14 Silence Is Golden, or How the West Meets Japan in the Theory of Spiritual Film Aesthetics

Dan Chyutin

In a 1994 written tribute, the late film critic Roger Ebert attempted to decipher what drew him to Yasujirō Ozu, often considered in the West as the most Japanese of all Japan's directors. Ozu's *Japaneseness*, supposedly manifested in a recurring engagement with "the daily emotional details of Japanese middle-class family life," would have been an obstacle to such an attraction if it were not, according to the reviewer, for the cineaste's ability to transcend particularity toward universal intelligibility.[1] Searching for the key to this universal reach, Ebert locates it in style rather than content. Ozu stylizes in the sense of restraining cinema's expressive range: always shooting from a low angle, tatami mat height; rarely employing movement, certainly not for its own sake; preferring a distant and impartial perspective over dramatic close-up; reducing high drama in favor of subtler interpersonal dynamics. These characteristics appear to strip down rather than add up, exposing the infrastructure of a globally shared reality. The director's stylistic approach is therefore figured as one of asceticism; in a world full of speech, as the review's title tells us, "*silence* is golden for Ozu."[2]

My point in evoking this homage is not to give further credence to its claims on Ozu's oeuvre, which ignore a considerable amount of talking that the Japanese filmmaker actually allowed to transpire in the space of his work. Instead, what I wish to highlight through Ebert's words is the commonplace reduction which they exemplify—that of Japan to minimalist restraint and Ozu to its emblem. While ubiquitous across different precincts of film discourse, this perspective has been particularly crucial to Western critical thinking about cinema's spiritual aesthetics, which though Christian-centric, has occasionally taken an avid interest in Japan and Ozu. The insights formed in spiritual film theory around Ozu's movie-making, in turn, have done much to shape the popular understanding of the latter's style and effects, well beyond the narrow confines of a minor academic subfield. The impact of Ozu's image as a champion of stylistic restraint, I would argue, even extends to the practice of contemporary filmmaking itself, which at times employs a supposedly Ozuesque aesthetic so as to reach certain spiritual ends. Such, I further claim, is the case with Martin Scorsese's historical epic, *Silence* (2016). Though Ebert includes Scorsese in the list of his favorite filmmakers, with which he opens the aforementioned review, it is apparently not for the same reason as Ozu. Indeed, there seems to be a

DOI: 10.4324/9781003248279-19

marked difference between the American filmmaker's robust style and the Zen minimalism attributed to Ozu's films. Yet in *Silence*, his first foray into Japanese subject matter, Scorsese takes his aesthetic on an Ozuesque turn, thereby signaling that, for him, silence may be golden as well. Speculating on the meaning of this shift, as it applies to the encounter between Western spiritual film theory and an imagined East, is the task of the following pages.

A Spiritual Style Between East and West

When charting the relatively meager history of scholarship on spiritual film aesthetics—that is, on the function of film form in provoking the experience of a radical "beyond"—it may be fruitful to choose the immediate post-WWII period as a point of departure.[3] During that historical moment, a dominant approach to spiritual film stylistics began to take hold in the writing of certain key thinkers—most prominently, André Bazin, Henri Agel and Amadée Ayfre.[4] Generally stated, the various iterations of this approach tend to coalesce around two basic assumptions: (1) that the experience of a beyond takes place in approaching reality, rather than through shutting our eyes to it; and (2) that for this encounter to happen via cinema, a markedly unfamiliar view of "the real" should be shaped on-screen, one based on a style which *eliminates* all common preconceptions on reality that prevent us from experiencing its essential nature. Importantly, the push for deprivation appears to originate from the conflation of at least two strands of thought. On the one hand, there is phenomenology, which was experiencing a heyday in post-liberation France. As Dudley Andrew notes, the phenomenological emphasis on precategorical experience coincided with these writers' interest in a "natural, immediate, and intuitive way of understanding life" that yields "the kind of truth which can't be reduced to logic."[5] Even more appealing, however, was the particular mode of elimination offered by Husserl's bracketing method (epoché), which leaves out much of what we would normally consider constitutive of "reality." This phenomenological perspective, on the other hand, is interweaved with a commitment to Christian thought, which Andrew peculiarly understates in his account. While phenomenology during this period was decades away from its late-twentieth-century theological turn,[6] Bazin, Agel and Ayfre, in different ways, introduced the possibility of regarding reality's essential truth as something other and more than the immanent: as Grace, whose nature, in Ayfre's words, "is to be hidden and ambiguous precisely because it is the human face of the transcendent Mystery of God."[7] Under this heading, bracketing is overlaid with shades of Christian apophatic theology and monastic asceticism, so as to support a valuation of stylistic restraint, of less as more, of a silence writ large on the visible and audible.

While a closer reading of, say, Bazin and Ayfre may yield greater theoretical variety, it is their model of aesthetic restraint which translated best and most into the English-speaking world. Helpful in this was its widespread dissemination through critic-cum-filmmaker Paul Schrader's 1972 book *Transcendental Style in Film*. A former theology student at Calvin College, Schrader wrote this study as an attempt to reconcile his prior spiritual interests with his emerging

cinematic ones. The result was an argument advocating for the existence of a universal formal model that expresses what "is beyond normal sense experience"[8] and is founded on a "stylization … of elimination,"[9] where "given a selection of inflections, the choice is monotone; a choice of sounds, the choice is silence."[10] Though indebted to earlier French formulations on ascetic realism, Schrader, however, makes a more consistent attempt at expanding their purview beyond the confines of Western Christianity. In this, he defines Ozu's cinema as epitomizing transcendental stylistics in the East, as much as famed French filmmaker Robert Bresson's cinema, known for its unyielding austerity, epitomizes it in the West. In Schrader's formulation, Ozu is a Zen master, whose style follows the "basic principle of … *mu*, the concept of negation, emptiness, and void."[11] As an artist in the Zen Buddhist tradition, Ozu "directs silences and voids," not in order to promote a vision of absence, but rather to expose a presence within the supposedly absent.[12] It is this attribute that, for Schrader, merits Ozu's definition as the most Japanese of filmmakers, in contrast to his perennial counterexample, the arguably Westernized Akira Kurosawa, whose cinema may appear too exuberant and flashy by comparison. Yet Zen as the supposed essence of Japaneseness is only important for Schrader to the extent that it is made to shed its cultural particularity and reveal itself as yet another example of a universal aesthetic model.

In spite of it being formulated half a century ago, Schrader's volume (which was republished in 2018 with a new introduction) has dominated much of the subsequent scholarly discussion on spiritual film aesthetics. This dominance, however, was not without its detractors. Japanese film scholarship, for example, frequently criticized Schrader for his generalized conflation and abstraction of Ozu, Zen, and Japan. Most scathing in this context was arguably Mitsuhiro Yoshimoto, who railed against Schrader's eager attempt "to mold Ozu into a Zen artist of the East whose personality and culture are so steeped in Zen that his films express the Transcendent," claiming that in this the writer uses "'Zen' and 'Orient' [as] magic words that miraculously solve critical dilemmas and contradictions of his theory of auteurism."[13] Two critical moves are especially troublesome for Yoshimoto: First, that Schrader ignores all dimensions of Ozu's work that do not fit the latter's definition as a transcendental artist, including and not limited to the fact that Ozu was a very popular filmmaker in Japan rather than an esoteric one like Robert Bresson; and, second, that Schrader essentializes Japan as Zen, and reduces Zen to that which best fits his idea of transcendental aesthetics—namely bare-boned minimalism—in order that its cultural particularity will diminish and its commonalities with a supposed universal would come to light. But this universal hiding within the particularly Japanese—which, according to Schrader, only a Western viewer, unburdened by Japan's cultural idiosyncrasies, can detect—is in Yoshimoto's argument the projection of a Western-Christian mindset. Simply put, Schrader wanted to recreate Ozu in the image of the Jansenist Bresson.

Similar sentiments appear in Darrell Davis's more recent reappraisal of Ozu's work. Davis asserts that Schrader's argument on Ozu as a Zen artist is "a product of its time [,] in line with the American counterculture's discovery of

works by Daisetz Suzuki, Alan Watts and Herman Hesse."[14] As such, it was affected by the cultural narrowmindedness of this discovery (or rather, mis/appropriation), which uses Zen "like a crutch or heuristic" to confront something "that feels unfamiliar, yet moving and profound."[15] Thus, for Davis, "Schrader's emphasis on Zen shortchanges Ozu's artistic deliberations,"[16] which *in toto* engender the alleged ineffable effect of the latter's films. What is missed in its "absorption into Zen" is just how much of Ozu's style displays "mischief and playfulness."[17] While Ozu shows a proclivity toward moments of "deep stillness" that invoke the sternness of Zen, these do not overshadow, for Davis, the filmmaker's penchant for comedy.[18] Accordingly, it is not so much the dominance of the former as its interplay with an equally dominant latter that brings about the ineffable in Ozu's oeuvre. And since this is not an ineffable that complies to "the somber holiness offered by Schrader," it therefore also invites a different theoretical reading of spiritual stylistics "that embraces, not disdains, humor."[19]

Yet criticism challenged Schrader's reductive account not only with regards to the "East," but also with regards to the "West." In this context, critics often objected to the transcendental model's overreliance on sparsity and even negation. Thus, for example, Terry Lindvall, W. O. Williams, and Artie Terry argued that in spite of claims for universalism, Schrader's valorization of a stylistic *via negativa* should be contextualized in relation to his "Calvinist and even Gnostic sentiments, and an academic elitism that prefers spirituality as an intellectual or mystic insight."[20] Schrader and his acolytes, according to this critique,

> presume the transcendental is characterized by darkness, silence, stasis, and the like, because they are drawn a priori to those expressions of the Holy based upon their intrinsic religious sentiments, and they subsequently view the transcendental cinema expressions of all other cultures through those filters.[21]

In contradistinction, the writers "contend that a balanced conceptualization of the transcendent is suggested by a *via positiva* that can be situated in cinematic representations of African American Christian rituals."[22] In their "spectacular transcendence," these depictions not only embrace cinema's expressive potential rather than work against it, but also gesture toward the importance of corporeal dimensions, as well as that of community, within the representation and experience of the spiritual.[23]

Reducing Schrader's paradigm to austere Protestantism may ignore the complexity of its take on apophatic Christianity,[24] but it is useful in highlighting a distinction from the aesthetic predilections of his long-time collaborator, Martin Scorsese, whose cinema has been arguably marked by an indelible "Catholic imagination."[25] A seminarian in his youth, Scorsese moved away from clerical life and into filmmaking, yet as he noted in a 2016 interview, the Catholic faith has always stayed with him. In his words,

> My search for faith has never really ended from when I became aware that there was such a thing as faith and started to look at how it's acted out in your daily life. It's in *Mean Streets* and it's in *Taxi Driver* and it's in *Raging Bull*, ultimately. And then *The Last Temptation of Christ* was a major step for me in trying to come to terms with these themes, these ideas of the Incarnation of Christ—what does it really mean?[26]

Whether or not exclusively Catholic, Scorsese's signature aesthetic does not subscribe to the supposed puritanism of the transcendental style, even in those films such as *Taxi Driver, Raging Bull*, and *The Last Temptation of Christ* for which Schrader wrote the scripts. Indeed, for Richard Blake at least:

> It is clear that the two artists have different notions about presenting "the holy" on the screen. In his book [*Transcendental Style in Film*], Schrader praises the empty chains hanging from the charred stake in *The Trial of Joan of Arc* ([*Procès de Jeanne d'Arc*] …, 1962) as "a spiritual expression of Joan's martyrdom." Scorsese, in contrast, is more interested in physical realities than "spiritual expression."[27]

This physical emphasis has to do with Scorsese's "sacramental vision," born out of the belief "that through Creation and the Incarnation of Christ, the material universe is sacred."[28] Following this logic, Scorsese's films present an intensified sense of materiality, often through exposing the abject features of both social behavior and human physicality; yet this presentation is not meant to have "matter vitiate the holy," but rather appear as its embodiment and expression.[29] Hence, the filmmaker's focus on violence, as it intersects with criminal life. Though profane in principle, violence is taken out of its quotidian setting through its intensification and stylization on screen, transforming it into a form of sacred ritual—a thing of both horror and beauty (see, e.g., the massacre at the end of *Taxi Driver*, or the fight scenes in *Raging Bull*). Within this context, according to Blake, "Scorsese's use of blood imagery … is illuminating."[30] What from a secular viewpoint may be considered as signifying a loss (of human life), in the filmmaker's Catholic imagination can be seen as a gain (of redemption). For if "the shedding of blood is key to God's activity in the material universe," then through its foregrounding on screen, "God's presence in the world" may be more fully sensed—not only by Scorsese's lost characters, often blind to the "opportunities for grace," but also potentially by the viewers, who are "touched" by the intensity of the on-screen violence.[31]

Intensity here is not only a matter of narrative content but of style. Catholics, as Blake explains, "routinely find God through the senses: statues, stained glass, ritual, incense, music, drama."[32] Scorsese's signature aesthetic responds to this routine by attacking the viewer's senses through a vigorous application of formal means. The camera moves incessantly in his films, with elaborate tracking shots that seem to operate independently of dramatic justification. Slow motion shots are often used for accentuating action, and freeze frames for

isolating objects in enhancement of their thematic meaning. Editing is often aggressive, forsaking a sense of continuity to create tension, dynamism, and surprise. Musical scores are not assimilated into narrative action but often overpower it, causing the spectator to sense the authorial presence of Scorsese "as composer … in the manner of a sample-based DJ."[33] Thus, instead of the transcendental style's "meticulous representation of the dull, banal commonplaces of everyday living," Scorsese's films turn most on-screen moments—even those depicting seemingly mundane circumstances—into instances of robust expressivity.[34] Reality is shaped through the fanfare of Catholic ritual.

An obvious example to this sacramental vision is *The Last Temptation of Christ* (1988), Scorsese's first (and most controversial) venture into explicit religious content. The film appears as a far cry from prior cinematic adaptations of Jesus's story, which highlighted His divinity. As Rhonda Burnette-Bletsch surmises, the director's material focus led him to create

> an intimate character study rather than a traditional epic. Unlike an epic film marked by reverence and pageantry, a character study requires a protagonist susceptible to temptation who undergoes development within a dramatic storyline. Scorsese complained that biblical epics like *The Greatest Story Ever Told* or *King of Kings* suffered from an "antiseptic quality, … a hermetically sealed holiness that didn't teach us anything new about Jesus." Shot in his usual documentary realist style enhanced by moments of expressionistic distortion, Scorsese's film was intended to "tear away at all those old Hollywood films … and create a Jesus you could maybe talk to, question, get to know." Prior films had treated the Christ like a sacred object that could be seen and experienced only from an external point of view, while his consciousness remained an inaccessible sacred space. Scorsese violated this taboo by giving viewers direct access to Jesus' thoughts and emotions. The result is a depiction of the incarnate Christ as a fully round character who struggles, doubts, and evolves over the course of the film.[35]

As a "fully round character," *The Last Temptation*'s Jesus echoes the profoundly haunted protagonists of Scorsese's earlier films, whose journey of "purgation through suffering" was inspired by Christ's narrative in the Gospels.[36] As in the case of those characters, the filmic Jesus's trials and tribulations are figured through Scorsese's robust cinematic style, which often utilizes "disturbing zooms, oblique camera angles, jump cuts, pounding music, and frenetic movement" to render the cinematic image more palpable (and bloodier).[37] This approach is especially evident in the final sequence of Christ's martyrdom. As Burnette-Bletsch explains:

> The redemptive suffering Jesus undergoes throughout the film, reaches a crescendo at the cross. Scorsese makes full use of his directorial art to accentuate the agony of his protagonist aesthetically. Prior to Mel Gibson's

> *The Passion of the Christ*, Scorsese's *Last Temptation* was the bloodiest and most graphic Passion ever shot. Yet, unlike Gibson, Scorsese does not focus on blood and gore for its own sake. The wounded Jesus becomes an object of devotion, considered from all angles, as the camera pans and switches from full-shot to close up.[38]

The crucifixion itself, according to Blake, borrows its visual patterning from Scorsese's own *Boxcar Bertha* (1972), which similarly shows "gushing blood as the nail is driven into [the] hand" of a union organizer being crucified by railroad detectives.[39] The graphic depiction of carnality in pain ties the filmic characters together, proving how in Scorsese's sacramental vision, divinity is enmeshed with humanity, and hence "the secular image [can be] reborn with a sacred meaning."[40]

Interestingly, the filmmaker's sacramental vision was extended beyond the limits of Christianity when, close to a decade after *The Last Temptation of Christ*, Scorsese segued into Tibetan Buddhist subject matter with his Dalai Lama biopic, *Kundun* (1997). While perhaps not as personal to him as the former film, Scorsese nevertheless could find a connection to the Fourteenth Dalai Lama and Tibetan culture through "a long line of Western and specifically Catholic encounters with Tibet," embodied in the exotic myth of Shangri-la.[41] This age-old tradition, often interweaving good intentions and gross exoticization, informs *Kundun*'s search for a common ground between Christianity and Tibetan Buddhism, as viewed from a Catholic perspective. According to Kerry P.C. San Chirico, "there are at least four ways" in which interreligious commonality is surfaced in this film:

> First, … from attention to ritual and its power to convey meaning based on Catholic devotional experience; second, from the personal experience of moral and even extra-ordinary affective qualities in his meetings with the Dalai Lama—that is, from the experience of a kind of charisma; third, from the discovery of a shared commitment to justice; and fourth, from a shared sense between Christian and Buddhist that a human life should be dedicated to love and compassion.[42]

Underlining all of these, San Chirico further stipulates, is "the teaching that the world is somehow charged with the divine"; and although "the 'divine' is differently understood between Roman Catholic Christianity and the Geluk sect of Tibetan Buddhism," there was enough similarity in this "sense of 'charged' ground of phenomenal existence" to attract Scorsese's sacramentalism.[43]

A sacramental logic does not only lead to fashioning the Dalai Lama as a Jesus figure, divinity incarnate, who carries the burden of suffering while "demonstrat[ing] certain divine-human attributes (love, compassion)."[44] It also undergirds the stylization of the Dalai Lama's world, which is characterized by intense expressivity. As San Chirico explains, "*Kundun* visually represents Tibet accurately as a land of sweeping landscapes and subtle hues, of deity-adorned

shrines, prayer wheels, and low-ceiling assembly halls."[45] Yet accuracy does not mean stark realism, and in order to turn this landscape into a sacramental "world as charged with God's glory and grandeur," Scorsese stresses its presence through dynamic camera movement and editing (with ample use of slow motion and dissolves), deeply saturated colors, and a moving score (by Philip Glass).[46] Expressivity reaches its apex in depicting the Dalai Lama's internal visions, which are also where Scorsese's reliance on blood symbolism is particularly visible. Starkest in this respect is the vision which the Dalai Lama experiences in the aftermath of the bombing by the Chinese military of the Litang Chöde Monastery in 1956. Featured here are two imposing scenes: of a flow of blood gushing into a pool of clear water, and of the Dalai Lama surrounded by countless bloodied corpses of monks. Both ethereal and earthly, these images overwhelm the viewer's senses with their potency; thus they appear far removed from the ascetic transcendental style, and more akin to the "epical and exoteric abundance" of Indian mythological films, born out of "an oral way of knowing" typical of the region.[47]

In *Silence*, made approximately 20 years after *Kundun* and 30 years after *The Last Temptation of Christ*, Scorsese brought together, for the first time in explicit fashion, his personal investment in Christianity and his continued attraction to the East. The film is based on Shūsaku Endō's eponymous novel (1966), which follows two Jesuit priests who travel to Edo-era Japan from Portugal in search of their missionary mentor, and become embroiled in the struggle of indigenous communities to preserve their Christian faith in the face of shogunate suppression. The book was given to the filmmaker by Episcopalian Archbishop Paul Moore around the completion of *The Last Temptation of Christ*. Scorsese embraced this story of faith under duress, and it soon became his not-so-secret passion project, taking three decades and overcoming many obstacles to be realized. Some of these obstacles were of a logistical nature, which even the filmmaker's proven star power could not easily vanquish. Some, however, were about Scorsese's personal struggle in coming to terms with the source material—an arduous process to which he referred as a "pilgrimage."[48] At first, the cineaste "read the book and … wanted to make it," yet he "didn't know how … to interpret it visually, how to structure it in the script." The challenge was different than anything he had encountered before. Indeed, by his own admission,

> with *The Last Temptation of Christ* I went as far as I could in trying to make sense of Christianity. But I don't mean the *logical* sense, I mean its mystery. Now how does one embrace mystery, how does one have faith in mystery? … When I read the last section [of the book], whatever I wanted to find in making *Last Temptation*, or *Raging Bull* to a certain extent, I knew I had to find it here, for me. But I didn't know how.[49]

It is easy to see why Scorsese would be drawn to Endō's novel, for its protagonist—the young Fr. Rodrigues—encounters similar struggles of faith to those

of the director's previous religiously-themed films. This similarity makes the issue of Scorsese's strain in adapting *Silence*—and how "the way into it" was for him the way "back to Christianity"—particularly difficult to explain.[50] A key to unlocking the difficulty here may be the very mystery which eluded the director in his past works. The narrative trajectories of *The Last Temptation of Christ* and *Kundun* provide Scorsese with the opportunity to discuss religion through a perspective with which he is well acquainted—that of the faithful; in *Silence*, however, I would argue that the filmmaker's sights were set elsewhere—on the object of religious faith, which is inherently unknowable and mysterious. To use Schrader's terminology, here was a shift of focus: from creating "works which relate the human experience of transcendence, which *express* not the Transcendent but the human who experience the Transcendent," to a transcendental work "which *express*[*es*] the Transcendent in human reflection."[51]

In order to shift into the purview of a spiritual film theory like Schrader's—the unfathomable "beyond"—Scorsese was impelled into a territory, which for members of his generation like Schrader, came to symbolize the unknowable missing in their own Christian faith: the landscape of Japan. With this foray, however, came also a change in Scorsese's stylistic approach, which was now lacking in the dynamism and exuberance of his past work. As many critics pointed out at the time, *Silence* featured slow pacing, its frequent uneventfulness, its dignified severity and quietude, which made it—in the words of one reviewer—a film "not for everyone."[52] This assessment was certainly incompatible with the common understanding of Scorsese as seeking popular acceptance, in particular with the glitzy epics of his later career. To answer these expectations would have meant relying on what made Scorsese a known commodity; but as previously stipulated, Scorsese sought in *Silence* to experiment in the unknowable, both as the core and the telos of his creative process. Thus, in order to travel these unfamiliar waters, the director had to be guided by a different aesthetic paradigm than his own, one seemingly dictated by *Silence*'s Japanese focus—that of a "transcendentalist" view of Japan as a culture of Zen, whose mysticality is embodied in the cinematic language of Yasujirō Ozu.

When asked about Ozu's influence on him in the context of *Silence*, Scorsese confessed ambivalence:

> I must admit, I've always said this, I've had a problem entering that world, of Ozu. Paul Schrader took myself and Brian De Palma to see *Tokyo Story* in 1973 in California, in Los Angeles. We were told that it was one of the greatest, if not the greatest film ever made. At that point I really liked Mizoguchi because that was the first Japanese film I had seen, *Ugetsu Monogatari* (1953). And then *The Life of Oharu* ([*Saikaku ichidai onna*,] 1952) and then *Sansho Dayu* (1954) and then *Chikamatsu Monogatari* (1954), all these films—and I thought Mizoguchi was extraordinary, I was brought into this world by that. And then from Mizoguchi I went to Kurosawa, *Seven Samurai* ([*Shichinin no samurai*,] 1954)—*Ikiru* (1952) was the

> one I really preferred. I liked *Ikiru*. I became kind of obsessed with that, viewing it over and over. And Kurosawa's cutting. That never left me …
>
> So when I saw Ozu, who is so different … I just found it very difficult to understand visually what I was viewing. And it had to do with who the people were, and where they were in the frame. I just didn't get it. However, something happened. By two-thirds of the way into the film, I clicked into it somehow, and I was overwhelmed by the ending. I don't know what to say. I said, "Well, what *was* that? Why?" I lost track of the picture one third of the way through, because I couldn't take what was going on, I couldn't tell what was going on, I couldn't tell where these people were coming from, who was entering the room. And the one thing that got me was the power of the ending, how I was moved by it, and I couldn't describe it.
>
> And the other thing was about these shots with nobody in them. Yet they're there. I said, "*What* is that?" It became a mystery. And I would go to see these Ozu pictures, and finally I think it was about ten, 12 years later, at that time I really settled into them and just went with them. Sometimes it doesn't translate for me—but when it does. it's wonderful.[53]

This statement is quite telling. As he freely acknowledges, Scorsese was inspired by *Sansho Dayu* and *Seven Samurai* in shaping certain scenes within *Silence*.[54] Yet as far as inspiration goes, the filmmaker did not incorporate the signature stylistic elements which brought fame to Kurosawa and Mizoguchi: the high-octane editing of the former, the extended and complex camera movements of the latter. These highly expressive aesthetic means would have brought the film closer to Scorsese's own style of abundance. The filmmaker's objective here, however, was different: not to evoke the familiar, and hence knowable, but to court the unfamiliar, for its potential of evoking the unknowable. So while Kurosawa's and Mizoguchi's influences are incorporated in *Silence*, it is only to the extent that they abide by a disparate stylistic approach—that of Ozu—which is inherently unfathomable for Scorsese, and therefore shares in the greater mystery that the director wishes to explore. Yet the Ozu who guides (and curbs) Scorsese is not the Ozu who displays humor and aliveness together with emptiness and quietude. He is the Ozu of silence—as envisaged by Schrader, who first introduced him to Scorsese; Ozu as a master of stylistic asceticism, the Eastern equivalent to Bresson's Western somberness (at one point in the above interview, Scorsese even refers to the "Ozu-Bresson approach" as "the opposite of excess, like in *Wolf of Wall Street* [2013] or in *Casino* [1995] or even in *The Aviator* [2014] to some extent").[55] The aesthetic mold shaping *Silence*, then, takes Scorsese away from his Catholic emphasis on a stylistic *via positiva*, and closer to Schrader's Protestant *via negativa*, seen as the proper means to achieve the desired transcendental end: to reach "the very essence of faith [by] *stripping away* everything else around it."[56]

The Ozuesque stylization of elimination can be sensed in scenes with dramatic potential, such as that depicting the crucifixion of Japanese "hidden Christians." Though traces of Scorsese's flair for the dramatics still appear in

this sequence, gone are the more aggressive and sense-defying stylistic means utilized in fashioning *The Last Temptation of Christ*'s crucifixion scene. Instead, we see the employment of slow cutting and pacing, less-than-dynamic shots, and the underplaying of music in favor of ambient sounds. Blood is there, but is not turned into a visual spectacle of pulsating redness. And a limited color palette pervades this scene as in others in the film, connecting the bareness and severity of the landscape with the emaciated state of crucified bodies, in a manner that resonates with the aesthetic of black ink Zen paintings, used by Schrader to describe Ozu's pictorial style. Furthermore, even at moments that expose the "spiritual visions" of the film's protagonist, there is a retreat from the intense sense of corporeality that typified, for example, the Dalai Lama's visions in *Kundun*. While Scorsese maintains the novel's depiction of the vision of Christ appearing in Fr. Rodrigues's consciousness as coming in the shape of a religious painting, the identity of this painting differs: not, as Joel Mayward explains, "Piero della Francesca's brawny, triumphant *Christ in The Resurrection* (c. 1460s) seen in Borgo San Sepolcro," as appearing in the literary origin, but a somber-looking, body-less visage of Christ in "an adaptation of a 16th-century painting by El Greco, *St. Veronica with the Holy Shroud* (1580)."[57] The absence of a potent sense of carnality in El Greco's painting—justified by Christ's presence being reduced to His imprint on the Veil of Veronica, and aided by the painter's signature use of muted colors and elongated figures—allow Scorsese to bypass "the difficulties of trying to depict an inexpressible transcendent deity and thereby create an all-too-immanent idol, such as the peculiar representation of God as a petulant British child in Ridley Scott's *Exodus: Gods and Kings* (2014)."[58] Thus envisaged, Scorsese's use of Christian art subjects it to a principle of spiritual aesthetics that favors the transcendental over the immanent, the mysterious over the literal, and which can be attributed to Ozu.

Importantly, Scorsese himself acknowledged Ozu as most present in certain key stations along Fr. Rodrigues's personal *Via Dolorosa*: specifically, in those scenes where the protagonist prays in jail, prior to his apostatizing, whose visual scheme—via "very rigid, and precise … angles in this small space"—evoked "that Ozu spirit"; or in the film's final sequence, which showed Rodrigues's final days, funeral and cremation, and which gave the impression that "everything's calmed down."[59] These instances still include Scorsese's usual accentuations via stylistic liveliness, through intermittent use of dissolves and camera movements (including a spectacular one, moving from the outside of Rodrigues's casket right into his hand, which clasps a small cross). Yet such "presences" become significant in light of the "absence" that surrounds them: as gestures of aesthetic vivacity, they contrast with the muted "real" of *Silence*'s diegetic world, thereby signaling their status as aberration rather than the norm (as would be the case in the films where Scorsese employs his signature aesthetic approach). This aberration, in turn, associates them with the order of the unknown, rather than the known. Accordingly, they come close—as close, perhaps, as Scorsese can bring them—to the function of "decisive actions" in Ozu's transcendental cinema, which, according to

Schrader, is that of revelations: "incredible event[s] within the banal reality which must by and large be taken on faith."[60]

The Importance of Slowing Down

Speaking candidly, Scorsese summarized his relationship to Ozu as follows:

> My energy level is very different from the Ozu films, so I found I had to slow down to observe it. I had to learn how to watch it … With Ozu I really had to learn how to view another language, in a way, of cinema.[61]

I have argued that *Silence* is very much a project of adapting Scorsese's energetic style to Ozu's "slowed down" one. The adaptation to "another language of cinema" decidedly foreign to the filmmaker appears to be not only about marking a departure from the Western focal point of his films. More than that, it is about accessing the unknown, which this foreign language of cinema, for Western spiritual film theorists such as Schrader, has come to embody: the unfathomable "Wholly Other."[62] Criticism of how Japan and Ozu—as emblems of the "mystical East"—are appropriated by the West is well warranted. It is nevertheless intriguing to see how this appropriation keeps having a generative and inventive effect on the contemporary evolution of spiritual aesthetics, including in those films that do not deal specifically with Japan and/or Ozu (as certain examples within the global movement of "slow cinema").[63] By claiming that for spiritual film aesthetics in the East, silence must be golden, film theory has largely and perhaps inadvertently established a norm, if not dogma, for filmmakers in both West and East to uphold on their path toward a cinematic "beyond."

Notes

1 Roger Ebert, "Silence Is Golden for Ozu," RogerEbert.com, August 14, 1994, available at: https://www.rogerebert.com/roger-ebert/silence-is-golden-to-ozu.
2 Ibid.
3 Here I draw on Arne Grøn's formulation of "beyond" in the context of praying, an activity which often is analogized to film spectating in spiritual film theory: "What is religion about? It seems to go without saying that religion is about 'beyond': something beyond, a world beyond, or even the Beyond. Apparently, this is also the answer we get from the prayer invoking a 'beyond.' But if we have a second look at the opening sentence, it does not simply point to something beyond. Rather, the prayer indicates a movement: seeing beyond what we see. Even if it does not perform this movement, but hopes for it, the prayer is about a movement *beyond*."

  See Grøn, "Beyond? Horizon, Immanence, and Transcendence," in *Phenomenology and Religion: New Frontiers*, Eds. Jonna Bornemark and Hans Ruin (Huddinge: Södertörn University, 2010), 223 [italics in the original].
4 See, for example, André Bazin, "*Le Journal d'un Cure de Campagne* and the Stylistics of Robert Bresson," in *What Is Cinema?*, vol. 1 (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1968), 125–43; and Amédée Ayfre, "Neo-Realism and Phenomenology," in *Cahiers du Cinéma: The 1950s: Neo-Realism, Hollywood, New Wave*, Ed. Jim Hillier (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985), 182–91.

5 J. Dudley Andrew, *The Major Film Theorists: An Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976), 244.
6 See, for example, Dominique Janicaud, *Phenomenology and the "Theological Turn": The French Debate* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2000).
7 Ayfre, "Neo-Realism and Phenomenology," 190.
8 Paul Schrader, *Transcendental Style in Film: Ozu, Bresson, Dreyer*, 2nd ed. (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2018), 37.
9 Ibid., 102.
10 Ibid., 67.
11 Ibid., 56.
12 Ibid.
13 Mitsuhiro Yoshimoto, *Kurosawa: Film Studies and Japanese Cinema* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000), 13.
14 Darrel W. Davis, "Ozu, the Ineffable," in *Reorienting Ozu: A Master and His Influence*, Ed. Jinhee Choi (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 34.
15 Ibid.
16 Ibid.
17 Ibid., 35.
18 Ibid., 40.
19 Ibid., 41.
20 Terry Lindvall, W. O. Williams, and Artie Terry, "Spectacular Transcendence: Abundant Means in the Cinematic Representation of African American Christianity," *The Howard Journal of Communication* 7 (1996): 208.
21 Ibid.
22 Ibid., 206.
23 Ibid.
24 On these complexities, see Dan Chyutin, "Transcendental Style Reconsidered: Absence, Presence, and a 'Place Which Is Not-a-Place,'" *Journal of Film and Video* 73, no. 3 (2021): 34–46.
25 Richard A. Blake, "Redeemed in Blood: The Sacramental Universe of Martin Scorsese," *Journal of Popular Film & Television* 24 (1996): 3.
26 Gabrielle Donnelly, "Martin Scorsese Interview: 'Catholicism Is Always in You,'" *Catholic Herald*, 22 December 2016, https://catholicherald.co.uk/martin-scorsese-interview-catholicism-is-always-in-you.
27 Blake, "Redeemed in Blood," 4.
28 Ibid., 3.
29 Ibid., 5.
30 Ibid., 6.
31 Ibid.
32 Ibid., 3.
33 Todd Decker, "The Filmmaker as DJ: Martin Scorsese's Compiled Score for *Casino* (1995)," *The Journal of Musicology* 34, no. 2 (2017): 284.
34 Schrader, *Transcendental Style in Film*, 67.
35 Rhonda Burnette-Bletsch, "*The Last Temptation of Christ*: Scorsese's Jesus among Ordinary Saints," in *Scorsese and Religion*, Eds. Christopher B. Barnett and Clark J. Elliston (Leiden: Brill, 2019), 152–3.
36 Ibid., 154.
37 Ibid., 162.
38 Ibid., 168.
39 Blake, "Redeemed in Blood," 5.
40 Ibid.
41 Kerry P.C. San Chirico, "Scorsese's *Kundun* as Catholic Encounter with the Dalai Lama and His Tibetan Dharma," in *Scorsese and Religion*, Eds. Christopher B. Barnett and Clark J. Elliston (Leiden: Brill, 2019), 181.

42 Ibid., 179.
43 Ibid.
44 Ibid., 190.
45 Ibid., 174.
46 Ibid., 190.
47 Sheila J. Nayar, *The Sacred and the Cinema: Reconfiguring the "Genuinely" Religious Film* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2012), 65.
48 Quoted in Darren J.N. Middleton and Mark W. Dennis, "The Global Afterlives of *Silence*," in *Scorsese and Religion*, Eds. Christopher B. Barnett and Clark J. Elliston (Leiden: Brill, 2019), 291.
49 Philip Horne, "Martin Scorsese: Catholic Tastes," *Sight and Sound* 27, no. 2 (2017): 19.
50 Ibid.
51 Schrader, *Transcendental Style in Film*, 38.
52 Kathryn Whitney Boole, "Film Review: *Silence*," *Santa Monica Daily Press*, January 14, 2017, https://www.smdp.com/film-review-silence/159310.
53 Horne, "Martin Scorsese," 23–4.
54 Ibid., 22–3.
55 Ibid., 24.
56 James Martin, "Exclusive: Martin Scorsese Discusses His Faith, His Struggles, His Films and *Silence*," *America: The Jesuit Review*, December 6, 2016, https://www.americamagazine.org/arts-culture/2016/12/06/exclusive-martin-scorsese-discusses-his-faith-his-struggles-his-films-and (my italics).
57 Joel Mayward, "The Cinematic Summoned Self: The Call of Christ in Martin Scorsese's *Silence*," *Pro Ecclesia: A Journal of Catholic and Evangelical Theology* 30, no. 4 (2021): 375.
58 Ibid., 376.
59 Horne, "Martin Scorsese," 24.
60 Schrader, *Transcendental Style in Film*, 74.
61 Horne, "Martin Scorsese," 24.
62 Schrader, *Transcendental Style in Film*, 6.
63 On the relationship between contemporary slow cinema and the transcendental style, see Paul Schrader, "Rethinking Transcendental Style," in Paul Schrader, *Transcendental Style in Film: Ozu, Bresson, Dreyer*, 2nd ed. (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2018), 1–34.