not knowledge acquired through intellectualisation, rationalisation, and logical reasoning. Transcendence requires that one suspend their rationalities in place of spiritual meditation. We are a part of existence and are therefore unable to completely separate ourselves from it in order to know its ultimate mystery. As such, "there will remain something always unknowable. Yes, it can be felt, but it cannot be known. Perhaps it can be experienced in different ways, but it is not like knowledge."[66]

[62] Vivian Sobchack, "What my Fingers Knew: The Cinesthetic Subject, or Vision in the Flesh", *Carnal Thoughts: Embodiment and Moving Image Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 195.
[63] Sobchack, "Embodying transcendence: on the literal, the material, and the cinematic sublime," 196.
[64] Ibid.
[65] Ibid., 67.
[66] Ibid.

Chapter Two: Conditions of *transcendence*

Filmmakers have long explored themes of the soul and the human condition and there seems to be an innate human desire to express the sublime, the intimate, and the Transcendent. As such, I have identified three conditions of transcendence in film*;* point of view, narrative revelation not resolution and, most importantly, the ability to externalise the internal to provide further clarification to my utilisation of the term applied to cinema. However before understanding this, it is worthy to outline the themes that constitute a tale of transcendence.

2.1. Tales of *transcendence*

A tale of transcendence is a film that follows a protagonist as they undergo a journey toward spiritual enlightenment that is embarked on when the hero is faced with the prospect of their mortality. These films have a spiritual aspect to them and are existential by posing questions about the nature of living. Tales of transcendence put the hero's soul at stake and centre around a conflict that causes the main character to search within themselves to resolve it. Thematically, this describes a films focus and articulation of the internal world of the character, their hopes, dreams, deepest fears and most cherished memories. A tale of transcendence is one that has a clear goal which is paradoxically complete and open-ended. The goal of the film is to explore a character's search for purpose, or rather how purpose may be found within struggle. If we recall, Jaspers understanding of transcendence is an original fundamental unity that escapes any attempt at objectification. For this to be communicated effectively, a film cannot contain any irony. Irony distracts us from transcendence because it deviates our attention from that fundamental unity by referring to other subjects. The irony I am referring to is when a film makes it a point to bring attention to, and subvert the expectations of a particular genre or topic, usually for the sake of comedy. Take for example the irony that drives *Dogma*[67]. The 1999 comedy follows two fallen angels played by Matt Damon and Ben Affleck who, after being banished from paradise, are on a quest to return to heaven on a loophole. The film is rife with blasphemy and satire that may be understood as Kevin Smith trivialising the Catholic religion and all its strict rules.

Instead, a film of transcendence may subvert the genre it operates within, but does so in service of crafting a spiritual parallel. This allows for the story to be based on other works and novels, as is the case with *A Hidden Life,* however, transcendence takes place when the filmmaker is able to rework the tale into something that reflects a part of their perceptive of life. According

[67] *Dogma*, directed by Kevin Smith, (Lionsgate Films, 1999).

to Tarkovsky, the author of the film is at liberty to adjust the original story in any way he wishes so long as his vision is whole, and the script is meaningful to him and has "passed through his own creative experience."[68] This is found when a filmmaker references their own experience in an attempt to capture that sublimity which translates into a work of transcendence. Due to the abstract nature of transcendence, it would follow that these films operate within the experimental genre, although this is not necessary. Through investigation, I had come to find that most films of transcendence were experimental, allowing a filmmaker the liberty to explore the soul unrestrained by the conventions of a particular genre. However, if operating within a genre a film of transcendence may subvert the expectations of said genre without being ironic and 'winking' at it.

2.1.1. Point of View or Perspective

The first condition of transcendence I wish to discuss is the point of view or perspective. This describes how a film is able to establish the protagonist's perspective throughout the film. It encapsulates when a film is not influenced by anything other than the quest for spiritual expansion, and what is meaningful to the character is carefully communicated by the manipulation of cinematic devices to give subjectivity and reverence to the image. Through a clear story, the protagonists' subjectivity informs how the film is shot, edited and heard. Therefore, a subjective point of view is accomplished through the manipulation of cinematic devices that allows the viewer to understand the world through the hero's perspective. An example of this can be found in the use of a personal voice-over narration that provides the viewer with verbal confirmation of this inner world, or sequences that depict the subconscious that gives a glimpse in to that hidden life. Transcendence with regards to perspective occurs when the character's internal world is made part of the atmosphere of the film. Given that tales of transcendence follows individuals who are deeply spiritual in some way or another, their imagery possesses a beauty that reflects that deep sense of serenity and in spite of the troubles they face, the transcendental character is able to see life's beauty in everything and which is reflected through the film's cinematography.

2.1.2. Revelation as opposed to resolution.

On this spiritual journey, one will not encounter absolute truths that will provide answers for the meaning of their existence, rather, the willing participant will uncover subtle revelations about themselves and the world around them, which enables them to contemplate the fullness

[68] Tarkovsky, *Sculpting in Time*, 18.

of their being. In other words, there will be no resolution at the end, only an expansion and crossing over into a new Unknown. Unlike the religious journey, the spiritual one is not concerned with absolutisms. It is aware of life's complexities and seeks to delve into the singularity of existence that governs our perception. According to Ian-Malcom Rijsdijk, there are two elements to most films; the first being the narrative element which is concerned with how the story resolves – whether it be commercial or abstract. Parallel to that, is the journey to revelation which is how a character – particularly the protagonist – changes during the course of the film. All films have an element of revelation, in romance films Character A realises that they are in love with Character B and that is the revelation. These revelations are confirmations of the quest the character is on, revealing information that will enable them to have a deeper understanding of who they are. Similarly, a transcendental character must be lost spiritually in order to be found, and the revelation stems from the purpose they find on this journey. Finally, the protagonist is placed in unusual circumstances that causes them to reflect on themselves and discover reasons for their purpose.

One of the ways cinema is able to convey these revelations is through the non-linear narrative structure. By utilising this device, the artist obliges the audience to "build the separate parts into a whole, and to think on, further than has been stated …"[69] . This mode of revelation relies on an initial confusion that seldomly gets unanswered. Gilles Deleuze writes,

> We have seen how […] perception and recollection, the real and the imaginary, the physical and the mental, or rather their images, continually followed each other, running behind each other and referring back to each other around a point of indiscernibility. But this point of indiscernibility is precisely constituted by the smallest circle, that is, the coalescence of the actual image and the virtual image, the image with two sides, actual and virtual at the same time.[70]

Deleuze describes the mirror-image which has two definitive sides that are distinct but indiscernible: the actual image and *its* virtual image. "The mirror-image", he describes, "is virtual in relation to the actual character that the mirror catches, but it is actual in the mirror which now leaves the character with only a virtuality and pushes him back out-of-field."[71] Furthermore he writes,

[69] Tarkovsky, *Sculpting in Time*, 21.
[70] Deleuze, 69.
[71] Deleuze, 70.

> When the virtual image becomes actual, it is then visible and limpid, as in the mirror or the solidity of finished crystal. But the actual image becomes virtual in its turn, referred elsewhere, invisible, opaque and shadowy, like a crystal barely dislodged from the earth.[72]

Tarkovsky demonstrates this through his use of the non-linear narrative in *Mirror* where montage is used to reflect the indiscernibility of the real and the imaginary. That being said, Malick demonstrates that *transcendence* may also be elicited through films with a singular focus on linearity. In *A Hidden Life*, Malick's strips the complexities of the non-linear narrative in favour of a simplified tale that relays a man's search for meaning in a world that has turned against him. The simplicity of the tale that rarely jumps in time becomes a journey to an inescapable fate that he has brought onto himself. The film's simple narrative leaves space for transcendence to occur. What is important here is a film of transcendence's avoidance of resolution which that allows for space for an awareness of the unknown to reverberate.

2.1.3. Externalising the internal

This brings us to our final condition of transcendence, that is, the director's ability to externalise the internal world of their protagonist. If spirituality is concerned with one's potential to self-actualise, the expression of the self is paramount to transcendence. As such, this is the most important condition of transcendence as it forms the basis of spirituality. Transcendence in film articulates what is reverent and meaningful to the protagonist and their individual connection to the sublime. Unlike other artistic mediums such as literature which is able to rely on the monologue to express a character's inner-being, film must rely on the material or the immanent, to convey this. As described by Sobchack,

> No matter how seemingly 'beyond' or 'outside' of quotidian space, time and 'bodiliness' we imaginatively, intellectually, or spiritually remove ourselves, our bodies in the 'here' and 'now' still provide the material and sensual grounds – the phenomenological *premises* – where that transcendent experience 'makes sense'. The same can be said of cinema.[73]

Thus, to effectively articulate what those instances of connection feel like, the filmmaker must utilise the immanent to express the intangible. Stylistically, the camera tends to wander in

[72] Deleuze, 70.
[73] Sobchack, "Embodying transcendence", 196.

space, breaking the spatial limitations of the frame which allows the viewer to experience the space the same way the central character might. Additionally, these films tend to frame objects within the periphery of our day-to-day lives as important. Diegetic sounds, whether it be environmental sounds – including rain, crackling fire, wind, and dripping water – or dialogue are isolated in such a way to elicit contemplation. How may this sound be significant to the protagonist? What weight do the words spoken possess? In films of transcendence, cinematic techniques are deployed for the sake of transcendental contemplation. Each moment is laden with the inner world of the protagonist that is articulated by the lens of exhalation that the world is shot through. Our sense of *transcendence in immanence* not only relocates us 'beyond' the *presentness* of our flesh to dwell in the world but also refers us reflexively back to our own fleshly presence. As such, the experience of transcendence is reliant on the body, the immanent, the 'here' and 'now'[74] and expressions of it depend on the material.

Furthermore, films of transcendence do not rely on religious symbolism to relay the spiritual, rather, they give reverence to the mundane and articulate the sublime in the everyday. Religious themes may be present in the film, but are not rigidly followed, and its dogma is recontextualised by the protagonist. Religion may be utilised as a means of spiritual expression, but it is not the foundation of it. Instead, the everyday is framed as an object of exuberance and is attributed as much significance as the religious symbol. The mundane is ascribed a significance that connects the character to their internal being as well as their external environment. Externalising the internal in film to elicit transcendence describes when a transcendental character's subjective experience becomes part of the atmosphere of the film, reverberating across scenes and taking a primary role in the composition of the world on-screen. It is when the aesthetic elements of cinema are utilised to articulate what is Transcendent to the protagonist, their Being giving colour and texture to the image.

2.1.4. Moments of transcendence

These conditions culminate into a moment of transcendence that functions as a film's climax. A moment of transcendence describe an instance in which the hero connects to their inner source to obtain a glimpse of their authentic truth. This moment may depict an instance when the characters truth is displayed outward, or an instance when the protagonist connects to an external source that provides them with a universal insight. Additionally, it is the moment the audience 'holds their breath' in exaltation to witness a moment in which the hero crosses over.

[74] Ibid.

Directors may decide to portray this instance differently. Tarkovsky utilises the visual motif of the reflection of a window or glass to cue a moment in which a character *sees* themselves within their authenticity. Take the moment the young woman present in the dream sequence of *Mirror* wipes her reflection to reveal an elderly woman. This moment illustrates Tarkovsky's propensity to use the mirror as a moment of internalisation. Malick represents the moment of crossing over through doorways, arches and thresholds in which one looks up toward the sky, as if gazing upon heaven. These moments are usually followed by shots of dominated by water. Look no further than the shot of the wake that closes *The Thin Red Line*, or the river that finalises *The New World* (2005)[75], or even the shores that Jack stands upon to see all the people from his memories in *Tree of Life* (2011)[76]. Malick's transcendence is a crossing over and arrival to the stillness of water.

What distinguishes films of transcendence to films that merely possess moments of transcendence is the former's ability to craft an experience in which the transcendent becomes an autonomous but integral part of the film's construction. Films of transcendence are able to allow for spiritual enquiry to permeate in every scene, so much so, that it becomes a part of the construction of the film's distinct style. When a transcendent atmosphere becomes autonomous and takes on a primary role in the composition of the film, the film has achieved a moment of transcendence. There are, however, instances in other films when moments of transcendence are reached but this deeper inquiry itself is not fully actualised throughout the film. Christopher Nolan's *Oppenheimer* (2023)[77] provides us with a fantastic example of the transcendental point of view in a scene that takes place after the bombing where Oppenheimer (played by Cillian Murphy) stands at a podium to address the success of the explosion in Hiroshima and Japan's subsequent withdraw from the war. As he makes his speech, there is an instance in which we witness his guilt materialise and the people he gazes upon become corpses gravely injured by the death-machine he created. This intimate glimpse into the psyche of an otherwise ambiguous character, makes the moment impactful as his internal world his externalised. However, the films focus on the revenge plot between Oppenheimer and Straus (played by Robert Downey Jr.) that dominates its second half disallows it from being an example of transcendence in film.

[75] *The New World*, directed by Terrence Malick (New Line Cinema, 2005).
[76] *Tree of Life*, directed by Terrence Malick (Searchlight Pictures, 2011).
[77] *Oppenheimer* directed by Christopher Nolan (Universal Pictures, 2023).

2.2. Circumventing transcendence

Given these conditions, firstly, the film must be able to establish the transcendental character's particular perspective through its use of stylistic elements as well as have the transcendental character a undergo a spiritual journey. Secondly, the spiritual journey is not conclusive in the way of providing the viewer with concrete answers about life, but rather privileges the revelations found through that spiritual enquiry, and finally, the film must be able to visualize and externalise the internal world of the character so that their presence may become part of the diegesis, many films may be considered works of transcendence. Before exploring works that I would consider to be transcendental, it is a useful exercise to further explore how a film may fall short of transcendence to, hopefully, provide more clarification to my criteria.

2.2.1. *Dead Man* (1995)

When starting my exploration of transcendence in film, I had considered Jim Jarmusch's *Dead Man* as an example, however, I had soon come to the realisation that it fails in crucial areas. *Dead Man* is a revisionist western that follows the story of a man named William Blake (not to be confused with the poet although he plays a symbolic role in the story) who goes to the far away town of Machine to answer a call for a job at the Dickinson Factory. At the start of his journey, he encounters a mysterious man (played by Crispin Glover) on the train who prophesizes his death which effectively frames the film as an example of prolepsis, a narrative device in which the future is revealed in the plot before it occurs. Even the name of the film could be seen as prolepsis as it proclaims our hero's fate – he is a dead man. After a strange turn of events, Blake finds himself as an exile who must travel through Purgatory with a Native American spirit guide who calls himself Nobody to the canoe that will carry him into the afterlife. The entirely black and white film follows Blake and Nobody as they encounter various obstacles and people who want to kill him until they eventually reach the Makah village where Blake is able to fulfil the prophesy spoken over him at the beginning of the film. While this film depicts a man undergoing a spiritual journey, it fails in eliciting transcendence as there is an ethereal quality to the story that is not present in this film.

However, the opening scene of *Dead Man* is the closest instance that the film gets to transcendence. After a long train ride filled with passengers that become increasingly hostile as the train travels deeper into the rural Western landscape, William Blake (played by Johnny Depp) is met with a mysterious train fireman who sits across from him. The men regard each other for a moment until the train fireman breaks the silence and asks him to look out the

window. Perplexingly, he describes a strange moment in which Blake is on a boat, and then lying on the ground and staring at the ceiling contemplating the similarity between what is happening in his head and the landscape of the water on which he finds himself. This conversation sets the tone for Blake's experience – people speak to him in strange, incomplete riddles. The men continue their enigmatic dialogue, and Blake tells the train fireman that is on his way to Machine. Upon hearing this, the mysterious man says, "Machine? That's the end of the line." The camera is positioned at a close-up as he says, "You're just as likely to find your own grave." It is only at the end of the film when the audience comes to understand that he was describing the moment of Blake's death. Fade-to-black and the opening credits begin to roll.

Now, let us return to Sinnerbrink's disclosive mood that he describes as the "grounding" mood that persists throughout a film which attunes the audience to the "various tonal qualities of the narrative."[78] The opening scene has potential to frame the film as an example of transcendence in film particularly through its use of the prolepsis. However, but the remainder of the film does not follow through. In fact, the tone of *Dead Man* is an ironic nod to the Western genre and as I have discussed, a film that achieves transcendence cannot be ironic as it deviates the film from its spiritual focus. It is subversive in that it follows the spiritual journey of our hero, rather than being centred around land as most Westerns are, however, it is this irony that disallows it from being an example of transcendence. Another component of the opening scene, as well as the entire film, is the feedback-heavy guitar score composed by Neil Young. Young's guitar starkly contrasts the time period of *Dead Man* which is set in the early 1900s. The juxtaposition of the electric guitar, an instrument associated with a later time in history, in combination with the setting of the early 1900s creates a sense of irony that is maintained for the duration of the film. As such, this sense of irony distracts the film from its transcendence.

Thematically, *Dead Man* has potential however, in spite of being about a man on his spiritual journey and his ultimate acceptance of his death, the film does not adequately explore the concept, nor pose any existential questions regarding death. Rather, the film opts to focus on the human drama of Blake progressively becoming an outlaw. Structurally, the film is divided into short black and white sequences that crosscut between our hero's journey and those who are after him. The deaths that occur – and there are a lot of them – are trivialised with no significance attributed to them except that they aid Blake's transformation into an outlaw, a label given to him by others. Moreover, any musings about death are met with incoherent and

[78] Sinnerbrink, "*Stimmung*: exploring the aesthetics of mood", 156.

unsubstantiated ramblings by Nobody who routinely refers to his student as a "stupid white person". As a result, our protagonist does not ever fully comprehend the journey he is on and is therefore unable to reach a point of self-acceptance. Instead, his self-actualisation is replaced by an 'outlaw poet William Blake persona' attributed to him by Nobody and the townsfolk of Machine. Blake takes a bewildered backseat to his own spiritual journey, using the likeness of a deceased poet as the foundation of his rebirth. This lack of self-awareness in the protagonist does not allow the space for the question of 'what is transcendent to Blake?' to be asked and is subsequently not explored. As a result, the film plays out as Blake simply trying to arrive at death, not stopping to reflect on what brought him to this point. He does not take personal responsibility for his life therefore his self-transcendence is not realised by the end of the film. Therefore, intrapersonal transcendence is not achieved in *Dead Man*.

2.2.2. *Koyaanisqatsi* (1982)

Moving forward, I would like to take a moment to consider the experimental film *Koyaanisqatsi* that, at first glance, presents us with an interesting conundrum to my conditions of transcendence. Receiving its title from the Hopi prefix 'koyaanis-' meaning "corrupted" or "chaotic", and the word "qatsi" meaning "life" or "existence", the title directly translates to "chaotic life" and the film powerfully depicts just that. Unconventional in every sense, *Koyaanisqatsi* is a kaleidoscopic collection of photographed human phenomena and activity that wordlessly conveys humanity, nature and the relationship between them. *Koyaanisqatsi* primarily consists of footage of people, cityscapes and the natural world. Reggio utilises slow-motion and speed-ramping (some shots are reversed) to showcase the chaotic life of the United States in the 1980s. This assortment of imagery is bolstered by its mesmerising musical score composed by Phillip Glass and Michael Hoenig to create an hour-and-a-half hypnotic experience that removes the viewer from their subjectivity to consider the world around them. Furthermore, *Koyaanisqatsi* is liberated from the conventions of genre in service of an experience that defies the norm, and perhaps, accentuates the chaotic rat race of modernity. Through its images and score, the film implores the viewer to consider themselves and their place in the world and what they may be doing with their time on Earth. Is it not, then, a film of transcendence? Not exactly. I will concede that the film is meditative in a sense, however, I would disagree that its primary focus is on the spiritual. *Koyaanisqatsi* presents us with a jarring look at how we live our lives in a modern, technological, and capitalist society but what disbars it from being a film of transcendence as I am utilising the term, is its seeming focus on the relationship between technology, society and the individual. Moreover, set against the

conditions of transcendence I laid out, the film does not establish a singular perspective, choosing to occupy the role of the observer who surveils humanity with a passive gaze. And finally, the film does not hint at any spiritual enquiry or journey taking place. Therefore, *Koyaanisqatsi*, while inviting the viewer to contemplate their existence in a chaotic world via a hypnotic experience, is not transcendent in the sense of the spiritual. It is, however, an exemplary example of how cinema may be utilised to create a hypnotic experience.

2.3. Schrader

The exploration of this paper is not new as transcendence in film has been explored before. The term 'transcendental style' was popularised into contemporary film theory by Paul Schrader in 1972 when he used it to describe the aesthetic style of films that were transcendental in nature. "The style," he explains, "is not intrinsically transcendental or religious, but it represents a way […] to approach the Transcendent."[79] He analyses the film style of Japanese director Yasujirō Ozu, French director Robert Bresson, as well as, to a lesser degree according to him, Carl Dreyer in Denmark. By doing so, he illustrates the "spiritual universality" of the desire to express transcendence in art, referring to the fact that works deal with the human experience of transcendence is an urge that is global, its expressions are not particular to culture.[80] Furthermore, he posits a 'transcendental style' in film that "uses precise temporal means – camera angles, dialogue, editing – for predetermined transcendental ends."[81] Similar to transcendence, the term 'style' is subject to ambiguous meaning. For the purposes of this exploration, we will understand 'style' as a "general representative form".[82] Simply, transcendental style can be understood as a general representative form which expresses the Transcendent (or a person's experience of the Transcendent).

Within these thematic and stylistic pursuits, Schrader identifies three steps of transcendental style as articulations of the *everyday, disparity* and *stasis*. The *everyday* being depictions of the banal and mundane that attributes it with a sort of reverence.[83] It praises simplicity and leading a life that is in tune with one's surroundings. Ozu often investigates everyday themes such as love, marriage, and family by employing the same (or similar) locations, actors, and filmmaking techniques. The second step, d*isparity* describes a visual expression of disunity

[79] Schader, *Transcendental Style in Film*,
[80] Ibid., 35.
[81] Ibid.
[82] Heinrich Wolfflin cited by Paul Schrader in *Transcendental Style in Film*
[83] Schrader, *Transcendental Style in Film*, 67.

between the protagonist and their environment, culminating into a "decisive action"[84]. The disunity marks the "paradox of the spiritual existing within the physical" which "cannot be resolved by any earthly logic or human action.".[85] And finally, s*tasis* which provides a view of the world, frozen for contemplation of the Transcendent. Reaching *stasis* demands careful use of "abundant" and "sparse" means, i.e., articulations of the visible and invisible, the work of everyday life and spirituality. In the conclusion of his thesis, Schrader asserts that the abundant must not overwhelm (too much religiousness in a film) nor be too sparse (not enough narrative); a film should set the viewer in motion by the end, asking them to enter the image, enter into the Transcendent.[86]

While Schrader's work establishes a decent outline that film theorists can use to analyse films of transcendence, I believe that it does not adequately explain how spiritual meaning and atmosphere is established in the films he stylistically analyses. Schrader does not examine what makes cinema a unique medium to represent transcendence, as opposed to other mediums of artistic expression. Furthermore, he fails to mention that a transcendental atmosphere must first be established. That being said, his three articulations; the *everyday*, *disparity* and *stasis* are present in what I consider to be works of transcendence. This paper takes it one step further and describes both the aesthetic and narrative of transcendental films. This exploration maintains that it is cinema's ability to invite us to feel a certain way that allows it to be a medium of transcendence.

Moving forward

Moving forward, I will be applying my conditions of transcendence to *Mirror* and *A Hidden Life*. *Mirror* and *A Hidden Life* are vastly different from each other in terms of structure as well as their execution of transcendence. In doing so, I will demonstrate how these conditions work in a film as well as how they may be done differently. This illustrates the notion's subjectivity and emphasises how transcendence is also a universal experience. It is, I would argue, a part of the human condition. Transcendence in a film is a function of both the narrative in terms of themes and singular focus, as well as aesthetic which allows life to be breathed into the image and while the films of my exploration demonstrate this in distinct ways, the goal of spiritual enquiry remains the same. It is a cinematic style that is purely subjective; focusing on what is

[84] definition
[85] Schrader, *Transcendental Style in Film*, 108.
[86] Ibid., 179.

internal, thereby transcending the traditions of cinema in favour of art. My notion of transcendence in film may be understood in terms of the practice of meditation where meditation is centred around a focus on the breath, transcendence is focused on that journey of ascension. The following chapters will examine how the focus of spiritual exaltation has been established by the opening sequence of both *Mirror* and *A Hidden Life*, and then set against my conditions of transcendence.

Chapter Three: *Mirror*

Mirror

Mirror may be considered Andrei Tarkovsky's most potent work of transcendence. In what initially appears to be a fever dream of phantasmagorical imagery and moments interwoven with memories and dreams lies a contemplative meditation on his subjective human existence. In this experimental drama, Tarkovsky reaches into the crevices of his being and most intimate influences to produce an hour and a half autobiographical (by his own admission) stream of consciousness. *Mirror* is his journey for revelation or an 'absolute truth'. Not absolute in the sense that it is a universal, objective fact, but rather a truth that resonates in his soul. For Tarkovsky, the artist is one who,

> creates spiritual treasures and that special beauty which is subject only to poetry. […] He is capable of going beyond the limitations of coherent logic and conveying the deep complexity and truth of the impalpable connections and hidden phenomena of life.[87]

Mirror follows the recollections of Alexei – Tarkovsky's alter-ego – and moves seamlessly through various time periods including moments from his childhood in the mid-1930s when his mother Maria (played by Margarita Terekhova) was employed at a printing house and his father had recently left the family. He recalls the summers he used to spend at his grandfather's country house and witnessing the barn house burn down. He reminisces on his wartime adolescence where he received rifle training and saw a girl who perpetually had a blister on her lip. Moreover, he remembers the excavation from Moscow under the psychological shadow of being a citizen of a country being called to arms. And finally, he reflects upon his life as an adult with its petty battles of ego as he bickers with his ex-wife, Natalia (also played by Terekhova). All of this is told through poetic imagery and a wandering camera that seems to have a life of its own as it floats through landscapes, hallways, and doorways. If we compare the depictions present in *Mirror* to Tarkovsky's real life, we will find many similarities.

Andrei Tarkovsky

Andrei Arsenyevich Tarkovsky was born in the village of Zavrazhye, Russia in 1932 to poet and translator, Arseny Aleksandrovich Tarkovsky (whose poetry makes an appearance in the film) and Maria Ivanova Vishnyakova, a graduate of the Maxim Literature Institute. His father volunteered for the army in 1941 after having left home four years prior, but subsequently

[87] Tarkovsky, *Sculpting in Time*, 21.

returned in 1943 after he was shot in the leg. Tarkovsky lived with his mother and sister Marina Tarkovsky, at his mother's home in Moscow where she worked as a proofreader for a printing press. Tarkovsky's early life was entangled with World War II, and we can see this influence in most of his films where his characters have either participated in the war or are affected by it. During the war, the three of them evacuated to Yuryevets to live with his maternal grandmother. Many motifs of his childhood – the evacuation, his mother working at the printing press while caring for two kids, and a withdrawn father – feature prominently in the film. The similarities between his life and the recollections of Alexei make this film Tarkovsky's most honest attempt at unmasking his being. When discussing the film he said,

> It is about a Man. No, not the particular man whose voice we hear from behind the screen […]. It's a film about you, your father, your grandfather, about someone who will live after you and who is still 'you'.[88]

Part of being able to transcend ones platitudinous-ness is through honest self-reflection which ideally leads to self-actualisation. It may be done through meditation or other practices that require you to 'look past yourself to see yourself', so to speak and, *Mirror* is Tarkovsky's reflection on the self. He implores the viewer to identify with and connect to the Man so that they may, to reflect on their lives, the past and present bleeding into one instance that informs them who they are. Additionally, *Mirror* is an invitation to transcend the self and ponder how you live on the earth and consider how you are part of the earth.[89] This sentiment is echoed in the film by the doctor who asks,

> Has it ever occurred to you that plants can feel, know, even comprehend? […] They don't run about like us who are rushing, fussing, uttering banalities. That's because we don't trust the nature that is inside us. Always this suspiciousness, haste, and no time to stop and think. [90]

Mirror invites the audience to stop and think and to be inspired by their own lives reflected in the mirror of the film in order to experience the core of spirituality, transcendence. It requires the audience to "watch this film simply, and listen to the music of Bach and the poems of

[88] Ibid., 9.
[89] Ibid.
[90] *Mirror,* 1975.

Arseniy Tarkovsky; watch it as one watches the stars, or the sea, as one admires a landscape,"[91] and relinquish intellectualism and rationalism in sake of the sublime and the inexpressible.

Disclosive transcendence

Mirror opens with a black-and-white scene of a young man, Yuri Zhary, receiving hypnotherapy for a speech impediment that causes him to stutter. The camera lingers on Yuri as he speaks to a woman off-screen. After a moment, the camera pans slowly to the woman off-screen, as though mimicking the eyes of another presence in the room who attentively observes them. As the hypnotherapy becomes more effective, and the atmosphere of the space becomes increasingly hypnotic, the camera slowly pulls out to reveal Yuri and the hypnotist in the room. The walls are white and bare, and the remainder of the space is occupied by minimal furniture. The hypnotherapist performs the ritual of psychologically freeing Yuri from his hinderance, and the scene concludes with him apprehensively declaring, "I can speak!". Notably, we do not see Yuri or the hypnotist at any point in the film after this moment, similar to the balloonist prologue that introduces *Andrei Rublev*.[92] As such, it makes sense that one could interpret the scene as a framing of the film and the experience that follows.

Let us consider the action of the moment. Here, we are witnessing a young man going through hypnotherapy that requires the participant to open themselves to the experience for it to be effective. Therefore, it would appear that Tarkovsky is inviting the viewer to, like Yuri, open themselves to the experience of *Mirror* so that they may too, transcend their ailments. If we return to Sinnerbrink's definition of disclosive mood as "the grounding mood pervading the film which attunes us to the various tonal qualities of the narrative," the atmosphere crafted by this scene is one of contemplation and poetry in the Tarkovskian sense. Tarkovsky's poetry does not refer to the genre of literature, but rather refers to "an awareness of the world and a particular way of relating to reality" – more on that in the next sub-section.[93]

Furthermore, there are certain aesthetic elements in the scene I wish to highlight. Firstly, with a running time of just over four minutes, the entire scene is one take which allows the audience to feel as though it is taking place in real time and making the passage of time feel almost meditative and/or hypnotic. Given that this is the first scene, one could argue that this attunes the audience to the longer scenes that occur throughout the film. More so, the long take allows

[91] Ibid.
[92] *Andrei Rublev*, directed by Andrei Tarkovsky (Columbia Pictures, 1966).
[93] Tarkovsky, *Sculpting in Time*, 21.

the audience time (and space) to contemplate what they are watching. The lack of editing allows the atmosphere time to settle, as one settles into meditation. As such, transcendence is evoked through the long take. Additionally, the camera moves slowly between the two characters, lingering on their features and gesticulations as though they are a pair eyes who is transfixed by the moment. Tarkovsky makes use of the in-camera zoom, a function of the camera that is unnatural to the human eye. As the lens pushes in slowly, effectively that drawing the viewer in. The hypnosis is maintained and elongated by the 'real' passage of time of the uninterrupted take and exemplified by the stark *mise-en-scene* that allows for no distraction. As mentioned recently, the room in which this session takes place is barely furnished. The walls are bare, and the room is empty with the exception of a plant and two chairs. It is crucial in Tarkovsky's films that the *mise-en-scene* reflect the psychological state and personalities of his characters[94], as such, the stark *mise-en-scene* possibly reflects the "blank slate", or clarity of mind required for Yuri to break his speech impediment. Therefore, as demonstrated, the visual style and narrative content of the prelude of *Mirror* provides us with an example of disclosive transcendence through Tarkovsky's effective use of the long take, a lingering floating camera and minimal *mise-en-scene*.

Let us now analyse the remainder of the film and explore how it satisfies the conditions of transcendence.

3.1. Point of View/ Subjective Perspective

Mirror is entirely subjective where each scene is a different moment in Alexei's life stitched together by *his* poetic associations. The film consists of his dreams, memories, desires and deepest regrets and what is significant to him is made abundantly clear; the landscape of the rural countryside that he grew up in, his adult home, and his mother and ex-wife who share the same face in his recollections. Alexei's perspective is established from after the prelude and the film opens with a wide shot positioned behind a woman as she sits atop a rudimentary fence made of logs deep in the countryside. She is surrounded by the flora of the countryside. The branches and leaves create a frame in the foreground through which the audience peers at her. Additionally, her dark green cardigan and beige skirt camouflage her with her surroundings, visually representing Tarkovsky's notion that Man [sic] is a part of nature.[95] The camera slowly pushes in as she smokes her cigarette, and we see a man approaching from far field. Alexei's

[94] Tarkovsky, *Sculpting in Time*, 75.
[95] Ibid., 9.

tired voice accompanies this moment and describes the setting. He speaks of the road that passed through Ignatievo and meandered near the farm he stayed with his family during each summer before the war. He recalls being able to see people from afar from behind a bush in the mid-field and being able to discern, from their route, whether it was his father or not. "If he turned from the bush towards our house, then it's father. If not, it meant it was not father and that father would never come."[96] His description is laden with his memory and is therefore, a personal recollection of the mid-field, the farm, and the "dense oak forest" that stretched all the way to Tomshino. Thus, the audience becomes aware that what is unfolding on the screen is a memory, confirmed by the past tense of his narration. As such, this scene establishes the perspective of the film as Alexei's stream of consciousness.

Furthermore, the *mise-en-scene* and cinematography of *Mirror* is loaded with Alexei's subjectivity. Scenes that appear random and disrupt the 'flow' of the narrative are moments in which his most suppressed emotions are articulated abstractly. For example, soon after a dream arrives a two-minute scene that consists of a phone call between Alexei and his mother. Notably, they do not appear on-screen, rather, the camera tracks through a dimly lit house, presumably Alexei's. Their conversation is short-lived but dense. He asks her questions about his childhood – which year his father left home and the year the barn caught fire, the latter being something the audience witnesses earlier in the film, and she informs him that both these events took place in 1935. From the phone call, the audience can infer that Alexei has not seen anyone – let alone his mother – in a while and he is slightly out-of-touch with the world around him. He does not know what day it is, nor does he know the time, asking, "what is now?". Through their stilted dialogue and Alexei asking, "Mom, why do we have to fight all the time? I'm sorry if I did anything wrong.", the audience may deduce signs of a strained relationship. Their phone call ends abruptly with no response from his mother and the lack of visual confirmation makes it unclear who hung up.

[96] *Mirror,* 1975.

Figure 1: Alexei's home.

The most striking feature of this scene is the overwhelming feeling of loneliness it conveys through its cinematography. From the dimly lit home adorned with thick dark curtains that block out the sunlight, to the slightly blue colour grading that expresses his supressed sadness, as seen in Figure 1, the stylistic elements of this scene all work to communicate the isolation that Alexei does not explicitly express. Tarkovsky, rather than directly tell the audience through explicit dialogue makes use of *mise-en-scene* and cinematography to elicit that feeling. His decision to have empty rooms, hallways and passages on-screen while a camera tentatively moves through the space allows the audience to associate the emptiness of the rooms with the emptiness of Alexei's being. In *Mirror,* Tarkovsky is concerned with how a person relates to their home and the meaning of home.[97] Alexei's loneliness becomes part of the construction of the space, enveloping the scene while adding a narrative richness to a scene that is otherwise bare. The slow track of the camera "allows the viewer gradually to assimilate information about the relationships of objects in diegetic space…"[98] In this way, Tarkovsky is able to convey Alexei's subjectivity in this scene through his careful consideration of *mise-en-scene* and cinematography.

[97] Peter King, "Memory and Exile: Time and Place in Tarkovsky's *Mirror*," *Housing, Theory and Society* 25, no. 1 (2008): 67.
[98] Stuart Minnis, "Roughened Form of Time, Space, and Character in Andrei Tarkovsky's *The Mirror*," *Quarterly Review of Film and Video* 25 (2008): 247.

Furthermore, there are multiple instances when characters either look directly at or speak directly to the camera as though looking at another person. For example, juxtaposing the phone call with his mother, there is a scene in which Alexei has an argument with his ex-wife, however she speaks directly to the camera which in turn follows her around the room as they converse. Alexei's bitter responses are heard off-screen and the camera becomes him, which is another manner in which the cinematography of *Mirror* takes on a subjective point of view.

3.2. Revelation as opposed to resolution (the logic of poetry)

Moving forward, the progression of the film's narrative does not seem to follow any logical or coherent flow. Rather, how the story advances is informed by his poetic logic and the audience is taken through Alexei's honest reflection of himself.

3.2.1. Defining 'poetry'

> Poetry is an awareness of the world, a particular way of relating to reality. So, poetry becomes a philosophy to guide a man throughout his life.[99]

Tarkovsky discusses the notion of poetic cinema in his book *Sculpting in Time*[100] which he wrote because he was unhappy with the overwhelmingly traditional approaches to film and film theory. Tarkovsky's conceptualisation of poetry is a way of seeing and understanding life. It is life with the awareness of the sublime and the irrational. Poetry is the understanding that one's soul and subjectivity is imbued within every aspect of life. There is no way a person can fully step outside of themselves to reach an objective truth about reality, and must instead seek to find their own truth by reflecting upon their own experiences. Tarkovsky's poetry acknowledges this and leans into a person's unique spark of the Divine. The logic of poetry, then, is the logic of authenticity and the search for meaning in a chaotic existence. It is the perception of life's innate beauty that rejects traditional modes of narrative which links occurrences through a linear, logical development of plot. Such a rigid endeavour arbitrarily connects events into sequence "in obedience to some abstract notion of order.".[101] According to Tarkovsky, cinema has been, for a long time, constrained to facile attempts at capturing life in accordance with logic and linearity while it has the potential to "lay open the logic of a person's thought."[102] As a filmmaker, Tarkovsky's goal is to "discern the lines of the poetic

[99] Ibid., 21.
[100] See note 1 above.
[101] Ibid., 20.
[102] Ibid., 20.

design of being" and translate that poeticism into film. Poetic cinema, then, according to Tarkovsky is "cinema that boldly moves away, in its images, from what is factual and concrete, as pictured by real life, and at the same time affirms its own structural wholeness."[103]

3.2.2. Revelation

"The birth and development of thought are subject to laws of their own," Tarkovsky asserts, "and sometimes demand forms of expression which are quite different from the patterns of logical speculation."[104] Paramount to Tarkovsky's cinematic revelation is confusion. The viewer must attempt to make sense of the images on-screen and connect these occurrences to what has previously been established. As the audience works to understand the meaning of these seemingly unrelated moments, poetic connections begin to form in the viewers mind, through which feeling is heightened and the viewer is made a more active participant in the experience of the film. In this way, the viewer becomes a *lived* body.[105] Through this initial confusion, a truth – whether it be within the story or a spiritual epiphany – is revealed within the narrative. "When less than everything has been said about a subject, you can still think on further"[106] and through thinking further, the poetry of *Mirror* is revealed. Each time the audience gets narrative or visual confirmation about something that may have alluded them initially, a revelation is actualised. Similar to how in life we are only able to uncover truths about ourselves through hindsight and reflection, *Mirror* condenses these epiphanies into an hour and a half cinematic experience. However, these moments of realisation brought on by poetic associations do not bring the audience closer to any sort of satisfying, overarching resolution. That is not their purpose. The function of the revelation in films of transcendence is to mimic the experience of questioning life and having epiphanies that bring clarity to the reason for your existence. *Mirror* is satisfied with revelation, not resolution and that is part of transcendence. Thus, privileging the revelation informs the poetic logic of *Mirror* as every scene follows another in reverent isolation that provide no explanation for what happened previously, and give no insight into what might happen next.

Associative linking, "possesses an inner power which is concentrated within the image and comes across to the audience in the form of feelings, inducing tension in direct response to the

[103] Tarkovsky, *Sculpting in Time*, 66.
[104] Ibid., 20.
[105] Sobchack, "Embodying transcendence", 196.
[106] See note 82 above.

author's narrative logic,"[107] which I demonstrated with my analysis of the phone call scene. As such, the disjointed or fragmented narrative structure, liberates Tarkovsky from the constraints of codes and conventions that are present in genre films. Tarkovsky utilises the tools of cinema to express his inner being most authentically and transcends the limitations of the traditional cinematic conventions of classical narration that privilege the progression of the plot by conveying the "deep complexity and truth of the impalpable connections and hidden phenomena of life."[108]

The film is tied together by Alexei's disembodied voice that describes the subjective significance of the setting and characters. He speaks in the past tense, framing the film as something that happened in the past that makes it an example of analepsis. The analepsis (commonly known as the flashback) is a narrative device in which the past is recounted in such a way that disrupts the chronological flow of narrative. Framing the film as a recollection of memories and significant moments in someone's life allows Tarkovsky to remove himself from the expectations of classical narrative that relies on linear narrative continuity. Using analepsis allows the film to flow and take form in the viewer's mind. Additionally, the analepsis enables the film to explore Alexei's subjectivity without being so solipsistic that we do not see anything outside of him. Instead, Tarkovsky maximizes the film's reflexive and fragmented structure to externalise what is transcendent to Alexei and presenting it as a phantasmagorical scrapbook of important moments of his life. Therefore, the complexity of the non-linear narrative allows for there to be a revelatory element to the film that requires the viewer to actively engage on a deeper level.

3.3. Externalising the Internal

This brings me to the final condition of transcendence and how it functions in *Mirror*. A director's ability to externalise the internal is concerned with how the director is able to use what is readily available – the tangible – to express the intangible. It is how the artist captures the sublime through the material. *Mirror*, as we have discussed, is entirely internal and it takes place in Alexei's conscious. Part of the conscious is dreams and I would like to use this section to discuss how Tarkovsky is able to bring forth the poetry of dreaming in *Mirror*. I focus on

[107] Tarkovsky, *Sculpting in Time*, 20.
[108] Ibid., 21.

dreams in particular because they are one of the aspects of human existence that is entirely from the subconscious.

In *Mirror*, dream sequences flow into reality and memories flow into the present moment to the extent that the present is not made explicitly clear until the film's final moments. "Faced with the necessity of shooting dreams," Tarkovsky wrote, "we had to decide how to come close to the particular poetry of the dream, how to express it, what means to use."[109] This highlights something particular to works of transcendence, that is the attempt to convey the 'poetry' of a moment so that the work is no longer a shallow and plastic exploration but a personal, subjective quest for what makes ones dreams distinct. Tarkovsky's concern was how to use film to best convey the irrationality as well as the *atmosphere* of dreams and drew inspiration from his memory.[110] He recalled the wet grass, the lorry load of apples and the horses of his childhood -- all of which make an appearance in the film during the process of making of his debut film *Ivan's Childhood*[111].

For *Mirror*, Tarkovsky took a bolder and more surreal approach to his dream sequences. In one sequence, he dreams of his mother whom, as established, he has a complicated relationship with. She is belittled by others in the real world, but in Alexei's dreams, she inspires awe. The sequence begins with ominous music along with sounds of birds calling and rustling leaves. In black and white, the scene follows a boy child as he walks through a house and eventually lands on his mother washing her hair over a large basin of water. The camera captures her from the front as her wet hair cascades over her scalp and into the water. The lowkey illumination casts a harsh spotlight on her pale figure that causes her to juxtapose starkly with the dark background. Her bent neck creates a disconcerting image, and her movements are further estranged by the use of slow-motion. For a moment, the music pauses, and the sound of trickling water is isolated. The camera pulls back as the sound of water intensifies and the music resumes, and we see her full figure – the basin has inexplicably disappeared highlighting this 'dream logic' – drenched in her nightgown. The room is also wet, with water cascading from the walls and destroying them. The dream progresses and she wraps herself in a towel and walks towards a glass cabinet to inspect herself. In the reflection she becomes the elderly woman of the present and the dream ends.

[109] Tarkovsky, *Sculpting in Time,* 30.
[110] Ibid.
[111] *Ivan's Childhood*, directed by Andrei Tarkovsky (Mosfilm, 1962).

Figure 2: Alexei dreams of his ex-wife.

In another dream, which takes place toward the end of the film after his ex-wife slaughters a chicken and looks directly at the camera with an expression that morphs from eerie satisfaction to barely concealed rage, we encounter one of the few times in the film Alexei's face is revealed. The dream begins with a close-up of his face staring back at her (or the camera) until he turns away to her floating figure above a bed. He caresses her form, and through a voice over reassures her. Like the phone call sequence, their conversation takes place separate from the action of the scene. In his subconscious she levitates above a bed as a dove flutter across the frame, creating a "beautiful and almost frightening image of latent sexual power and eerie capability" that "align the feminine with the arcane."[112] (see Figure 2)

In the film's penultimate scene, it is finally revealed that Alexei is on his death bed. His loved ones believe that he is dying of guilt to which Alexei replies that he simply wished to be happy. Tarkovsky deliberately avoids shooting his face as the camera slowly tracks down his body until landing on his hand which cradles a small bird. He reassures his loved ones that everything will be alright and with one last laboured breath, releases the bird. One may be tempted to ascribe symbolic meaning to Tarkovsky's visuals; however, he was adamant that there was nothing deliberately symbolic about his poetic imagery. Instead, he believed that the image

[112] Carmen Gray, "*Mirror*: 'All is Immortal,'" *The Criterion Collection,* July 6, 2021, https://www.criterion.com/current/posts/7453-mirror-all-is-immortal .

must reflect the universe in essence, as in a drop of water.[113] When discussing the vulnerable flame in *Nostalghia*[114], Tarkovsky's second to last film, Pallasmaa observes "[t]he many images present in *Nostalghia* are not intended to be symbols but rather emotional miniatures, riddles that vainly seek their own explanation,"[115] and the same may be said of the images presented in *Mirror.*

In *Sculpting in Time*, Tarkovsky posits that the first principle of the cinematic image is observation. He arrives at this understanding through a discussion of what he coined the 'artistic image'. The artistic image is, for Tarkovsky, a means of capturing a singular and unique moment of existence, "a kind of detector of infinity . . . towards which our reason and our feelings go soaring, with joyful, thrilling haste.".[116] The artistic image captures the universe in one moment and it is the special virtue of cinema to allow for time to be imbued into a simple image, which, in combination capture infinity. He was inspired by the Japanese poetry, particularly the practice of Japanese *haiku*.[117] "The defining characteristic of Japanese haiku," according to Kreider and O'Leary, "is its attempt to capture a moment of consciousness through precise observation: this rather than to impart a message through the choice and manipulation of the objects depicted with their reified symbolic value."[118] *Haiku* embraces the principles of *shasei*, to 'sketch from life' or to (re)present life objectively, which aligns with Tarkovsky's conceptualisation of the artistic image. He praises the following *haiku* by Basho in *Sculpting in Time*:

The old pond was still

A frog jumped into the water

And a splash was heard.

"How simply and accurately life is observed," Tarkovsky notes. "What discipline of mind and nobility of imagination. The lines are beautiful, because the moment, plucked out and fixed, is

[113] Tarkovsky, *Sculpting in Time,* 107.
[114] *Nostalghia*, directed by Andrei Tarkovsky (Gaumont, 1983).
[115] Juhani Pallasmaa, "Space and image in Andrei Tarkovsky's 'Nostalgia': Notes on a phenomenology of architecture in cinema," *Chora: Intervals in the philosophy of architecture*, eds. Alberto Perez-Gomez and Stephen Parcell. (Montreal: McGill-Queens University Press, 1994): 143–66.
[116] Tarkovsky, *Sculpting in Time*, 109.
[117] Ibid., 66.
[118] Kristen Kreider and James O'Leary, "Time, place and empathy: the poetics and phenomenology of Andrei Tarkovsky's film image", *Visual Studies* 28, no. 1. (2013): 1-16.

one, and falls into infinity."[119] As such, the bird that he holds in his final moments must not be understood as a symbol of anything. The viewer is invited instead to consider what its release may mean in tandem with Alexei's passing or within the context of their own lives. Tarkovsky was preoccupied with the notion that the "material universe constitutes a harmonious whole with an innate spiritual identity"[120] and uses film to express that unity. "The purity of cinema, its inherent strength, is revealed not in the symbolic aptness of images (however bold these may be) but in the capacity of those images to express a specific, unique, actual fact."[121] This aversion to symbolism in Tarkovsky's film must then mean that meaning and affect is elicited by the atmosphere created by the poetic logic of the film. This poetic logic is reflective, sentimental, and meditative. It is atmospheric more than it is symbolic and transcends the logic of classical narrative and invites the viewer to become open to experience. For Gray, "art reminds us who we are, and promises nothing less than a transcendence of mortality – at least for lost voyagers."[122] The conclusion of the film, in conjunction with the understanding that Alexei is the directors alter-ego brings credence to his claim, Tarkovsky is the lost voyager who seeks to transcend his mortality through his art.

Conclusion

In conclusion, *Mirror* may be considered Andrei Tarkovsky's most authentic articulation of transcendence in film. Drawing inspiration from his own lived experience, he presents reality as he has experienced it – filled with love, loss, regret, and the moments of the sublime. If transcendence is concerned with one's soul, Tarkovsky has presented us with his in this phantasmagorical experience. He discloses his intention of spiritual liberation through the prelude of the film, and maintains it throughout its poetic, non-linear structure. He invites connection and transcendence in his viewer through, not by what has been said, but through what is interpreted and felt through the image. His poetic cinema relies on confusion, intuition and a willingness to be an active participant in meaning-making. Tarkovsky synthesizes reality, recollection, and dreams into one instance, condensing the experience of spiritual epiphanies revealed throughout one's quest for meaning. To quote Daniel Sullivan, "the film is an exploration of life coloured by the ultimate threat to life."[123] Tarkovsky was a filmmaker who

[119] Tarkovsky, *Sculpting in Time*, 107.
[120] Gray, "*Mirror*: 'All is Immortal,'"
[121] Tarkovsky, *Sculpting in Time*, 72.
[122] Gray, "*Mirror*: 'All is Immortal,'"
[123] Daniel Sullivan, "Tilich and Tarkovsky: An Existential Analysis of *Mirror*," *Journal of Humanistic Psychology* 52, no. 4 (2012): 451-452.

believed that to create is to commit an act of the spirit and he implored his viewers to find themselves in his art; not to fall victim to the banalities of existence. *Mirror* articulates his filmmaking philosophies, creating art to "plough and harrow his soul, rendering it capable of turning to good."[124] And finally, if I may be so bold as to claim, *Mirror* is a masterpiece. I do not mean that in the sense of creating an arbitrary ranking of cinema, rather I use the term as Tarkovsky defines it in *Sculpting in Time*:

> A masterpiece is a judgement of reality, complete and finished and with an absolute bearing on that reality; its value lies in giving full expression to a human personality in interaction with the spirit.[125]

[124] Tarkovsky, *Sculpting in Time*, 42.
[125] Ibid., 43.

Chapter 4: *A Hidden Life*

Terrence Malick

There are few contemporary film directors that are more polarising than Terrence Malick. Terrence Frederick Malick was born in 1943 in Ottawa, Illinois to Emil A. Malick and Irene Thompson. He had two younger brothers, Chris and Larry Malick, the latter of whom passed away when they were young. Malick graduated from Harvard in 1965 having obtained a Bachelor of Arts, summa cum laude. He subsequently received a Rhodes Scholarship which he used to study philosophy at Oxford University however did not complete it after a disagreement with his supervisor regarding Malick's concept of world in Kierkegaard, Heidegger and Wittgenstein.[126] Malick is a filmmaker many people know of, but do not know much about. Unlike Tarkovsky who wrote about his filmmaking philosophies and spoke freely about his influences, Malick has remained a recluse, refusing to partake in media publicity for his films, and not allowing anyone to take any footage of him on set. As such, people have turned to his philosophical background in an attempt to deduce anything about his approach to filmmaking. While his educational background in philosophy has provided some insight into his possible influences, to reduce his films to philosophical deliberations inspired by Heideggerian concepts has been done in a lot of film criticism.[127] There is merit in this exercise, of course, one only has to have a basic understanding of Heidegger's ontology to see how some of his ideas make an appearance in Malick's films. For Martin Woessner in *What Is Heideggerian Cinema? Film, Philosophy, and Cultural Mobility*, for example,

> The task, for him [Malick], is not to reduce film to philosophy or even to translate philosophy into film. Instead of retreating into the cozy confines of scholarly security, we must remain open to the new and sometimes startling insights that emerge from unexpected juxtaposition.[128]

As such, this exploration attempts to do something different which is to apply Malick's work to spirituality and transcendence focussing on his most recent film, *A Hidden Life*.

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[126] Thomas Deane Tucker and Stuart Kendall, *Terrence Malick: Film and Philosophy* (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing USA, 2011).
[127] see Barnett, Christopher B, "Spirit(uality) in the Films of Terrence Malick," *Journal of Religion & Film*: Vol. 17: no. 1 (2013); Donougho, Martin "Melt Earth to Sea": *The New World of Terrence Malick. The Journal of Speculative Philosophy* 25, no. 4 (2011): *359–374;* or Robert Sinnerbrink, 2006. "A Heideggerian Cinema? On Terrence Malick's The Thin Red Line," *Film-Philosophy* 10, no. 3 (2006): 26-37.
[128] Martin Woesnesser, "What is Heideggerian Cinema? Film, Philosophy and Cultural Mobility," *New German Critique* 113, no. 2 (2011): 131 129-159.

A Hidden Life

A Hidden Life has been hailed as his one of his finest and most demanding films to date.[129] Clocking in at nearly three hours, the epic historical drama recounts the true story of Frans Jägerstätter (played by August Diehl), a young Austrian farmer who passively objects to swear an oath of loyalty to Adolf Hitler and refuses to engage in combat. There is only one way this tale could end in a fascist dictatorship – and it does, the film slowly reaches its inevitable conclusion of Franz's torture and execution. *A Hidden Life* is not overtly political and rarely dwells on the politics of war, rather, Malick focuses solely on Franz's spiritual journey as he remains steadfast in his beliefs. His focus is purely on the soul, and a man's acceptance of his death. The war is used as a backdrop onto which Malick's characters contemplate their mortality – as seen in *The Thin Red Line*. Similar to *Mirror,* World War II becomes the foundation onto which Franz contemplates his mortality and if there is one thing that is made clear in this film, it is that Franz does not fear death. However, the Franz Malick presents us with in *A Hidden Life* is not the same man described in his biography. Growing up, Jägerstätter was a rambunctious, fun-loving, quick tempered, intelligent boy who was fondly remembered by his fellow villagers as one who was "ahead of the crowd", being the first one in his village to own a motorcycle.[130] This is a far-cry from the Franz we encounter in *A Hidden Life* where Malick portrays him as a soft-spoken and modest man who quietly asserts his position. It is briefly mentioned in the film that his sudden change in demeanour may be attributed to his wife, Franziska Schwaninger nicknamed "Fani" (played by Valerie Pancher), who is a deeply religious woman.

This exploration considers *A Hidden Life* to be an example of transcendence in film. Llyod Micheals describes Malick's main thematic concern as "the isolated individual's desire for transcendence amidst established social institutions, the grandeur and untouched beauty of nature, the competing claims of instinct and reason, and the lure of the open road" and *A Hidden Life* encapsulates this.

Disclosive transcendence

The film opens with a black screen accompanied with a man's soft voice, "I thought we would build a nest high up in the trees. Fly away like birds in the mountains," which frames the film

[129] Matt Zoller-Seitz, "Review: A Hidden Life,", *Robert Egbert*, December 19, 2019, https://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/a-hidden-life-movie-review-2019 (accessed June 2023)
[130] Gordon Zahn, ed., *In Solitary Witness. The life and death of Franz Jägerstätter* (Illinois: Templegate Publishers, 1986).

with a wish. In the interior monologue, the voice and body are intertwined in their representation, where the voice is not an extension of the body but a manifestation of its "inner lining"[131]. In this case, the voice articulates the internal world of Franz. As such, the voice-over transcends the visible, bringing forth, or creating an awareness of, his hidden life. Disembodied and lacking any specification in space and time, the voice-over is, as pointed out by Bonitzer, beyond criticism – evoking questions such as "who is speaking?", "where?", "when?" and "to whom?" which points to the transcendental quality of the voice-over in cinema which may be attributed to its ability to exist both within and outside of the diegesis. It transcends the narrative, while simultaneously being entangled in it. Typically, in this disembodied space created by the voice-over lies a character's innermost workings, their deepest fears and greatest desires. "The voice […]," writes Doane, "is the privileged mark of interiority, turning the body inside-out."[132]

Scholars have examined this aspect of Malick's films, Charlotte Crofts observes Malick's tendency to "defamiliarize and disturb" the relationship between sound and image,[133] while Monaco expresses this tumultuous relationship as, "an electric current between the positive pole of the voice-over narration and the negative pole of the images on screen.".[134] Meanwhile, James McLeod analyses Malick's voice-over narration against the cinematic conventions of narration. "Malick's use of voice-over," he argues, "constitutes a visceral sensory 'anti-voice-over narration', using the viewers familiarity with the technique of voice-over narration to systematically subvert expectations of the heavily encoded conventions of traditional narration."[135] Interestingly, there is a moment in the film I would like to highlight in which it seems that Malick inserts his own subjective experience as an artist through the voice. It takes place when Franz has a conversation with the church painter in which they discuss being an artist. "I paint their suffering without having suffered myself […] I inspire hope…" The scene crosscuts between shots of the painter at work and shots of the church. He is not the focus on the scene, rather his words and the larger truth of them are highlighted by Malick's masterful use of the voice-off that transgresses into a voice-over induced by the poetic imagery of the

[131] Mary Anne Doane, "The Voice of Cinema: The Articulation of Body and Space," *Yale French Studies,* no. 60. (1980): 41.
[132] Doane, "The Voice of Cinema: The Articulation of Body and Space," 41.
[133] Charlotte Crofts, "From the 'hegemony of the eye' to the 'hierarchy of perception': The reconfiguration of sound and image in Terrence Malick's days of heaven". *Journal of Media Practice* 2, no. 1. (2001): 20. 19-29
[134] James Monaco, "Badlands", *Take One* 4:1 (1972), 32.
[135] McLeod, "Narrative vistas: subversive voice-over in Terrence Malick.", 57.

church in conjunction with the philosophical, existential tone of his words. Therefore, the voice is what discloses transcendence in *A Hidden Life*.

The use of the voice-over is a prominent feature in Malick's works, from his debut *Badlands* which is told through the naïve voice of Holly to the polyphonic, and the distant existential whispers that dominate *The Thin Red Line*, he is a director who does not shy away from using the voice to allow the viewer into his protagonists' inner world. For example, Malick tends to utilise the voice to deconstruct the dichotomy between internal world and the external world. He uses the voice-over in *The Thin Red Line* to outline Charlie Company more as a collective entity than distinct individuals, making their relentless questions shared musing between them, and their existential questions universal. As observed by James McLeod,

> *The Thin Red Line*'s undifferentiated voice-overs, in predominately similar southern accents and addressed to an often indistinct other […] obscures the traditional inviolability of narrative personae, establishing auditory uniformity parallel to the use of physically similar actors and the absence of clear protagonists […] The voice-overs' subject matter also reflects ambiguously on the self/other boundary.[136]

Throughout *A Hidden Life* Franz and Fani exchange letters while Franz is away in training and then in prison. In these letters they dream, wish, regret, question God, reminisce and describe the simple wonder of the mundanity of their lives, giving all these significance and reverence. His first letter is said over images of him in-training framed through Malick's graceful floating camera that looks at them from a low-angle – not to connote any sense of superiority as is typical of that shot. Rather, the camera peers up at the action with the reverence of someone who harbours a deep appreciation for life. His cuts occur at random, cutting in the middle of the action as characters move on-screen. Mallick's idyllic framing of this time in the military highlights Franz's earlier feelings towards the war; he was not yet disillusioned from the fight. He was a young man fulfilling his duty to his country with hopes that the war will end soon. Fani's response is softly spoken over a montage of life at the village; she implies that she misses him by listing all the tasks they could use his help with around the farm and her focus on the activities on the farm gives them importance and reverence. As such, Malick utilises the dialogue between husband and wife through letters to communicate his inner being.

[136] See McLeod, James. "Narrative vistas: subversive voice-over in Terrence Malick." *Philament August* (2009): 74 56-90.

4.1. Point of View/ Subjective Perspective

If we recall, part of my first condition of transcendence is a focus on a character's spiritual journey. *A Hidden Life* centres around Franz Jägerstätter as he faces the ramification of his defiance. The film is singularly focused on his life and how he has found his purpose through this difficult decision. *A Hidden Life* avoids political discussion and does reveal the atrocities of war, rather it privileges Franz's spiritual dilemma and his unwillingness to "pledge loyalty to the Anti-Christ,", according to him. Various members of the community attempt to dissuade him – the mayor, the bishop, his friends and so forth, however he remains passively steadfast in his decision, not ever providing a more rational reason other than that it goes against what he believes God requires from him. The film focuses solely on Franz's spiritual dilemma and transcendence is achieved through this unrelenting focus on the state of his soul. In addition to this is the technical way what is meaningful or spiritual to him is illustrated in the film. His perspective is established through an aesthetic of reverence, Malick's camera makes the world inhabited by his characters beautiful and with Franz being the protagonist, we perceive the camera to be the world through his eyes. As such, the reverence of the camera becomes a reflection of Franz's point of view. There are two instances where Malick deploys the point of view shot in the film; first, when Franz is being beaten by a guard in prison and secondly, as he enters the room of his execution (more on that later).

4.2. Revelation as opposed to resolution.

"Do you have a right to do this?" asks the judge.

"Do I have a right not to?" responds Franz.

What does one make of the dilemma presented in this film? What *is* the right thing to do? Transcending the morality of war and the killing of innocent lives, *A Hidden Life* presents us with a deeply spiritual conundrum. As mentioned, Franz's refusal to participate in the war is not to assert a political position, Franz's primary concern is the notion of pledging allegiance to the Führer as opposed to the Father to whom he has already given his soul. When Franz consults the bishop, the bishop cites the word of the apostle, "Let every man be subject to the powers placed over him," advising Franz to adhere to the Catholic Church's ruling. However, this is precisely his dilemma, Franz does not believe that this right thing to do for his soul as well as his relationship with God. Thus, Malick chronicles a spiritual dilemma; the Catholic Church or Christ, placing Franz's soul at the centre of the issue. David Benjamin Johnson sums

the films position: "The spirit of the true Christ, the disobedient Christ, is not be found in the Catholic hierarchy but rather in the humanistic conscience of the individual."[137]

However, Seitz notes the "self-excoriation" in the people Franz consults with. In a particularly poignant scene that takes place in the middle of the film when Franz is in military prison – by this point he has been subjected to regular torture and humiliation by the guards – a lawyer asks him whether it matters whether he carries a rifle or not because he is still contributing to the war by shining the shoes and filling the sandbags of the German soldiers.[138] Seitz also notes the films "generosity of spirit" that allows some Nazis to experience moment of doubt as seen when a judge (played by the late Bruno Ganz) invites Franz into his office to question him about his decision.[139] When Franz leaves, the judge takes his seat, imagining what it would be like to be Franz with a dejected and troubled look on his expression. Throughout the film, we see people who agree with Franz but are not courageous enough to translate this into action. *A Hidden Life* is relentlessly a human tale – Malick uses the war not as an opportunity for moral superiority over a period of history that one could easily attribute to evil. To quote Seitz, "What's important here is not just what happened, but what the hero and his loved ones were feeling while it happened, and the questions they were thinking and arguing about as time marched on. "[140]

Furthermore, it is made clear that Franz harbours a deep connection to his family, and they form part of his definition of what is *transcendent*. Their suffering becomes his which is compounded by his suffering in the military. As a result, another way Malick expresses Franz's inner turmoil is through his loved ones. A moment that illustrates this occurs when he speaks to his mother. Her gravelly voice provides context into Franz's childhood, stating that he grew up without a father and is now passing that same fate to his children. The film does not aim to resolve this issue, rather, it presents a piercing look at what his spiritual commitment cost him. That is the entire experience of *A Hidden Life*, the film places the audience intimately inside of Franz's circumstances and examines it in terms of the soul.

[137] David Benjamin Johnson, "Authoritarianism and the Authoritarian Personality: Malick's Tragedy of Disobedience," in *Life Above the Clouds: Philosophy in the Films of Terrence Malick*, ed. Steven DeLay (New York: New York Press, 2023).
[138] Matt Zoller Seitz, "Review: A Hidden Life".
[139] Ibid.
[140] Matt Zoller-Seitz, "Review: A Hidden Life".

Furthermore, unlike *Mirror* whose non-linear structure relies of the logic of poetry and confusion to invite transcendence, it is precisely *A Hidden Life*'s unshakable trajectory toward death that invites the viewer to consider the structures in their own lives that they may desire to stand against in order to obtain the sense of serenity the film elicits. In Malick's earlier works, particularly *The Thin Red Line*, he utilises a non-linear narrative to open up the possibility of a parallel spiritual world within the linearity of their uphill battle, however, in *A Hidden Life*, he is solely focused on that moment of execution. It is a simple, straight-forward story that lacks any plot twist or unexpected events. The first act of *A Hidden Life* establishes Franz's life, what is meaningful and transcendent to him as well as how his life has become affected by the war. The second act outlines the suffering him and his family endures; him in prison and his family's ostracization from the community, and the final act of the film focuses on Franz's execution. The audience is aware of Franz's fate and the film's entire progression is akin to witnessing an inevitable car accident.

Franz's acceptance of his fate is what drives the film forward and his revelations are what drive the narrative forward. In other words, Franz's revelation is the purpose he finds in his journey. His revelations are epiphanies of compassion that he articulates in the form of a letter addressed to his wife in which he compares his suffering to that of those in prison with him and concludes that his is "the smallest of crosses", highlighting his compassion for others. Franz is spiritually tied to those around him, emphasizing with their struggle and finding solace and community with them. Additionally, his resolve is only hardened by the suffering he endures and the quiet acceptance that he will die for 'nothing' which for him is better than betraying his beliefs. "Even though I am writing with bound hands," he pens, "it's better than if my will were bound." He goes on to reflect on his life and reaches an epiphany that, I believe, sums up the entire message of the film, "when you give up the idea of surviving at any price, a new light floods in. Once you were always in a rush, always short of time. Now, you have all you need." Malick strips away the complexity of non-linearity in film for the sake of a distilled exploration of the human spirit in the face of tribulation. The audience, like the other characters in the film, may be tempted to ask 'why?' however that defeats the point. Franz's decision is an act of radical faith – the core of his spirituality. The audience's revelation, then, is the depth of his faith and the film functions as a microcosm of that journey.

A Hidden Life, while considering the moral implications of his actions, ultimately becomes an exploration of faith, the human soul and a man's acceptance of his death. It focuses on Franz's

being, and in the span of three hours, tracks its harrowing and preparation for death coinciding with Tarkovsky's function of art. It is through suffering and humiliation that his soul is able to expand, and his purpose becomes to enact the faith which defines him.

4.3. Externalising the internal

As previously stated, Malick utilises the voice in the form of letters to articulate what is *transcendent* to Franz, particularly Fani who represents to him love, security and home. He first expresses his disillusionment with the war to her in a letter, asking, "Oh, my dear wife. What's happening to our country?". Furthermore, it is Fani who introduces their lives in the film as she retells the story of the first time she met Franz. This voice-over is interesting because it starts off as a conversation between the two of them at the breakfast table, signalled by the shot of them seated there before the scene changes to a flashback of the day in question and transgresses into her reminiscing about an unattainable past over various shots of their lives simplest joys; their playful love, their home, his mother, his family, and village of St. Radegund which displaces her voice in time. Their peaceful life before the war narrated by his wife frames it with a sweet tenderness. The fact that Fani is the one who tells the audience what is transcendent to Franz is another way in which Malick externalises the internal, by allowing other characters to fill in those gaps – making them part of what is transcendent to him. We must assume that it is deliberate that through Fani's voice that his love for those aspects of his life is articulated. It is not that they speak on his behalf, rather, he speaks to the audience through them.

Furthermore, Franz and his family are deeply connected to the rhythm of the Earth and the changing of seasons, partly because their livelihood – farming – depends on this connection. Malick articulates the importance of nature to his characters by framing each scene with imagery of tranquil landscapes and the rolling hills of their home. He tends to end his scenes by fading to black and opening the next scene with an establishing shot of the landscape they are in. As such, nature becomes a reverent, changing force whose ever-changing patterns coincides with the change in their lives. For example, the moment Franz makes his life-changing decision is marked by the official change of season in Radegund; the cool white of winter externally articulating the next phase of Franz's journey. Winter, while breathtakingly beautiful as seen through Malick's cinematography, is unforgiving to plant life and crops, foreboding an era of hardship. However, Franz is steadfast in his faith, unable to feel perturbed. In fact, his time in prison seemed to bring him closer to that peace once he is aware of what

will happen to him and has accepted it with grace. His connection to nature remains as he remarks to his wife, “Nature does not notice the sorrow that has come over the people.” And connects this with the blackbirds outside his prison window that sing and “seem to know more about peace and happiness than humans.”

Execution Scene

The final scene of *A Hidden Life* is, in my opinion, a clear example of transcendence in film. It is the culmination of a three-hour journey; the moment Franz crosses over. Here, Malick takes the viewer through our hero’s final moments. The scene is crosscut between the final announcement of his verdict as well as his memories of Radegund, his children, his mother and Fani. His final letter is addressed to his loved ones while James Newton Howards harmonious score amplifies his words as he bids them farewell and apologies for the suffering they’ve had to endured at his expense. At the site of his execution, Malick strips the music, focusing on the environmental sounds of his waiting room, the prison courtyard – prison shoes crunching on gravel, the cadence of their chains as they shuffle to the bench. Shot through a doorway, the soldiers bring the first man inside.

Malick brings us to our protagonist as he sits and awaits his turn. He is shot through a low-Dutch-angle that displays the clouds in the sky, connoting heaven or the ascension that is about to happen. The audience hears the song of birds, and the camera begins to travel through the surroundings, pushing in on a chimney, floating through buildings and peering up at the wispy leaves of a willow tree against a blue-grey sky. The audience hears the rustling of leaves as Franz, off-screen, begins to whisper an illegible prayer, delicately harmonising with the sound of rustling leaves, almost as though the trees are praying. His whispers continue as the camera cuts back to him; however, his lips remain sealed, making this prayer non-diegetic. It is the utterance of his being, marking the final glimpse into his mind. In one final moment alone, he hears his wife’s voice saying his name and closes his eyes. For a brief moment, the scene cuts back to a long shot of him riding his motorbike in the countryside, a time he felt truly free.

The memory ends and Franz is told by soldiers that it is time to go. The iridescent, sparkling imagery of the exterior and memory are starkly contrasted by the interior the building which is shroud in darkness. There is minimal light, the walls are covered by shadow and the executioners are adorned in black attire. The shots inside the building are stark, adding to this claustrophobic element to the framing. However, as the camera crosses the threshold of a doorway, it looks up at the skylight that casts a soft, warm glow that glitters with dust,

disrupting the darkness of the room. Here, the camera follows Franz's gaze up at the 'new light' of acceptance of his death which is confirmed in the next shot as the camera becomes his point of view as he enters the execution room. Only the ambient sound of the room as well as their footsteps can be heard as he walks towards the chair; the executioner lifts the bucket and the screen hard cuts to black.

The next shot fades-in to a flowing river, water dominating the frame for a moment signalling Franz's passing. If we compare this to how he framed Pocahontas's death in *A New World* where her death is narrated and her soul 'carried back over the ocean' to her birthplace. *A Hidden Life*, by comparison, seems to enact this moment, sealing it with the flow of water. The following shot is of a villager in St. Radegund who rings the church bell – a leitmotif that sonically starts most scenes – which informs the community that Franz has passed on. They take a moment of silence to acknowledge this. Howard's heart wrenching score accompanies the moment as the audience sees Fani and her family adjusting to life without him, emphasizing once more, how change is constant, like the seasons. The film closes with an extreme long shot of a mountain summit in St. Radegund accompanied by Fani's response to the request her husband made at the start of the film, "Franz, I'll meet you there, in the mountains.".

As such, the execution scene becomes a culmination of all of these conditions, making it what I consider an exemplary example of transcendence in film. The subjectivity of his journey culminates in his last moments; we hear his internal prayer, and we see through his eyes as he gazes upon the new light of the skylight as well as his entry into the execution room. The silence in the room is broken by the clang of the bucket, reminiscent of the funeral bell heard throughout the film. Here, Malick delivers a scene that poignantly presents the audience with that final moment as the scene's pacing is similar to real life, placing the viewer in the room with him, as him. However, Malick does not show us the actual execution, leaving that to our imagination, satisfying the second condition that revolves around revelation as opposed to resolution through the film's open-ended ending. After the hard cut that removes the audience from the prison, we return to St. Radegund where we see the community mourn him. There is an inexplicable knowledge amongst them that Franz has passed, and through this understanding, step up to correct their previous wrongdoings. And finally, Malick externalises Franz's being through the whispering trees that mimic his prayers.

As such, Malick's transcendence is full of existential questions about one's place in the universe, their capacity to feel pain, and questions about life and death. We see examples of

this in *Badlands* with Holly's existential crisis as she looks at those archive pictures, as well as her naïve disregard for death throughout the film. *The Thin Red Line* is an extreme example of facing one's mortality when every breath feels borrowed as it is in a battlefield. *Tree of Life* is a man's recollection of his childhood when he finds himself in a meaningless present stricken with grief and regret as he mourns the death of his brother set against the creation of the universe, and *A Hidden Life* is a man's journey to the execution room and his acceptance of death for the sake of his faith. The entire movie is this man's preparation for death as he 'atones' – isolation, torture, ostracization – his soul until the very end when Malick gives us an exemplary example of transcendence in film.

Conclusion

In conclusion, *A Hidden Life* satisfies my conditions of transcendence differently from *Mirror.* It establishes point of view by focusing solely on Franz's spiritual dilemma and journey as he faces the ramifications of his decision. Transcendence is achieved through its focus on Franz's soul, its focus on his hidden life, so to speak. On a more technical level, Malick deploys the point of view shot during moments where the audience would rather look away from; when Franz is being beaten as well as when he is being executed. Furthermore, the film is shot through an aesthetic of reverence that reflects the love Franz has for his wife, his family, his community and his home village. Additionally, in Malick fashion, the voice-over is deployed to add to the interiority of the image. The film does not offer any resolution, opting to present the audience with the spiritual dilemma that Franz experiences. Nor does the film demonise those who do not stand with him, it allows them the "generosity of spirit" to reflect on their political standing. Furthermore, unlike *Mirror* whose poetic logic elicits transcendence through the poetic associations that the audience must make, *A Hidden Life* is an unrelenting, three-hour, almost meditation on spirituality and faith. The film, despite being Malick's more linear film, does not offer resolution in the way that we have come to expect from classical narration. Instead, Franz's revelation is the purpose he finds on this journey and his hardened resolve as he remains steadfast in his faith. And finally, Franz is intimately connected to everything around him; the compassion he possesses for his fellow prisoners as well as his love of nature that reflects the seasons of changes in his life.

Conclusion

I began this exploration seeking to understand what it was about certain films that moved me spiritually. Through an investigation that resides somewhere in between philosophy and spirituality, I arrived at transcendence. Transcendence in film is a concept that describes the aesthetic and narrative aims of a film that wishes to illustrate the experience of, as well as extend the invitation for, intrapersonal transcendence. Transcendence is the unrelenting focus on spirituality in a film and describes the affect a film may have on a viewer after it has been viewed. It is deeply intuitive, preferring the sublime to the rational, and the subjective to the objective. Transcendence does not seek resolution; it only poses questions and acknowledges the deep mystery of existence. Furthermore, transcendence is a mode of cinema that overlaps with spirituality and philosophy, however, unlike the logical rigidity of philosophy, or the dogma of theology, transcendence presents us with a different offering for the nature of being, mainly, it is an individual's search for purpose. This notion suggests a 'sub-genre' of cinema that combines aesthetic devices and narrative content to guide the viewer through a journey of self-actualisation. Narratively, the potential for transcendence describes when the hero is faced with the prospect of their death, which, in turn, becomes the canvas onto which they consider their mortality. The hero, then, embarks upon a spiritual journey aided by moments of self-reflection to obtain ascension, a journey I coined a tale of transcendence. Aesthetically, it is shot, edited and scored through an aesthetic of reverence which brings life to the image.

The notion of transcendence in film finds its inspiration in the works of Andrei Tarkovsky and Terrence Malick and therefore focuses on how transcendence plays out specifically in their films. As such I outlined three conditions for consideration while acknowledging how they may appear differently for each filmmaker; the point of view, privileging revelation as opposed to resolution and finally, the externalisation of the internal. The point of view describes how a film of transcendence must establish their hero's subjective perspective by shooting through an aesthetic of reverence that brings exaltation and *Stimmung* to the image. Furthermore, the next condition requires that a film privilege narrative revelation as opposed to narrative resolution. Because tales of transcendence follow the hero on a spiritual voyage and the revelation is an instance of spiritual clarity within the pattern of our lives that gives one purpose, it may be likened to an epiphany where the revelation of transcendence brings one closer to their truth.

There are no absolutisms present in transcendence which is translated into film through ambiguous or open-ended endings. In addition to this, the revelation may be portrayed through a non-linear narrative structure in which epiphanies are reached during the viewing experience. This functions to mimic the experience of reality which is an amalgamation of memory, dreams and the present. Tarkovsky dubbed this the logic of poetry which prefers an authentic portrayal of existence in film. Conversely, focusing on the linearity of the journey to its inevitable end, and maintaining a strict focus on spirituality of the tale, also allows for transcendence in a film. In both cases, by privileging the revelation as opposed to enforcing resolution, films of transcendence leave narrative space for transcendence to occur. And finally, a film of transcendence is characterised by its ability to externalise the internal world of the character, where the film is informed by an aesthetic of reverence which gazes at the world with veneration that colours the film world with sublimity. I discussed *transcendence in immanence* which, effectively, describes the task of utilising the immanent – the material – to convey the sublime and deep mystery of being.

Moments of transcendence describe an instance in the film where the hero connects to their inner source to obtain a glimpse of their authentic truth. Furthermore, I discerned that what differentiates a film possessing moments of transcendence from films of transcendence is their ability to allow for spiritual exploration to permeate in every scene, to the extent that it becomes a part of the film's *Stimmung,* and the audience is left transfixed in a moment. I cited *Oppenheimer*, *Dead Man*, and *Koyaanisqatsi* as films with transcendental potential but ultimately deviates from the formula, paying closer attention to the latter two. In the second section, I turned my attention to *Mirror and A Hidden Life* to demonstrate how condition functions in film, taking their varied approaches into account.

Through my analysis of *Mirror*, I illustrated Tarkovsky's transcendence as a disjointed, kaleidoscopic, honest recollection of his life. He drew from the intimate moments of his youth, adulthood as well as his dreams to produce an autobiographical reflection into his time on Earth. He views the spiritual journey as one not concerned with time and logic, but poetry and the inexplicable and every moment flows into the next with no distinction between past and present, just Being. The ultimate burden for Alexei is regret – for his strained relationship with his mother, for the disintegration of the relationship with his wife and the subsequent distance with his son, which seeps into most scenes of *Mirror*. Tarkovsky's transcendence is introspective, and surreal, reflective, and personal, going as far as incorporating his father's

poetry into the voice over of the film. In *Mirror,* he lays bare the most intimate parts of him through cinema. His camera pans through space and lingers on objects that are seemingly insignificant – one shot that comes to mind is the close-up shot of the full teacup overflowing with rain in *Solaris* (1972)[141]. There is something so haunting about that moment in the film that says so much through the simple image drawing inspiration from Japanese *haiku.* As such, Tarkovsky's cinematic transcendental style is concerned with capturing the Universe through the simple image with a narrative structure that is authentic to the human experience.

Conversely, Malick's *A Hidden Life* shows us transcendence as an unrelenting journey toward death. He uses the faith (and fate) of one man to expand upon the beautiful simplicity of what it means to be alive. Transcendence in this film is that overarching knowledge that our main character will not concede against what he believes is right, despite the consequences. The epic does not meander into discussions of politics or judgement, nor does it linger on issues of morality, religion or philosophy. Instead, the film follows a simple man who places his soul at the proverbial altar, so to speak and it is almost as though the film whispers "only God may judge me." Franz becomes a passive protagonist whose innerworkings are externalised by what Malick chooses to frame as significant; the simplicity of farming[142] , the beauty of St. Radegund, the practicality of everyday living, the song of the blackbirds that remind him of life's transience, as well as the constant changing of nature. To divert slightly, the opening sequence of *The Thin Red Line* sees Witt's character contemplates his mother's passing, hoping that he will meet death with the same calm that she did. Franz, 20 years later into Malick's return to cinema, is the embodiment of that *calm*, making him, perhaps, Malick's most transcendental character. Unlike the *Tree of Life* where Malick gives us that moment of transcendence with Jack's where all his loved ones greet him at the shores of forgiveness and self-acceptance, in *A Hidden Life*, he leaves that moment to obscurity and mystery, opting instead to show how life, like nature, carries on through the inclusion of the villagers of his hometown.

Obviously, these films approach have quite different approaches to transcendence, however, they both possess a spiritual aspect that is integral to the world of their films. Schrader makes two points in the conclusion of his thesis that apply here; first that "spirituality in art must have room move, to change with the times and the arts. The best definition of spiritual art is one that

[141] *Solaris*, directed by Andrei Tarkovsky (Mosfilm, 1972).
[142] The first thing we see our main character do with his wife is plant potatoes.

is similarly in flux."[143] As such, we cannot expect films that deal with transcendence to be executed it in the same way. Secondly, he adds that, "spiritual art must always be in flux because it represents a greater mystery also in flux: man's relationship to the Holy."[144] And as demonstrated in the discussion of *Mirror* and *A Hidden Life*, each film possesses their own way of expressing the transcendent.

This exploration has attempted to clarify what it is about certain films that "evokes in us a sense of presence"[145], using transcendence as a mode of making sense of this experience. The films analysed in this study are nearly fifty years apart, providing evidence of the persistence of transcendental cinema, or transcendence in film. Tarkovsky and Malick are vastly different filmmakers, however, I would argue that they search for the same thing in film as they both focus solely on a sort of spirituality of cinema. Transcendence amplifies larger question of making meaning within our own lives, and if no one can definitively answer the reason for our existence, it is up to the individual to find expressions of meaning for themselves. As such, the differences in Tarkovsky and Malick's approaches to transcendence demonstrates this universal quest.

The work done here does not wish to pose itself as an 'end-all-be-all' for studies regarding transcendence in the future. Rather, my simple request for viewers and readers alike to consider these three conditions as a loose framework for how transcendence may be articulated in a film. I acknowledge that my area of exploration is small, focusing solely on two directors where a larger group of films may have been, perhaps, more useful in seeing whether my conditions hold up. This was intentional – in order to demonstrate how transcendence may work in film and my aim was to closely analyse the films of the directors that inspired the initial thought. I found it fascinating how there was Something that transcended the narrative of each of these films, an intention that is felt during and after viewing. The conditions laid out in this thesis are the ways in which I was able to make sense of this experience.

[143] Paul Schrader, *Transcendental Style in Film*, 185.
[144] Ibid.
[145] Nichols, "Transcendence and Film", 77.

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