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Transcending Japan

Paul Schrader and the search for Japanese spirituality
in film

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Introduction

In this thesis I explore depictions of Japanese religiousness in the cinematic and academic work of Paul Schrader. The analysis will center on his 1972 publication *Transcendental Style in Film: Ozu, Bresson, Dreyer* and his 1985 film *Mishima: A Life in Four Chapters*. The purpose of this analysis is to discover how a western film critic and director explains the connection between Japanese film and religion on the one hand, and how he directs a film in Japanese with strong spiritual themes on the other. The focus of this analysis will be to uncover how ideas around Japanese spirituality are incorporated into Schrader's conception of 'transcendence'. In this project, special attention will be given to the discursive contexts around Japanese religion and how they have effected the depictions of Japanese religion and spirituality. In addition, I will explain how these works are still relevant due to the academic influence of *The Transcendental Style in Film* on current scholarship and assess the book through a contemporary academic lens.

Through this analysis, the *Transcendental Style* will be placed within the context of the postwar new religious movements in the United States, while *Mishima: A Life in Four Chapters* will be viewed in context of the modernized and politicized form of Shinto that emerged in the Meiji era. By exploring these socio-historical conditions, I aim to explore how Schrader and his creative partners leveraged certain time- and region-specific understandings of Japanese religion and spirituality to craft theories and narratives in accordance with their own creative interests. These individual priorities are an important ingredient in Schrader's work and must be explored and analyzed in order to form a clear picture of all the elements that play a role in Schrader's understanding of the spiritual and the religious. In this way, I aim to explore Schrader's personal vision and interests in his work, and the manner in which they are inexorably linked with cultural and historical contexts.

In order to complete this research, I will be relying on a large variety of sources. Religious studies handbooks and terminological studies were used to properly understand and explain the necessary terminology. Articles and books within the field of religious studies will be used to explore the popularization and specificities of Zen Buddhism in the west, which proved invaluable in creating a proper understanding of what influenced Schrader's understanding of the subject matter in his 1972 publication. Literature in film studies, Lacanian theory and the

philosophy of Slavoj Žižek will be used to create an understanding of understand the complex exploration of the themes of sexuality, desire and sublimity that make their appearance in *Mishima: A Life in Four Chapters*. The political and historical contexts of the depiction of religion in the film will then be explored through literature on the history of Shinto. Finally, academic literature on Paul Schrader's book and film will be used to form a picture of how these aspects can be used to form a coherent interpretation of Schrader's depiction of Japanese spirituality and religion.

Defining Terms

In this thesis, three terms will make a prominent appearance. While ‘religious’, ‘spiritual’ and ‘transcendental’ partially overlap in their meanings, they are different terms when it comes to their connotations and usage. Even though such terms are inherently hard to define due to their varied application throughout history and the all-encompassing, abstract subject matter they aim to describe,¹ I argue that such definition is still important. This need arises through the focus on ‘the transcendent’ in this paper. The meaning of this term is highly ambiguous and has been defined in various ways throughout recent history as I will explore in this chapter. Because of this, I will have to create the understanding that that it can describe something that the other two terms cannot, even if all terms overlap in some way.

The goal of this chapter is to create an overview of previous usage of these terms, so that there exists some degree of clarity on what is described when they are used in this thesis. Even when a completely comprehensive definition cannot be reached, as is the case with the term ‘transcendental’, I hope to create some understanding through exploring its different connotations throughout its historical usage. Firstly, I will explore the definition and differentiation between Spirituality and Religion, then I will explore how the transcendental has been defined and how it relates to, or can be differentiated from the other two terms.

Religion and Spirituality

The difficulty in defining and differentiating spirituality and religion has already been established,² some even question the need or possibility of defining such terms.³ Differentiation them, is however, still possible since it is undeniable that Spirituality and Religion occupy different parts of the public imagination.⁴ By leveraging these popular definitions, it is possible

¹ Brimadevi Van Niekerk, “Religion and Spirituality: What Are the Fundamental Differences?” *Hervormde Teologiese Studies* 74, no. 3 (2018): 3, doi:10.4102/hts.v74i3.4933.

² Van Niekerk, “Religion and Sprituality,” 10.

³ Michael Stausberg and Mark Q. Gardiner, “Definition,” in *The Oxford Handbook of the Study of Religion*, ed. Michael Stausberg and Steven Engler (Oxford University Press, 2016), 10.

⁴ Heinz Streib and Constantin Klein, “Religion and Spirituality,” in *The Oxford Handbook of the Study of Religion*, ed. Michael Stausberg and Steven Engler (Oxford University Press, 2016), 77.

to explore how these terms are conceptualized differently. In addition, I contend with the difficulties of definition by refraining from describing the general state of the field or any academic consensus, and use this section solely for creating a general understating of the terms for the sake of this paper.

When analyzing the public discourse around spirituality and religion, they are often stated as being opposite to each other. While religion is associated with the static, dogmatic and hierarchical, spirituality is seen as its dynamic, open and personal opposite.⁵ In this way, spirituality can be viewed as a more positive and progressive alternative to religion. Though I will not make such value judgements in this paper, I will use this juxtaposition in my own conception of religion and spirituality. Therefore, within this thesis, the religious will pertain to institutional and social aspects of spiritual life. The religious emerges through social co-creation and may refer to the lifestyles of those who practice it, the rules they live by and the communities they foster. Though the word ‘religion’ is one used for many forms of spiritual practice across the globe, it does not always refer to institutions and people who espouse godliness or divinity. Buddhism, for example does not feature a belief in God(s), but is undoubtedly still referred to as a religion.⁶

Spirituality, on the other hand, will refer to the personal belief in a reality that exists beyond what is perceptible by the regular senses. A spiritual belief can be abstract and philosophical, referring to substances or processes, but can also be tangible, like a belief in ghosts or other invisible actors that leave their traces on the perceptible world. The spiritual can thus be differentiated from the institutional rules and rituals that are often associated with the religious.

The transcendental

The most contentious of the three terms discussed in this chapter is the conception of ‘the transcendent’. Coming from Latin word *transscendere*, which means to climb over, or to

⁵ Raymond F. Paloutzian, *Invitation to the Psychology of Religion* (Guilford Publications, 2016), 12-13. Van Niekerk, “Religion and Sprituality,” 10.

⁶ Van Niekerk, “Religion and Sprituality,” 3.

overcome,⁷ the word is endowed with a sense of the mystical and the divine. Outside of academic usage, the word is often used to editorialize, emphasizing grandiosity, or the almost incomprehensible greatness of something. The term has also been used by philosophers to describe their ideas on spirituality and the nature of humanity and existence. *The Transcendentalists* were a group of philosophers and writers active in New England in the early nineteenth century who broke with the negative, puritan view of human striving that was prevalent in contemporary Calvinist theology.⁸ In addition, *transcendental idealism* was conceptualized by Immanuel Kant to explain the difference between the appearance of objects to humans, and the existence of those objects in and of themselves.⁹

In Kant's usage of the term, the transcendental does not pertain to the spiritual nor encompasses the overcoming of some kind of barrier, like the Latin etymological origin describes. For Kant, the transcendental ideal pertains to something that exists purely within human subjectivity and experience. This can be juxtaposed with objective reality, or things in and of themselves, which are not known to us and exist independent of human cognition.¹⁰ Kant also refers to this last conception as a 'transcendental reality'.¹¹ This implies that Kant does not use the word 'transcendental' to refer to the subjective appearance versus the objective reality of an object, since transcendental ideality and transcendental reality are supposed to be oppositional. Instead, 'transcendental' refers to the idea that this state is *a priori* to our systems of knowledge.¹² For Kant, then 'transcendental' means being at the root, existing at the very end of the logical chain and being beyond further investigation.

Though the term seems inseparably associated with that which is beyond the boundaries of reason, Kant seems to have dragged the term back into the realm of worldly human knowledge. None the less this assertion on the term cannot be understood as being final.¹³ Kant's

⁷ "Transcendent," Merriam-Webster, accessed February 13, 2025, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/transcendent>.

⁸ "Transcendentalism," Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, accessed February 13, 2025, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/transcendentalism/>.

⁹ "Kant's Transcendental Idealism," Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, accessed February 13, 2025, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/kant-transcendental-idealism/>.

¹⁰ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason* (Cambridge University Press, 1998), 155-163.

¹¹ Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, 165.

¹² Immanuel Kant, Patricia Kitcher and Werner S. Pluhar, *Critique of Pure Reason* (Hackett Publishing Co. Inc., 1996), 2.

¹³ James E. Faulconer, *Transcendence in Philosophy and Religion* (Indiana University Press, 2003), 1.

conception exists within the complexities of epistemological theory, and scholars are still in discussion over the meaning of the term within his philosophy.¹⁴ It is therefore important to include the view of those who understand of the term as being more spiritual in meaning. According to Charles Taylor, ‘transcendental’ can mean going beyond the human world or experience, but it can also refer to the invention of a new standpoint from which the existing order can be criticized.¹⁵

According to Melissa Croteau, whose work will be featured more prominently further on in this thesis, transcendence can be both human and spiritual. While spiritual transcendence overcomes the limits of the material world, human transcendence overcomes personal limitations and heals the broken.¹⁶ She also describes downward transcendence, which is defined as a movement toward ruin, rather than healing. Chin-Tai Kim explains transcendence in a generic sense, as a word that is close in meaning to terms such as ‘absolute’, ‘infinite’ and ‘necessary’, but more narrowly defines the spiritual aspect of the term as the relationship between an infinite being and the finite beings that it transcends.¹⁷ This definition seems to rest much more on the Abrahamic and monotheistic perspective on religiosity than the others discussed so far.

In the religious conception, the transcendental is that which goes beyond common knowledge or material reality. Beyond this very general definition, it is impossible to describe the term universally because what transcendental is can differ according to the specific religious practice in which it is used. Though it refers to a being whose existence transcends our own In Kim’s definition, there are also conceptions of the term that are not centered around divinity. In Buddhism, transcendence could be understood as the manner in which a Buddha breaks with the cycle of rebirth and attains enlightenment.¹⁸ The transcendent is in this instance not a distant and superior being or substance, but a path to follow in search of a cessation of suffering. In this way, the meaning of the term could have as many variations as there are religious practices, and

¹⁴ Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, “Kant’s Transcendental Idealism.”

¹⁵ Charles Taylor, *Dilemmas and Connections* (Harvard University Press, 2014), 30.

¹⁶ Melissa Croteau, *Transcendence and Spirituality in Japanese Cinema: Framing Sacred Spaces* (Routledge, 2023), 5-6.

¹⁷ Chin-Tai Kim, “Transcendence and Immanence,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 55, no. 3 (1987): 537–38, doi:10.1093/jaarel/LV.3.537.

¹⁸ Robert E. Buswell and Donald S. Lopez, *The Princeton Dictionary of Buddhism* (Princeton University Press, 2013), 129.

generalized definitions can only go so far in actually describing the varied understandings of practitioners of religion across the globe.

Therefore, arriving at a coherent definition for this thesis will be more challenging than it was for the previous two terms. The term is related to the spiritual and the religious through its associations with the mystical and the divine but is even less descriptive. It is no surprise that a term that describes that which goes beyond human knowledge and existence is hard to properly define. This is why I will defer to the most general definition of transcendence described above, that being something beyond worldly experience or knowledge, or defer to Schrader's conception on the term in this thesis. I will explain this definition in the next chapter, which centers on an analysis and critique of Paul Schrader's 1972 publication *Transcendental Style in Film: Ozu, Bresson, Dreyer*.

***The Transcendental Style in Film* and its influences before and after**

The Pacific War, fought between the United States and Japan between 1941 and 1945, encompassed a moment of cultural hostility between the two nations, in which propaganda and racial characterization were the prevalent mode of portraying the other.¹⁹ It is no surprise then that Japanese religion was also viewed negatively. Shinto, which had by that time taken on an imperialistic and nationalistic character through the reverence of a godly emperor,²⁰ was portrayed and experienced especially negatively. During the end of the war and during the occupation of Japan by the US from 1945 to 1952, the American authorities were influenced by a missionary scholar called Daniel Clarence Holtom, who posed that militarists had abused the primitive religion of Shinto to create Japanese ultranationalism. As a result of viewpoints such as this, it became American policy to eradicate this form of Shinto from the country.²¹

This view changed in the counter cultural movements of the 1960s, as eastern spiritual practices became more popular amid the rising religious dissatisfaction of young people in the West.²² The rise of global travel and tourism as well as rising immigration from Asian countries to the US and Europe further contributed to the popularization of Asian religions in these regions.²³ Within this popularization of eastern spirituality, Japanese Zen was introduced by the English writings of Japanese religious scholar D.T. Suzuki. Zen captured the public imagination as a religion focused on the experience of the individual rather than institutional rules and structures.²⁴ D.T. Suzuki's romantic conception of Zen, which he construed as a universal

¹⁹ David Desser, "From the Opium War to the Pacific War: Japanese Propaganda Films of World War II," *Film History* 7, no. 1 (1995): 45, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3815159>.

²⁰ Helen Hardacre, *Shinto: a History* (Oxford University Press, 2017), 440.

²¹ Jolyon Thomas, "Religions Policies During the Allied Occupation of Japan, 1945-1952," *Religion Compass* 8, no. 9 (2014): 279, doi:10.1111/rec3.12117.

²² Colin Campbell, *The Easternization of the West: A Thematic Account of Cultural Change in the Modern Era* (Routledge 2016), 269.

²³ Jørn Borup and Marianne Qvortrup Fibiger, "Introduction," In *Eastspirit: Transnational Spirituality and Religious Circulation in East and West*, ed. Jørn Borup and Marianne Qvortrup (Brill, 2017), 3-4.

²⁴ André van der Braak, *Reimagining Zen in a Secular Age: Charles Taylor and Zen Buddhism in the West* (Brill, 2020), 7.

spiritual practice that encapsulated the core of all religions,²⁵ became a representation for Japanese religious practice in the West.

Besides D.T. Suzuki, scholars at Kyoto University among which thinkers such as Nishida Kitaro, Tanabe Hajime and Nishitani Keiji can be counted, also orientated themselves toward the west while philosophizing on Zen during the middle of the twentieth century. This so-called Kyoto school married Zen with the philosophies of western thinkers such as Nietzsche and Heidegger, and tried to create a philosophical and theological framework for modern life in intercultural dialogue with the west.²⁶ It was D.T. Suzuki, however, who was the most influential in kickstarting Zen as a spiritual movement and inspired westerners to try their own hand at Zen philosophy and theology. Alan Watts became a prominent writer and communicator of Zen ideas in the US and was an important figure in the counter cultural movement in the 1960's. His blending of eastern and western sources, as well as his indifferent attitude toward meditative discipline made his ideas highly popular in the anglophone world.²⁷

Through these key figures an awareness of Zen as a spiritual practice focused purely on individual experience and enlightenment, while being free of ritualistic dogma emerged. Paul Schrader's *Transcendental Style in Film*, which was published in 1972, was greatly influenced by this modern and westernized conception of Zen Buddhism. This work became highly influential in an academic understanding of religious experience in film and was unique in its attempt to formulate a global style of spiritual filmmaking. It was in his search for a claim to global universality of his theory that Schrader included analyses of Yasujiro Ozu and his films in his book. Ozu's films were the only ones included that were made outside of Europe and by a non-European filmmaker.

For Schrader, Ozu and his films became representative for the viability of his ideas outside of the west and he used the writings of Suzuki and Watts as a basis for his analysis.²⁸ While Schrader's theory itself does not rely on Zen or these writings, it does reflect Suzuki's view that there is a foundational and universal core to all religion. These factors made *the*

²⁵ Ibid, 38.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Peter J. Columbus and Donadrian L. Rice, *Alan Watts-Here and Now* (State University of New York Press, 2012), 8.

²⁸ Paul Schrader, *Transcendental Style in Film: Ozu, Bresson, Dreyer* (University of California Press, 2018), 45-46, 59.

Transcendental Style in Film a product of its counter cultural environment whether or not this was intended. These influences are echoed in the many academic works that rely on the book to make their own assertions on Spirituality and Japanese film.

The transcendental style

Schrader posits the transcendental style as a formalistic expression rather than one built on script or plot.²⁹ Alongside Ozu Yasujiro, he argues that Robert Bresson has developed a style of filmmaking in which camera positioning, editing and cinematic rhythm lend a transcendental quality to their films. Schrader further argues that Carl Dreyer has partially utilized this same style, but never truly managed to strip other elements that distracted from the transcendental quality of his films.³⁰ Schrader argues for a formalistic conception of the style because he wants to distinguish the transcendental style from the broader category of ‘religious film’. These films, according to him, are often overly dramatized and follow too much of a conventional classical Hollywood style of filmmaking in order to truly grant these films a transcendental quality. Therefore, they fail to truly challenge the viewers perception of their world.³¹

According to Schrader, the transcendental style is defined more by comparative lack of certain techniques rather than the presence of them. In films that utilize the style, camera movement is generally minimal,³² leading to a matter-of-fact style of filming with little embellishment. There is also a comparatively high number of shots taken of characters from a frontal position, which Schrader likens to Byzantine iconography.³³ A thorough explanation of the cinematic grammar of the style is, however, not present. Rather, Ozu, Bresson and Dreyer’s style of filmmaking are likened and compared to various religious artforms in order to make the argument that their films possess a transcendental quality irrespective of subject matter.³⁴ In addition, the book discusses the connection between the directors, their respective societies and the possible impact of their personality on their work.

²⁹ Ibid, 41.

³⁰ Ibid, 135.

³¹ Ibid, 180-181.

³² Ibid, 69-70.

³³ Ibid, 126.

³⁴ Ibid, 81, 126.

These last points, however, are then defined as not being the most important aspect of the respective director's style. This is because Schrader wants to make the argument that the transcendental style crosses cultural boundaries and is a universal form of spiritual filmmaking.³⁵ These sections aim to illustrate how Ozu, Bresson and Dreyer have taken influence from their respective cultural environments and personal experiences when it comes to depicting the transcendent, yet have still arrived at the same universal point. The most comprehensive explanation of a transcendental style in the book comes not from Schrader but from Robert Bresson himself.

Most films have what Bresson calls 'screens'. These are embellishments, clues, and dramatizations that act as context to the image on screen to help the viewer interpret the events in a certain manner.³⁶ Such 'screens' pertain to the meanings film sequences and techniques contain for an audience. A music sequence can inform the intended emotional reaction, and certain camera movements can dramatize or add significance to certain cinematic moments. Bresson's goal was to strip his films off such screens, leaving his films without this extra context so that the viewer could be exposed to a raw cinematic image.³⁷ What Schrader calls the transcendental style seems to encompass a stripped-down approach to filmmaking in which plot points, camera techniques and music that hold clear directions for the viewers' emotions are purposefully removed. This results in the viewer having to fully absorb the image, rather than relying on screens as shorthand for interpretation.

Schrader argues that it is in this form that transcendental feelings can best be evoked in the viewer. In a film like Bresson's *Diary of a Country Priest*, such as religious Byzantine art, the viewer looks directly into the eyes of a person inspired by spiritual feeling.³⁸ Such an image inspires identification and invites the audience to awe at the presence of a transcendental experience. Because such emotions are not entrenched in the average cinema goer, conventional cinematic techniques would only distract from what the film is trying to convey. Three other

³⁵ Ibid, 133.

³⁶ Ibid, 42.

³⁷ Ibid, 89-92.

³⁸ Ibid, 126.

aspects that Schrader argues are essential to the transcendental style are disparity, decisive action, and stasis.

Disparity is a growing tension within a film between a character and their environment.³⁹ For example, in *Diary of a Country Priest*, the priest responds to the worldly problems of those who come to him for advice with a heavy-handed religious approach, causing the townspeople to come to despise him. The priest is not only in conflict with his environment on a social level, but also on a symbolic and spiritual level. He is inexplicably unable to function within a mundane social environment or relate to the psychological concerns of those around him. His perspective and worldview is out of time and place, even though there is seemingly no real reason for this to be the case. This conflict creates an expectation of a resolution within the viewer.

This expectation is then followed up by the decisive action and eventually stasis. The decisive action as defined by Schrader is a reaction to the viewers' expectation of a resolution to the disparity they are presented with. It is an unexpected event and a rare moment in the film where music or other techniques of dramatization might be used to inspire overwhelming emotion in the viewer. It is a moment in which the mundane is suddenly disrupted, and the transcendental ambitions of the film reveal itself.⁴⁰ Finally, there is stasis, which can be defined as a concluding moment of stillness that becomes imbued with the emotions felt throughout the film, but is at the same time completely separated from it. Stasis does not resolve the previously existing disparity but freezes it into place and transforms it into an aesthetic and transcendental form which the viewer can come to accept.⁴¹ It is represented as a still image that lingers and crystallizes the emotions of disparity into a transcendental experience. The inclusion of stasis at the end of a film makes it so that the audience can then return to their experience of life with new forms of emotion.⁴²

³⁹ Ibid, 3.

⁴⁰ Ibid, 70-71.

⁴¹ Ibid, 75-77.

⁴² Ibid, 111.

Critiquing the transcendental style

It is the formula of disparity, decisive action and stasis, based on Schrader's analysis of Bresson's films, on which the transcendental style is based. His application of the theory is, however, not limited to Bresson, as Schrader argues that these ideas can be applied to the films of Yasujiro Ozu and to some extent to Danish filmmaker Carl Dreyer. In his attempt to analyze Ozu's works and paint them as films with Buddhist intentions, clearly exhibiting the transcendental style, he creates tensions in his arguments that undermine his initial theory.

Schrader makes the case for the presence of spirituality in Ozu's films by comparing Zen forms and concepts with the cinematic subject matter. Ozu's characters embody *mono no aware*, while his framing recalls 'one-corner' style painting, and his codas carry a profound sense of emptiness.⁴³ Schrader introduces these concepts one after the other and uses many aspects of Japanese culture to make this connection, as *Kendo*, haiku, *sadou* and *sumi-e* painting all make their appearance. By providing such a volume of comparisons, Schrader loses focus on his central goal of painting Ozu as a Zen inspired artist. This tendency for volume also makes his comparisons less convincing. Instead of advancing his argument from a visual or impressionistic comparison to further discussions on Zen practice and philosophy, Schrader introduces new terms and points of comparison, some of which are not, or only tangentially, related to Zen. For instance, the concept *mono no aware* is mostly associated with periods before the arrival of Zen in Japan during the 13th century.⁴⁴

In the section in which Schrader does try to analyze Ozu's films in terms of Zen philosophy, additional problems come to the forefront. This is because Schrader's sources are the same sources that fed the counter revolutionary Buddhism of the 1960s in the West. D. T. Suzuki and his contemporaries, who provided the English language writings that brought awareness of Zen to the west, have enchanted it with a romanticism that does not, nor has ever existed in any Asian practice of the religion.⁴⁵ When Schrader describes Yasujiro Ozu as a herald of traditional

⁴³ Ibid, 56-57.

⁴⁴ Lauren Prusinski, "Wabi-sabi, mono no aware, and ma: Tracing traditional Japanese aesthetics through Japanese history," *Studies on Asia* 4, no. 2 (2012): 28, <https://studiesonasia.scholasticahq.com/article/14408-wabi-sabi-mono-no-aware-and-ma-tracing-traditional-japanese-aesthetics-through-japanese-history>.

⁴⁵ van der Braak, *Reimagining Zen in a Secular Age*, 79.

Japanese culture who bases his films around Zen philosophy and art,⁴⁶ he is unaware that the writings through which he analyzes these films constitutes a distinctly modern adaptation of Zen that has many characteristics not found in its Asian counterpart. Suzuki is known for relying on both western as well as Japanese scholarship to fuel his writing and referenced western religious thinkers many times in his work.⁴⁷ Suzuki's aim and project was to free Zen knowledge from the cloistered walls of the temple and influenced a political and publicly practiced Zen in the west.⁴⁸ This new mode of Zen practice, which centered on life and society outside of the temple, rather than one focused on continuous training within a religious community, is characteristic of modern international Zen.⁴⁹

It is with this innovation that Zen became part of the vanguard in the religion versus spirituality dilemma which is characteristic of the modern view.⁵⁰ In this modern conception, Zen was not of the educated monk, but of the “spiritual seeker, thinker, artist and avant-garde poet”.⁵¹ Zen became viewed as a truly universal spiritual practice, which empowered the individual and opened up spiritual fulfillment to everyone. Suzuki stated that all Buddhist doctrines are only conventionally true, and that ultimate truth is only realized by not being attached to such conventional knowledge.⁵² According to this idea, ultimate truth is not tied to any specific religion or doctrine but lies beyond semiotic or rational means and exists independent of culture. This notion of universal mysticism is highly prevalent in Schrader's theory as well. Schrader relies on a religious scholar by the name of Rudolf Otto, who conceptualized the ‘numinous’ as a pre-cultural transcendental experience of a ‘Wholly other’.⁵³

⁴⁶ Schrader, *Transcendental Style*, 46-47.

⁴⁷ Gregory P. A. Levine, *Long Strange Journey: On Modern Zen, Zen Art, and Other Predicaments* (University of Hawaii Press, 2018), 45.

⁴⁸ *Ibid*, 46.

⁴⁹ Sueki Fumihiko 末木文美士, “Daisetsu wo dō yomu ka? Nin no shisou o chūshin ni 大拙をどう読むのか？人の思想を中心に,” in *Daisetsu Suzuki: zen o koete 大拙鈴木禅を超えて*, ed. John Breen and Yamada Shōji 山田奨治 (Shibunkaku Shuppan 思文閣出版, 2020), 8-9.

⁵⁰ Paul Heelas, Linda Woodhead, and Benjamin Seel, *The Spiritual Revolution: Why Religion Is Giving Way to Spirituality* (Blackwell, 2005), 1.

⁵¹ Jørn Borup, “Easternization of the East? Zen and Spirituality as Distinct Cultural Narratives in Japan,” *Journal of Global Buddhism* 16, no 3 (2015): 71, <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.1305983>.

⁵² van der Braak, *Reimagining Zen in a Secular Age*, 102.

⁵³ *Ibid*, 99-100.

Schrader, *Transcendental Style*, 37.

The Wholly other, is proposed as a universal object of experience of the transcendent, which is then processed in culturally specific terms. Otto divided religious practice into the categories of theism and mysticism in order to accommodate non-Western forms of religion and to create a culturally universal theory.⁵⁴ The idea that there is a core experience to all religion, is fundamental to Schrader's assertion of a transcendental style in film. It is this core transcendental experience, and not any culturally specific acts to adapt the experience of the Wholly other into doctrine or practice, that Schrader claims to be depicted in the films he analyses.⁵⁵

This conception has, however, come under scrutiny by poststructuralist thinkers.⁵⁶ Zen scholar Dale S. Wright argues that any kind of perception or experience independent of language is impossible.⁵⁷ Language, and the cultural signifiers that it accompanies, are present from the very moment one even begins to conceive of an object or experience. Wright applies this post structural conception to Zen, and argues it is exactly the social and religious monastic community that defines Zen and not a pure, individual experience of the transcendent.⁵⁸ The words used and rituals practiced in the monastery are not superfluous doctrines that hide a wordless universal truth as Suzuki argued, but are posed as being at the very core of Japanese Zen for the many centuries that it has been practiced.

If one accepts the conclusion of this more recent scholarship that language is a prerequisite to all experience, Schrader's theory becomes untenable. Without concepts espousing a universal core to religion hiding behind the veil of linguistic and culturally specific practice, such as Otto's 'numinous' or universal 'Wholly other', there is no transcendental style. The transcendence Schrader attributes to Ozu's 'Zen inspired' films, can thus only be applied to a specific philosophy and religious worldview and cannot be said to be congruent to any similar conception in Bresson's or Dryers films. In addition, we can start to question Schrader's D.T. Suzuki centered analysis of the Zen elements in Ozu's films. If Zen is defined by its practice, by its monastic rituals and religious language, and there is no universal transcendent experience to

⁵⁴ van der Braak, *Reimagining Zen in a Secular Age*, 100.

⁵⁵ *Ibid*, 81.

⁵⁶ *Ibid*, 105-106.

⁵⁷ Dale S. Wright, "Rethinking Transcendence: The Role of Language in Zen Experience," *Philosophy East & West* 42, no. 1 (1992): 122, doi:10.2307/1399693.

⁵⁸ *Ibid*, 123.

be revealed beyond these signifiers, then Ozu's films cannot function to provide this revelation. Since Ozu's films are hardly concerned with monastic life, *koan*, or meditation, the argument that Ozu is a Zen inspired artist can be opened up to criticism.

Previous commentators have similarly criticized Schrader's interpretations of Ozu's films. Robert Boyers has aimed to recontextualize the 'transcendentalism' in Ozu's work to be much more secular in meaning.⁵⁹ Additionally, Yoshimoto Mitsuhiro has criticized Schrader's assertion that the popularity of Ozu's films is due to them aligning with the sentiments of a Japanese 'Zen culture'.⁶⁰ Such impressions of Zen Buddhism, as well as those previously discussed, are characteristic for the time in which Schrader wrote. He did not seem to grasp that his understanding of what Zen Buddhism is, was a new innovation rather than the core to centuries of continuous practice. As a result, Schrader's attempt to paint Ozu as a highly traditional Zen artist can be assessed critically in light of a more recent scholarship.

In addition, Schrader's argument for a transcendental style is precarious because he argues the style to be purely formalistic, defined by camera movements and editing techniques rather than thematic substance. There are, however, many more elements in a film that provide structure and meaning. This is in some way acknowledged by Schrader himself, since plot, characters and other thematic elements are much more thoroughly discussed in his chapter on Bresson, compared to his analysis of Ozu's films.

For Bresson's films Schrader thoroughly discusses the implications thematic symbols and plot elements have on the spiritual meaning of these films. Schrader analyses Bresson's recurring motif of the prison and interprets it as a metaphor for how people may be shackled or liberated by irrational and transcendental passions.⁶¹ Even though Schrader heavily relies on the content of his films in order to make the argument that the form is one with transcendental qualities, Schrader still urges that the cinematic style of Bresson's works can be completely separated from its contents.⁶² Despite this, the more thorough discussion of thematic substance leads to the chapter on Bresson being more convincing than the previous one, since Bresson's work, unlike Ozu's films, is deeply immersed in spiritual subject matter. In addition, the assertion that

⁵⁹ Robert Boyers, "Secular Vision, Transcendental Style: The art of Yasujiro Ozu," *The Georgia Review* 32, no.1 (1978): 63-91, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41397472>.

⁶⁰ Yoshimoto Mitsuhiro, *Kurosawa: Film Studies and Japanese Cinema* (Duke University Press, 2000), 18.

⁶¹ Schrader, *Transcendental Style*, 114-115.

⁶² *Ibid*, 88.

Bresson's films are different from more sentimental religious films is convincing and grounded in thorough analysis. Though Bresson's formalistic style of filmmaking has influenced this difference, it is not necessary to separate it from the substance of his films in order to support this argument. When it comes to Ozu's chapter, the thematic substance of his films are not discussed, even though they are featured prominently in the chapters discussing Bresson and Dreyer.

Croteau and transcendental filmmaking beyond Schrader

It is no surprise that a pioneering work on spirituality in international film cannot be held to the standards of 21st century scholarship more than fifty years after it has been written. This evaluation is still necessary, however, since Schrader's work is still used by scholars who aim to explain the relationship between religion and film. For instance, David Desser applied Schrader's theories to Kore-eda Hirokazu's *Maborosi* in 2007.⁶³ In addition, Ama Michihiro analyzed Takita Yōjirō's *Okuribito* while utilizing elements of the transcendental style in 2010.⁶⁴ Schrader's book also featured prominently in Stefanie Knauss' overview of film and religion in academia, which was published in 2020.⁶⁵ Finally, Melissa Croteau has explored the transcendental and spiritual qualities of various Japanese films in her 2023 publication.

Croteau's attempt to describe spirituality and transcendence in Japanese films is the most comprehensive of these publications. She analyzes films by various Japanese directors and discusses their spiritual and transcendental elements. The films contents are discussed in terms of Japanese religious ideas and concepts by drawing on various Japanese philosophers and theorists as well as previous western academic writing on the subject. By doing so, the book aims to create an overview on how these concepts are represented within Japanese cinema. Prior to the film analysis, Croteau dedicates a part of the introduction to defining the terms she will use throughout the book. In this section, she defines the word 'transcendence' in a myriad of different ways. Firstly, she states that it implies movement or transit. Then, she states that this

⁶³ David Desser, "The Imagination of the Transcendent: Kore-eda Hirokazu's *Maborosi* (1995)," In *Japanese Cinema: texts and contexts*, ed. Alastair Phillips and Julian Stinger (Routledge, 2007), 279.

⁶⁴ Ama Michihiro, "Transcending Death in *Departures (Okuribito)*: A Case Study of Film, Literature and Buddhism in Modern Japan," *Journal of Japanese & Korean Cinema* 2, no. 1 (2010): 39, doi:10.1386/jjkc.2.1.35_1.

⁶⁵ Stefanie Knauss, *Religion and Film: Representation, Experience, Meaning* (BRILL, 2020), 39-41.

transit can be used to imply a downward transcendence, toward disillusion, corruption, or destruction. Finally, she describes a generalized transcendence, in which characters overcome obstacles and barriers throughout the plot of a film.⁶⁶

Unfortunately, these descriptions do little to properly define the term for purposes of analysis. Croteau's assertion that transcendence implies transit is helpful, but further qualifications of the term do not make clear how she intends to use the term in the rest of the book. Her description of a 'generalized transcendence' risks losing connection with the themes of spirituality or religion that she aims to explore. This generalized usage of terms results in an inconsistent communication of meaning, where there is no clarity of which definition is supposed to be indicated throughout the work. A similar problem can be observed with Croteau's usage of the term *ma*, which she defines as "an interval, or break in space time",⁶⁷ and uses heavily throughout the book, while applying it to films that are very different in thematic substance. The term is used to connect the disparate films Croteau describes through a generalized analytic framework. Both the large celestial skies in Makoto Shinkai's *Your Name* as well as a gloomy brick building Hirokazu Kore-eda's *After Life* contain this element of *ma* according to Croteau, even though they do not seem to have much in common.⁶⁸

Because *ma* is defined as simultaneously symbolizing liminal or transitional space-time, interconnection and 'sacred' space, it is quite broad and therefore can be applied in many different situations. Transitional moments and symbolism of interconnectivity are not rare in film in general. Therefore, it is not hard to use the term to describe a variety of ideas and situations in a large variety of films, but this very general usage takes away from its value as a descriptor of a certain idea or phenomenon.

In addition, *ma* is not a word that is taken from a religious text or practice, instead, Croteau defines it as a "multifaceted Japanese concept".⁶⁹ As such, it does not differentiate between Japanese religious practices but is instead imbued with a general idea of Japanese religiosity throughout the book through various associations. If we recall Dale S. Wright's

⁶⁶ Croteau, *Transcendence and Spirituality in Japanese Cinema*, 6.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 98, 183.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

assertion that it is the specific and local knowledge, which includes language, customs and doctrines, that is necessary to understand the subtleties of religious practice,⁷⁰ it becomes hard to accept a description of Japanese spirituality that is generalized in this manner. Like Schrader, Croteau focuses on 'codas' and moments of stasis in Kore-eda's films, which she promptly defines as being congruent with *ma* and other Japanese spiritual tendencies.⁷¹ This line of argumentation suffers from much the same problems as it did in Schrader's chapter on Ozu. It mystifies camera techniques and artistic choices without any indication of spiritual meaning or motivation behind those choices.

Unlike Schrader, however, she does not purely focus on Zen for her analysis, but draws on later Shinto ideas by citing 16th century native scholar Motoori Norinaga, whose writings she mixes with more general, western ideas on Japanese culture and religion.⁷² By including such a huge variety of religious practices, Croteau inevitably and inaccurately depicts Japanese spiritual practice as a uniform entity that can be analyzed as such. She is forced to rely on generalized terms that do not come from religious institutions because there exists no suitable religious terminology to describe such a diversity of spiritual practice. Though Croteau attempts to breathe new life into the idea of transcendental Japanese filmmaking in this way, she fails to meaningfully restructure or recontextualize the idea from the way in which it was originally conceptualized.

Evaluating Schrader's conception of spiritual filmmaking

Now that we have described Schrader's project to describe a transcendental style and the influence of this work, we can assess its relevance and shortcomings in light of more recent scholarship. Structuralists and semiologists have long pointed out that the cinema image functions within a cloud of meanings and associations, in which what is depicted on screen is that which structures such associations.⁷³ In the literature discussed, there is a lack of awareness of the importance of thematic analysis to explore the religious meanings and connotations

⁷⁰ Dale S. Wright, *Philosophical meditations on Zen Buddhism* (Cambridge University Press, 1998), 47.

⁷¹ Croteau, *Transcendence and Spirituality in Japanese Cinema*, 211.

⁷² *Ibid*, 109

⁷³ Robert Stam, Robert Burgoyne and Sandy Flitterman-Lewys, *New Vocabularies in Film Semiotics: Structuralism, Post-Structuralism and Beyond* (Routledge, 1992), 30-31.

present within the text of a film. Films and their possible religious connotations should be evaluated as a wholistic work, structured in meaning and language, rather than conceiving a cinematic semiotic mode that can only be parsed through form.

In addition, there is a lack of awareness of the historical and cultural specificities to religious practice and a tendency to use generalized or non-specific descriptions of religious or spiritual experience. There is no real recognition of the diversity of religious practices, and the analysis does not center on a historical, geographic, and philosophical locale as is necessary to properly analyze a form of religion. Finally, Schrader argues for the conception of a universal transcendence and to understand the transcendental experience as a foundational element inherent to all religious experience. The role of language in experience is not properly acknowledged and the difference in interpretation of transcendence between religions and cultures is not adequately considered. These tendencies are understandable considering the year of publication of *The Transcendental Style*, but its continuing influence on academic writing should be assessed critically.

Mishima: A Life in Four Chapters: painful desires and transcendental obsessions

In this chapter, I will analyze *Mishima, A Life in Four Chapters* while considering how Schrader presents Japanese religiosity and transcendental experience and reflects this conception back on Japan. After introducing the plot and the contexts surrounding its production, I will discuss the themes of desire and identity present within the film through Lacanian psychoanalysis and the philosophy of Slavoj Žižek, after which I will explore how the characters deal with these themes through a highly politicized form of spirituality and will place this conception in its proper historical context.

After *Mishima: A Life in Four Chapters* was released in 1985, it quickly turned into a financial failure in the US and was immediately banned in Japan due to its controversial subject matter. It was, however, produced without any expectation that the release of the film would be any less disastrous from a financial perspective.⁷⁴ This left Paul Schrader and his brother Leonard with much creative freedom as there was no need to cater to a wide audience. Due to this, the resulting film is one based purely on the interest of its creators. Yukio Mishima was not widely read in the United States and most of his works were not even translated at that time.⁷⁵ Because of this reason, and because the film was entirely in Japanese, it was unlikely that it would resonate with the general American public. None the less, it was released and as a result, the world gained access to a film with a unique perspective on both the life of the writer Yukio Mishima, as well as Japan itself.

Mishima is a biopic, but rather than presenting the life of Yukio Mishima as a single chronological narrative as is usual for the genre, the film is divided into a multitude of distinct storylines, which are shown over the course of its runtime. In the first of these elements, Mishima's final day is depicted in color, on which he infamously committed ritual suicide after an attempted *coup d'état* targeting the Japanese self-defense forces. Secondly, snippets of his life

⁷⁴ Thomas Prasch, "'So I Found Another Form of Expression': Art and Life/Art in Life in Paul Schrader's *Mishima: A Life in Four Chapters*," In *ReFocus: The Films of Paul Schrader*, ed. Michelle E. Moore and Brian R. Brems (Edinburgh University Press, 2020), 106.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

are depicted in black and white, often accompanied by monologues. Finally, the narratives of three of Mishima's novels are depicted. These are adaptations of *The Temple of the Golden Pavilion*, *Kyoko's House* and *Runaway Horses* respectively. Its sections are easily recognized by their stylized set design (fig. 1, 2 & 3.)

Far from a rousing or inspiring life story, *Mishima* explores the writer's obsessions, anxieties, and sexual desires. The film's dramatization of the first two novels also reinforces these themes. In the adaptation of *The Temple of the Golden Pavilion*, a young Zen acolyte who suffers from a stutter, is awestruck by the beauty of the titular structure. Instead of admiring it, however, the acolyte hates its beauty and fervently wishes the golden pavilion to be destroyed. The film's narrativization of *Kyoko's House* depicts a young actor who becomes obsessed with body building. His mother's debts soon bring him into contact with the leader of a criminal organization. She offers to buy him to cancel the mother's debt and they begin an intense sadomasochistic relationship.

This focus on beauty and self-image soon shifts in the second half of the film as Mishima's nationalism and spirituality are explored. The biographical narrative is interspersed with the adaptation of *Runaway Horses*, which follows a high school student who is plotting a series of political assassinations in order to cleanse the country of its corrupt elite and restore the divine emperor to power. The plan soon falls apart, however, as the army lieutenant they cooperated with is transferred and the students are arrested. The student alone manages to escape and proceeds to assassinate one of their targets with a sword.

In this latter half of the film, *Mishima* portrays Japanese nationalism and the radical and highly politicized version of the Shinto religion which was practiced in imperial Japan. Shinto should be differentiated from earlier forms of organized spiritual practice in Japan, as it was actively carved out as a separate religion through government policy in the Meiji period. This stands in contrast to the state of religious organization before the restoration, where Shinto and Buddhism were greatly intermixed.⁷⁶ Shinto practice from the Meiji revolution onward has often been named 'State Shinto', for the state's role in sponsoring and propagating Shinto practice as a separate and unique form of religion.⁷⁷ The formation of Shinto thought was not purely a top-

⁷⁶ Buswell and Lopez, *The Princeton Dictionary of Buddhism*, 805.

⁷⁷ Hardacre, *Shinto: a History*, 440.

down affair, however, as 'Shintoist' religious thinkers, local officials and emigrants played a major role in shaping the characteristics of Shinto thought and practice during the 20th century.⁷⁸ Between 1900 and 1945, the newly separated religion of Shinto became deeply enmeshed with nationalistic and imperialistic ideals, which was often referred to with the term 国体, こくたい, 'kokutai' or 'national body' in English.⁷⁹

At the center of *kokutai* was a belief in the divine origins of the Japanese emperor, as it was believed that the imperial line descended from the sun goddess Amaterasu Ōmikami. This belief then developed during the radicalization of Japanese politics in the 1930s into the propagation of the full divinity of the emperor.⁸⁰ Within *kokutai* ideology Japan is a divinely led nation and was therefore espoused to have an inherent right to rule Asia and beyond. Within it, Japan is described as a tightly knit family state, in which the emperor served as the father, and the people as its children.⁸¹ This deification was used as a way to affirm the emperor's hegemony over any other person by asserting the emperor's divinity, uniting religion with political power.⁸²

The deification of political leaders was not unprecedented in Japan, as the Tokugawa administration has erected shrines deifying their past leader Tokugawa Ieyasu.⁸³ But the largely state-led religious movement of the early Meiji period that saw the emperor as both the center of political legitimacy, and as a divine ruler, was unique in Japanese history as it separated and reconstructed Shinto into a new state-oriented ideology.⁸⁴ The early Meiji government heavily promoted Shinto practice and steered its interpretation by emphasizing the divine lineage of the emperor. This campaign consisted of religious missions to the countryside and an attempt to build a popular cult around the emperor Jimmu, who is named as the first emperor of Japan

⁷⁸ Ibid, 404.

⁷⁹ Ibid, 440.

⁸⁰ Clinton G. Godart, *Darwin, Dharma, and the Divine* (University of Hawaii Press, 2017), 51.

⁸¹ Hardacre, *Shinto: a History*, 440.

⁸² Sakamoto Koremaru 坂本是丸, *Kokka Shintō : saisei itchikokka no kaisei no tenkai* 国家神道祭政一致国家の形成と展開 (Kōbundō 光文堂, 2006), 2.

⁸³ W.J. Boot, "The Death of a Shogun: Deification in Early Modern Japan," In *Shinto in History: ways of the kami*, ed. Mark Teeuwen and John Breen (Taylor & Francis Group 2000), 146.

⁸⁴ John Breen, "Idealogues, bureaucrats and priests: on 'Shinto' and 'Budhism' in early Meiji Japan," In *Shinto in History: ways of the kami*, ed. Mark Teeuwen and John Breen (Taylor & Francis Group 2000), 146.

according to the ancient Japanese scriptures *Kojiki* and *Nihonshoki*.⁸⁵ This attempt at shaping Shinto into a national religion would fail, however, and the relationship between the state and the newly created national Shinto ideology became increasingly complicated.⁸⁶

The Meiji state's new ambition to facilitate freedom of religion in an attempt to maintain better relations with western powers, would facilitate the legal separation of Shinto into a sectarian, and a non-sectarian or 'secular' arm. Shinto practice and ritual at non-sectarian Shrines were not seen as a religious act, but as a civic obligation.⁸⁷ This is how the state could make Shrine attendance and participation in Shinto ceremonies mandatory, despite the pretenses toward religious freedom in the Meiji constitution. Throughout the later Meiji, Taisho and finally Shōwa periods, veneration of the cult of the emperor through non-sectarian Shinto became widespread to such an extent that practitioners of any religion were forced to incorporate a Shinto conception of imperial divinity into their beliefs.⁸⁸ It is in this environment that *kokutai* ideology truly took root in all of Japanese society. It is this ideology that the portrayal of Mishima's character pertains to, and this unification of nationalism and imperial deification that becomes the core of his obsession in the second half of the film.

This section depicts Mishima's foundation of the *Tatenokai*, a private military organization, which Mishima describes in the film as an "an army of shields to protect his imperial majesty" and "a spiritual army dedicated to purity." It is with members of the *Tatenokai* that Mishima enacts his *coup d'état*. Though it is not explored in the film, it is this historical background that forms the basis of the beliefs depicted. It is hard to say whether Schrader and his team depicted *kokutai* ideology with realism and historical awareness, since it is depicted only through their own prioritization on the themes of desire and transcendental experience and is only relevant in terms of a particular interpretation of Yukio Mishima's actions. The film tackles the subject matter from an imagined viewpoint of an advocate of the most radical form of *kokutai* ideology. Its handling of the subject is therefore personal, rather than historical.

⁸⁵ Thomas David DuBois, *Religion and the Making of Modern East Asia* (Cambridge University Press, 2011), 158-159.

⁸⁶ *Ibid*, 159.

⁸⁷ *Ibid*, 160.

⁸⁸ *Ibid*, 190.

Beauty, art, the mirror and the sublime

Having explored the most important themes of the film, it is clear that there exists a tension between the first half, in which Mishima's desire for beauty and his homosexuality are explored, and the second half, in which fervent nationalism and spiritual devotion come to the forefront. I aim to explore this tension by analyzing how the desire for beauty is depicted in the film on the one hand, and how Shinto spirituality may be used to try and transcend it on the other. I want to point out, however, that this project is purely aimed at the fictional characters of the film, rather than an attempt to get at the real psychological state of Yukio Mishima as he lived. Mishima's portrayal in the film has been criticized as being reductive to his character and for the lack of presence of a socio-historical context.⁸⁹ It is clear the creators of the film had their own priorities and wishes for how they wanted to portray Mishima's life. This analysis should therefore be seen as an exploration of the personal interests of Schrader and his team rather than a psychoanalytical assessment of Yukio Mishima.

In order to explore how the themes of desire and spirituality may intersect, it is necessary to explore beauty through the libidinal function of desire within the film. This intersection between film and psychoanalysis has been commented on by scholars. In her 1978 book *Visual and Other Pleasures*, Laura Mulvey explores the role of desire in cinema and explains how the cinematic image of a woman becomes the object of a, presumed, male audience's gaze. She does this by analyzing the relationship between audience and screen through a Freudian and Lacanian perspective.⁹⁰ She identifies both the desire for a certain form of pleasurable looking, which encompasses the viewing of a sexually desirable human form, as well as a more narcissistic desire in which desire is internalized through a recognition of self.⁹¹ She explains this last aspect through the Lacanian idea of the mirror stage, which is understood as the moment when a young child first starts to understand themselves as a coherent entity by recognizing themselves through a mirror. In this moment, fragmented emotions and senses become unified into an image of the

⁸⁹ Prasch, "So I found another expression", 109-110.

⁹⁰ Laura Mulvey, *Visual and Other Pleasures* (Macmillan Publishers, 1989), 25.

⁹¹ *Ibid*, 17-18.

self. This coherence, however, only exists as an image, in an impression of the self as self, and the subject can only emerge as such.⁹²

Because the coherent mirror-image only exists as an image, it appears more complete than the collection of bodily emotions and impressions that gave rise to it. This is why there exists a tension between the body and the subject. Mulvey states:

Recognition is thus overlaid with misrecognition: the image recognised is conceived as the reflected body of the self, but its misrecognition as superior projects this body outside itself as an ideal ego, the alienated subject which, reintrojected as an ego ideal, prepares the way for identification with others in the future.⁹³

It is only after going through such a process that one can encounter an object which causes desire, an *objet a*. the *objet a* possesses that which the subject feels it is lacking. In this feeling, there is simultaneously a perception of recognition as well as one of distance. The subject feels that the perceived object possesses something that he does not recognize, it is this recognition of something beyond the object of perception, the *objet a*, that arouses the subject's desire.⁹⁴ There is therefore a difference between a desired object and the very property, the unnamable thing that makes it so that the object can be perceived as desirable. Since the *objet a* exists beyond that which is perceived, attaining the object of desire will always be disappointing, for it will reveal itself as not being the *objet a*, but simply a mundane object to which a desirable status was only granted.⁹⁵ In this way, the *objet a* is always absent, but its absence simultaneously imminently recognized. *Mishima* brings the relationship between the viewer and the viewed onto the screen itself, and explores gaze, desiring subjects and desired objects through the concept of beauty.

The characters of the first two adaptations are obsessed with beauty, but the theme is also represented in the biographical sections of the film. In one scene toward the middle of the film, Yukio Mishima is dancing with his partner at a bar. His partner then says that Mishima's body

⁹² Todd McGowan, "Cinema after Lacan," In *After Lacan: Literature, Theory and Psychoanalysis in the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Ankhi Mukherjee (Cambridge University Press, 2018), 118.

⁹³ Mulvey, *Visual and other pleasures*, 17.

⁹⁴ McGowan, "Cinema after Lacan," 118-119.

⁹⁵ *Ibid*, 119.

feels weak, upon which Mishima promptly walks out of the bar to go home. The two later talk outside of Mishima's house and when his partner asks what is wrong, he replies as follows:

You and I both have a strong sense of aesthetics, when you look at yourself in the mirror you see beauty. I can't even look at myself, so don't make jokes like that again.

Mishima sees beauty in his partner, but he is not satisfied with a simple pleasurable look. When he recognizes a desirable form, he recognizes it as lack within himself. The beauty of the young man is surplus to the object of his gaze. Mishima recognizes it, but only as an absence. In this way, the gaze is turned inward. It is not a simple look, but a traumatic and narcissistic mirror encounter. This property, of being incapable of the simple pleasurable look, and of the domination of the narcissistic impulse in all libidinal experience, is one that is repeated often in the characters of *Mishima*. In *Kyoko's House*, the actor is lying in bed after a sexual encounter, but he shows no affection to his partner. Instead, he says that he doesn't pay enough attention to his own body and that he does not have enough muscle. In an attempt to win back his affection, the woman sits up and holds a mirror up to him facing herself. "I'll be your mirror," she says (fig.4) She moves the mirror up to his hair so that it his hair is replaced with hers: "This is your hair," moving the mirror to his face: "This is your face." Then she moves the mirror to his breast: "This is your breast." Finally she says: "Isn't this better than a mirror?"

The actor is unable to enjoy the image of another without the image of himself. Like Mishima in the previous scene discussed, he cannot simply look pleurably as his gaze is aimed only at his mirror image. In recognition of this fact, his partner attempts to incorporate the image of her body in his mind as being part of his own in order to become the object of his gaze. Similarly, the acolyte in *The Temple of the Golden Pavilion* is incapable of simply appreciating beauty. He describes the golden pavilion as being too beautiful and states that he is scared as he shudders in its presence, its beauty assaulting him through all senses. The acolyte states that the temple is "a mirror you can't break", revealing that he incorporates the image of the pavilion into the experience of his own subjectivity.

This phenomenon of a pleasurable experience of beauty being overpowered by the narcissistic gaze is not the only way in which the characters ways of looking are rendered painful, however. Not only do the characters in *Mishima* project the experience of beauty onto

themselves, they are also incredibly sensitive to experience that which is beautiful as sublime. Slavoj Žižek poses beauty and the sublime as being “opposed along the axis of pleasure and displeasure,” and uses Kant’s transcendental idealism to define what differentiates the sublime from the beautiful. To Kant, the sublime encompasses the relation of an inner-worldly, empirical object to a thing in and of itself, which is independent of human cognition.⁹⁶ Žižek goes on to explain the paradox that this relation brings about:

In principle, the gap separating phenomenal, empirical objects of experience from the Thing-in-itself is insurmountable – that is, no empirical object, no representation [Vorstellung] of it can adequately present [darstellen] the Thing (the suprasensible Idea); but the Sublime is an object in which we can experience this very impossibility, this permanent failure of the representation to reach after the Thing. Thus, by means of the very failure of representation, we can have a presentiment of the true dimension of the thing.⁹⁷

This is why the experience of the sublime, unlike the experience of beauty, causes displeasure. By imagining the greatness of the Thing through the sublime, we recognize the inadequacy of the sublime object to the Thing. On the other hand, the indication of the existence of the Thing causes pleasure.⁹⁸ This pleasure lies not in the successful reception of the Thing, but exactly in the failure of its representation.

Žižek then calls into question Kant’s description however, and argues that the subjects capacity to feel the presence of the Thing-in-itself, even though its absence, was overestimated in this notion.⁹⁹ In a Hegelian criticism of Kant’s conceptualization, Žižek argues that instead, the Thing can only be experienced on the forefront of our imaginations. In this way, the Kantian formula is reversed. Instead of us experiencing a lack or failure in representation, which indicates the fullness and reality of the Thing-in-itself, we experience the Thing in its full reality, but it is its existence that is lacking.

⁹⁶ Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (Verso, 2008), 228-229.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁹⁹ Ibid, 233.

The sublime experience therefore reveals nothing beyond itself but a vast nullity, and only serves to fill the empty space that the inexistence of the Thing has left behind. Žižek states:

Thus the status of the sublime object is displaced almost imperceptibly, but none the less decisively: the Sublime is no longer an (empirical) object indicating through its very inadequacy the dimension of a transcendent Thing-in-itself (Idea) but an object which occupies the place, replaces, fills out the empty place of the Thing as void, as the pure Nothing of absolute negativity – the Sublime is an object whose positive body is just and embodiment of Nothing.¹⁰⁰

Finally, Žižek explains how this phenomenon coincides with our experience of subjectivity. As we have explored, there is a misrecognition between the body, the physiognomy of a person, and that person's subject-representation or mirror image. This gap, the realization that the spontaneous actions of the body cannot represent the subject, constitutes a traumatic lack. It is this lack that is the absolute negativity which the Thing will occupy. As a result, the lack is objectified, and is crystallized into fantasy.¹⁰¹

The acolyte's encounter with the golden pavilion is clearly a recognition of a sublime object. This perceived recognition of the existence of a Thing beyond the sublime façade of representation is then betrayed, as the sublime object opens up and reveals the metaphysical emptiness behind its existence. As the acolyte walks the temple grounds, he looks up at the golden pavilion. The pavilion breaks in two and reveals its interior. What is revealed, however, is nothing, as the interior is nothing but a monochrome surface (fig. 5)

As the golden pavilion fills out the lack of this surface, it also bridges the gap between the acolyte's self-image and bodily expression. Indeed, through his stutter, the acolyte is repeatedly traumatized by the spontaneous movements of his body, as the representation of the subject is continuously deformed through corporeal action. Due to the severity of this experience of lack, the experience of its objectified representation is unbearably intense. The object of desire

¹⁰⁰ Ibid, 234.

¹⁰¹ Ibid, 235-236.

becomes an inescapable fixation, while simultaneously being unattainable. The acolyte's crisis is therefore both incredibly severe as well as inescapable, which drives him to drastic measures.

In an attempt to overcome his crisis, the acolyte swears off his own desire, he says:

It was so small but it grew so big, it filled the world, like tremendous music. That is the terrifying power of eternal beauty. It grows larger and larger and pushes everything else out of our lives. ... Beauty is my enemy. Life is unbearable as long as the golden pavilion stands.

It is due to this great suffering as a result of the desire for beauty, through the sublime object and the narcissistic gaze, that the characters in *Mishima* seek to move beyond their desiring selves.

Action, the harmony of pen and sword and the drive beyond desire

The thematic shift that occurs halfway through *Mishima: A Life in Four Chapters* corresponds to a certain realization of its characters, the characters then come to a variety of solutions to try and resolve their personal crises. The acolyte blames the object of his desire for his pain, rather than accepting that it is the way in which he desires that brings about his suffering. As no American bombers move to attack Kyoto, he vows to destroy the temple himself. In the final moments of the story, he is shown relishing the flames as the golden pavilion burns down around him.

The actor accepts that he cannot attain the beauty he strives for, as his body will inevitably age and wither away. One of his friends says to him that it is better to die at the peak of your beauty, than to let it decay into old age. Because his object of desire, his sublime obsession, is himself, he decides it is his own body's existence that should be ended. Mishima's character comes to a different solution as he devotes himself to nationalism and spirituality to try and overcome his own painful, never-ending desire. As Mishima founds the shield society in the narrative and comes to fully embrace *kokutai* ideology, his sensitive and insecure nature is never again depicted. He starts directing heroic plays and films, in which he stars as the lead, and he is shown praising the emperor to a group of leftist students who occupied a university.

Mishima portrays *kokutai* ideology as a transcendental obsession. The level of devotion to the emperor, and fervent, puritanical nationalism the characters display trumps all other

emotion as well as all rationality. For Mishima, this transcendental devotion pushes into, and mingles with his obsession with sublime and corporeal beauty. By committing himself completely to country and emperor, Mishima aims to replace his worldly obsessions with an even more intense object of devotion. The focus of this rebellion against the perceived corruption and depravity of the libidinal drive is crystallized in the third literary adaptation of the film. In this final narrative, there is no more transition to a renunciation of the drive. Instead, there is only a crystalized ideal, a spearpoint of devotion and conviction toward spiritual cleansing. The student's actions in the adaptation of *Runaway Horses* are not logical, as their actions are repeatedly faltered and yet they strive to kill their targets.

In this imagination, the nation becomes the body, and the body becomes the nation. The ‘corrupt capitalists’ who are targeted by the students are imagined as soiling the body of Japan, in the same way the libidinal drive corrupts the body of the individual with unwanted desires. This mental mode can be seen as an extreme example of Sigmund Freud’s analysis of religion as a way to control natural impulses.¹⁰² According to Freud, religion developed as a method to suppress antisocial tendencies and actions that stemmed from uncontrolled desire. In this way, religion facilitated social harmony and civilization. On a personal level, this same function can be overused and develop into a neurotic compulsion, where the slightest infraction of the social code is associated with guilt and enforcement of the social norms becomes obsessive.¹⁰³ The practice of religion in the second half of *Mishima* could be seen in this manner.

This neurotic strictness and complete, unconditional adherence to religious rules is also depicted in the film through the concept of purity. In the third narrative, the student states that “If purity is toned down, it is no longer purity”. In his eyes, the restoration of the emperor and elimination of all other political influence is an unconditional stipulation of religious law. Purity is this state, in which all is according to religious structure and any disrupting impulse is completely annihilated.

Purity cannot simply be reduced to a general religious concept, however, as purity has a particular significance in Shinto. For Boyd and Williams, who published an article discussing

¹⁰² Paloutzian, *Invitation to the Psychology of Religion*, 84-85.

¹⁰³ Ibid.

Shinto purity rituals in 1999, purity is conceptualized as a state of restored natural creativity.¹⁰⁴ It exists where the natural state of the world is first disrupted by a corrupting force and then rectified by a positive force that possesses the power to drive away this corruption. This movement is not just ethical and symbolic, but also metaphysical. The corrupt, the dirty and the vile are imagined both as literal dirty objects such as corpses, stagnant water and diseased bodies, as well as describing the interior realities of human thought.¹⁰⁵ Boyd and Williams give as an example the idea of a clouded mirror; behind the dust there is a natural and sublime brightness.

This brightness is obscured and can only be restored by cleaning the surface. In this imagination, purification then becomes both a physical and psychological act, where the moral and the aesthetic become intimately connected. The ugly and the beautiful do not simply symbolize virtue or vice. Instead, they are equivalents, physical manifestations of an invisible world that constantly affects what is perceptible. Purity can thus only be achieved through physical action, by effecting the visible to correct the invisible. Because one's fate is dependent on the cleanliness and beauty of one's surroundings, beautifying and cleaning becomes an essential practice of purification, without which one is subjected to corruption of the body and of the mind.

This conception seems to fit with Schrader's focus on the juxtaposition between desire and spiritual devotion in the film. It is also how Mishima's character's obsession with beauty becomes intermingled with his transcendental ambitions. He believes that it is through beauty that purity can be achieved, and the roaring call of desire can be quelled. It is of course exactly this placing of beauty at the place of the sublime that is causing his agony. The connection between the physical and psychological that Boyd and Williams describe is also why both Mishima and the student resort to drastic action to attain purity. The student's murder and Mishima's coup can be more easily characterized as a cleansing ritual rather than a political action. It is an attempt at transcendence through purity, to annul their own perceived defilement by violently ripping out the corrupting element of the world they inhabit. They imagine their

¹⁰⁴ Jamers Boyd and Ron Williams. "Artful Means: An Aesthetic View of Shinto Purification Rituals," *Journal of Ritual Studies* 13, no. 1 (1999): 39, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/44368553>.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 39-40.

societies as corrupted by capitalist institutions and false ideas of political organization, behind which sparkles faintly the potentiality of imperial restoration.

They do in the end achieve transcendence, not by achieving purity through their drastic actions, but instead by ending that crucial aggregate on which the libidinal function is dependent, the human body. Mishima has one of his pupils cut off his head while he cuts into his own body with a small blade. The camera focuses in on his screaming face. The student sits on a cliff and cuts open his belly, paying reverence to the sun, from which the emperor is said to be descended. It is with that image of the rising sun that the film ends. Because the function of desire stems from the fundamental tension between the body and the subject, there is no way to cease desiring after a sense of self has been established. A spiritual transcendence of desire can therefore only be attempted; it can only be strived for. It therefore becomes an additional drive with which the subject has to contend. By obsessively focusing on purity, Mishima's character did not resolve his trauma, but only added an additional dimension to the tension that caused him agony. The only real solution, the only true transcendence, was that of death.

Historicizing the ahistorical on Shinto and purity

In his 1985 film, Schrader portrayed Mishima's adherence to *kokutai* ideology and commitment to purity, but his concept should not be evaluated without historical awareness. Shinto historian Mark Teeuwen explains that, in the Kamakura period, *Jindō*, which would develop into the concept of Shinto,¹⁰⁶ is referred to by some as a way to unite with the primeval chaos that existed before the separation of heaven and earth through purity.¹⁰⁷ This conception was based on Daoist cosmological teachings and ran parallel with a Buddhist conception of *Jindō*. This Buddhist idea conceptualized the Kami as the original source of True Reality, from which the Buddhas are manifest traces. This viewpoint juxtaposes the superior original and inherent enlightenment of the Kami with the inferior acquired enlightenment of the Buddhas.¹⁰⁸ Both these conceptions saw

¹⁰⁶ Mark Teeuwen "From Jindō to Shinto: A Concept Takes Shape," *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* 29, no. 3/4 (2002): 233, doi:10.18874/jjrs.29.3-4.2002.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid, 255.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid, 252.

the Kami as the original, transcendental and essential source of existence and explained how one could only connect to this source through purity.¹⁰⁹

These ideas seem to be congruent to the connection between purity and Shinto that Boyd and Williams describe. What seems to miss from Boyd and William's description, however, is any reference to Daoism or Buddhism. The separation and reification of Shinto in the Meiji period greatly influenced its conception in the modern era. Teeuwen describes how the *Jindō* concepts of the medieval era were not greatly involved with politics, insofar as they functioned to legitimize the rule of a divine emperor. Instead, they "dispersed imperial symbolism" and did not contribute to the idea of the Kami as a symbol of imperial power. This changed in the modern era, where Shinto became greatly intertwined with imperial legitimacy and shrine worship spread to the whole population.¹¹⁰ This change coincided with Shinto's separation from Buddhist and Daoist ideas, which is why no references to them can be found in Boyd and William's examination of purity in modern Shinto rituals.

This version of purity in Shinto, as described in Boyd and William's article and explored in *Mishima*, is therefore distinctly modern. Schrader presents this state-Shinto centered purity ideal not from a perspective of historical awareness, but from the perspective of a believer. The reification of the state Shinto ideology in the Meiji and Taisho eras meant that it was presented not as a modern invention but as a timeless Japanese reality.¹¹¹ Through Mishima's character, the film presents Shinto from this perspective and regards purity as an ahistorical Japanese ideal.

Indeed, Mishima is presented as a staunch traditionalist who rails against the tides of modern depravity and moral degradation. In reality, however, he would be a modernist, just one with ideals that were out of time and place due to the devastation they caused in recent history. Schrader's focus and priority on the transcendental experience works to obscure the historical specificity of the ideology and religious beliefs he depicts on screen. In making the film so singularly focused on obsessive, irrational and uncompromising passion, Schrader innocuously presented an irrational and emotional view of Japanese spirituality. This personal view is not anchored on any knowledge of cultural or historical circumstances, but on the personal

¹⁰⁹ Ibid, 256.

¹¹⁰ Ibid, 258.

¹¹¹ Hardacre, *Shinto: a History*, 440.

preferences and interests of Schrader himself. Through the medium of cinema, Schrader attempts to convey his artistic view on spirituality to a larger audience. In this way, Schrader depicts the impulse for ending one's desire as a universal religious experience in which Shinto forms only one axis. Indeed, *Mishima* is not a film about Shinto, or any kind of coherent set of religious beliefs, but about a supposed universal phenomenon of limitless devotion and transcendental experience. Mishima is presented as a manifestation of this devotion. His specific beliefs are less relevant than the ideas that Schrader and his team are trying to convey.

Conclusion

Having thoroughly analyzed the film, there remains the question of why it was made in the way that it was. Why did Schrader pick a relatively unknown writer from Japan for his biopic and why is it focused on radical obsession and devotion to this extent? Furthermore, how can Schrader's earlier academic work on transcendence be compared to the film? Another remaining question pertains to the setting and language of the film. Is there a connection between Schrader's discussion of Ozu's films in *The Transcendental Style* and his decision to create a Japanese language film thirteen years later?

The beginning of an answer can be found in *The Transcendental Style*, where Schrader writes about his own experience with strict religious doctrine, desire and his own motivation to write the book. Schrader frames his own interest in film as a result of his desire for the forbidden and calls his education in film studies a "pursuit of the profane".¹¹² His interest in spirituality was then rekindled through viewing Robert Bresson's *Pickpocket*, as he sensed a bridge between the spirituality of his youth and the profane cinema he loved.¹¹³ This juxtaposition between the holy, the profane and the mental strain that comes with negotiating the two is also present in the film Schrader directed in 1985. In this way, one could see the themes of desire and purity, that are present within *Mishima*, as a reflection of Schrader's own experience with strict religious doctrine and forbidden temptations, which are finally negotiated through Bresson's 'transcendental cinema'.

This idea is reinforced by Schrader's own comments on the film, he states:

I came to Mishima because his story is part of my fantasy world . . . If I'm going to do a film about my own death-wishes, my own homo-erotic, narcissistic feelings, my own over-calculation of life and my own inability to feel, well, here's a man who has repeatedly stated those identical problems. I believe that this is the only way to do a

¹¹² Schrader, *Transcendental Style*, 171.

¹¹³ Ibid.

biography which also has the force of a personal statement: two psyches have to be in sufficient synch.¹¹⁴

Schrader saw in Mishima not simply an interesting character that would attract an audience, but someone with whom he had a deep psychological connection. Whether or not there is a direct link between Schrader's complicated relationship between the spiritual and the profane and Mishima's narrative in the story cannot be determined with certainty. It is, however, tempting to make this connection.

Both through Ozu in *The Transcendental Style*, and then through Mishima in *A Life in Four Chapters*, Schrader looks to Japan in search of transcendence. In Ozu he saw evidence for a universal foundation for spiritual experience, and in Mishima he saw a deep personal connection. In some ways, these interpretations are in complete opposition to each other, but there are similarities as well. Thomas Prasch has pointed out some resemblances between the directors that formed the transcendental style of Schrader's 1972 publication, and *A life in four chapters*. According to him, Schrader's use of black and white is congruent with Ozu's style of filmmaking, while the usage of voice-overs recalls Bresson.¹¹⁵ There is also the focus on the transcendental as a deeply moving, individual experience.

Indeed, the end of *A life in four chapters* brims with sublime emotionality. When Mishima is speaking to the soldiers just before his final act, it cuts into a monologue over a flashback of Mishima flying above the clouds in a Jetfighter:

My mind was at ease, my thought process lively. No movement, no sound, no memories. The closed cockpit and outer space were like the spirit and body of the same being. Here I saw the outcome of my final action. In this stillness was a beauty beyond words. No more body or spirit, pen or sword, male or female. Then I saw a giant circle coiled around the earth, a ring that resolved all contradictions, a ring vaster than death, more fragrant than any scent I have ever known. Here was the moment I had always been seeking.

¹¹⁴ George Kouvaros, *Paul Schrader* (University of Illinois press, 2008), 55.

¹¹⁵ Prasch, "So I found another expression", 113.

While Schrader himself denies any transcendental ambitions for his films,¹¹⁶ it cannot be denied that Mishima's final act is presented here as a true and full experience of the transcendent. In these final moments of the film, it seems the aim was to grasp at that fundamental kernel of religion that Paul Schrader sought in the films of Ozu and Bresson in *The Transcendental Style*. The scene is a decisive action par excellence and would lend itself easily to the ruminations on hierophanies and spiritual feeling so commonly found in Schrader's book. By expressing the Wholly other through Mishima's experience and trying to communicate this experience to the audience, it could be argued that Schrader attempted to produce a film that expressed the transcendental similar to the films discussed in his 1972 publication.

On the other hand, making the argument that Schrader directly used the formalistic techniques described in *The Transcendental Style* during the production of *A life in four chapters* is much harder. Though Prash does touch on some superficial similarities between *Mishima* and Ozu and Bresson's cinematic style,¹¹⁷ it is hard to argue that these similarities are the result of a direct influence. Voice overs are not an uncommon occurrence in film and the usage of black and white can hardly solely be attributed to Ozu, especially considering that he directed many films in color. Additionally, the film is hardly the slow, dull and mundane tale that Schrader identified as fertile ground for cinematic expression of the transcendent in *The Transcendental Style*. Perspectives shift constantly, shots do not tend to linger, and the set design is elaborate as well as expressive. Frontal shots, which Schrader points to as one of the aspects indicative of the transcendental style,¹¹⁸ are not used with any regularity in the film either. While the final part of the film could be described as a decisive action, upon which the image of the rising sun with the credits rolling can encompass stasis, this is something the film is continuously building toward. There is no sudden disruption of the mundane through disparity, but rather a constant barrage of abnormality, capped off with a climax of brutal violence.¹¹⁹

Clearly then, Schrader did not attempt to utilize the transcendental style in this film. Perhaps he did not mean to represent any kind of transcendental experience from the outset but ended up creating a scene that depicts it later on in the creative process. Maybe a mundane and

¹¹⁶ Prash, "So I found another expression", 116.

¹¹⁷ Ibid, 113.

¹¹⁸ Schrader, *Transcendental Style*, 80-81.

¹¹⁹ Ibid, 70.

dull style of filmmaking simply did not fit the subject matter, or the influence of other creatives led to a different form of expression. Regardless, the cinematic form through which the transcendental experience is presented differs significantly from the formula Schrader described in his 1972 book.

What then, can be made of Schrader's work on, and in, Japanese film? As discussed in the literary critique, Schrader mainly uses Ozu's work as a template to project a modernized and westernized conception of Zen upon. His discussion of Japanese culture in this chapter suffers from a dated and orientalist conception of Japan as a nation dominated by tradition and Zen spirituality.¹²⁰ In *The Transcendental Style*, Schrader does not explain Japan, or Ozu's films, but rather projects a limited, modern and westernized understanding of Japanese culture onto the subjects he aims to discuss. This lack of attention to the changing nature of cultural norms comes through in *Mishima* as well, as an exploration of the socio-historical circumstances of Mishima's life as well as the events depicted in the film is not present.¹²¹ Instead, Schrader prioritized sketching a psychological profile of Yukio Mishima, upon which he projected himself. The result is an interesting speculation on what the thought patterns of someone under the influence of the radicalized *kokutai* ideology of the 1930's could be like. The depiction of this ideology, unlike his characterization of Zen, does not present a generalized, Japanese other, but highlights the tension that exists between Yukio Mishima's views and that of the majority within the society he inhabits.

At the same time, however, it is hard to truly evaluate Japanese society, religion or history through the film. The effort to put "two psyches in sufficient sync" obscures and complicates Mishima's story through Schrader's tendency to put his own psychological fingerprint onto the narrative. In addition, the topic of the film contributes to this difficulty. Even a more psychologically distant depiction of Yukio Mishima's life would have to content with the contradictory accounts of his life and beliefs that exist in the writings he left behind.¹²² Mishima was atypical for his society, and a view of Japanese culture which includes his beliefs and actions will always be hard to generalize past the individual thoughts and actions of Mishima himself.

¹²⁰ Ibid, 45.

¹²¹ Prasch, "So I found another expression," 110.

¹²² Ibid.

Schrader's view on transcendence and spirituality in film seems to have shifted from his writing of *The Transcendental Style* in 1972 and the release of *A Life in Four Chapters* in 1985, but his conceptualization of transcendence on a fundamental and universal experience of a Wholly other seems to have remained. The way in which Mishima's death was presented in the film, as well as Schrader's own comments, indicate that Schrader believed he truly understood Mishima's spiritual and emotional world despite Schrader's cultural distance to him, which most likely resulted from his perspective of universal mysticism. In addition, Schrader attempted to communicate a transcendental experience to his audience through a Japanese film, depicting it as a truly trans-cultural phenomenon.

Through this focus of universality, Schrader tends to present Japanese religion without regard for historical change. In both his book and film, he presents a distinctly modern version of a certain religious practice as a foundational, ahistoric element of Japanese culture and society. This tendency is present in *Mishima* through his portrayal as a defender of the core traditionalist values of purity and masculinity, and in *The Transcendental Style* by describing Japan as an oriental culture based on Zen Buddhism.¹²³ By doing this, he taps into a long tradition of universalization, orientalisation and essentialism. This can be traced to the sources on Zen and Japanese culture in *The Transcendental Style*, as D.T. Suzuki, Alan Watts and Donald Richie all share in the tendency to portray Japanese religion and culture as an essentially unchanging set of values and beliefs. In turn, the book is used to contribute to this tradition by the likes of Croteau, who asserts the deep and spiritual meanings of various Japanese concepts in her publication. Though these works claim to explain elements of Japanese culture and society, they explain more about the personal perspective of its creators as well as the discursive environment from which its ideas were created.

¹²³ Schrader, *Transcendental Style*, 55.

Images



Figure 1: *Mishima: A Life in Four Chapters*, directed by Paul Schrader, 1985, 1:39:53. Depiction of Yukio Mishima's final day in color.



Figure 2: *Mishima: A Life in Four Chapters*, directed by Paul Schrader, 1985, 8:49. Flashbacks filmed in black and white.

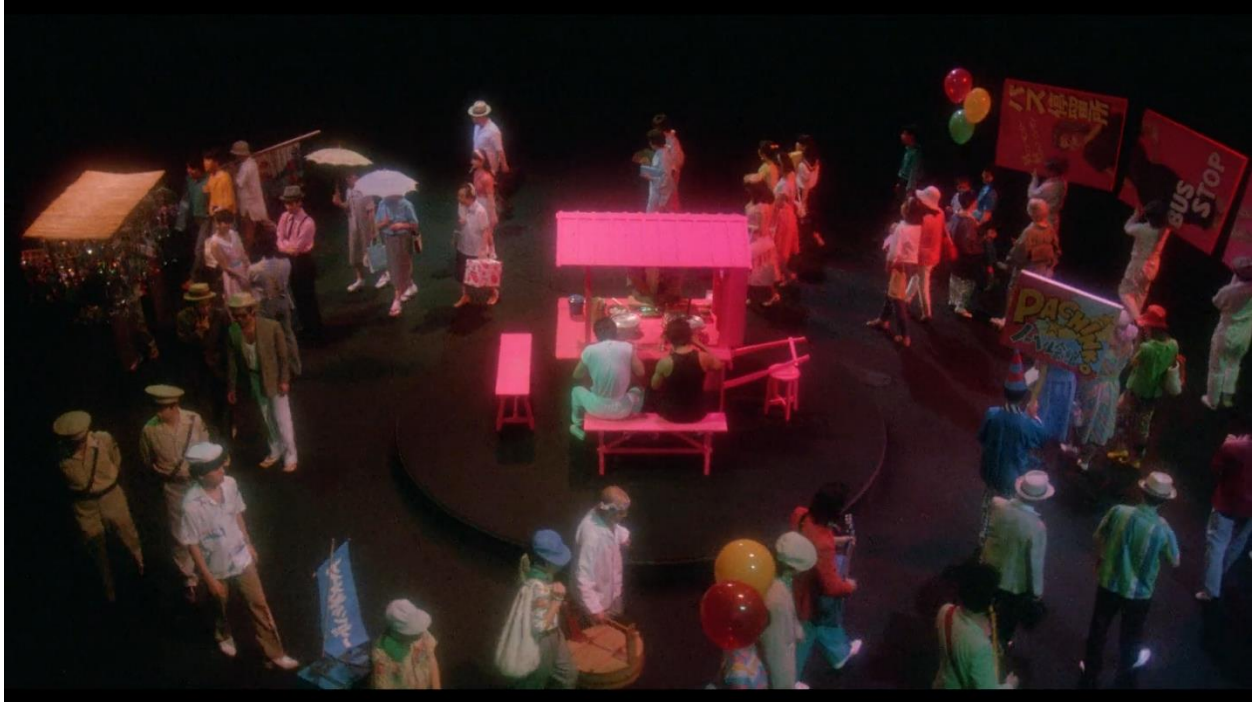


Figure 3: *Mishima: A Life in Four Chapters*, directed by Paul Schrader, 1985, 49:42. The stylized set design used for the adaptation of Mishima's books.



Figure 4: *Mishima: A Life in Four Chapters*, directed by Paul Schrader, 1985, 44:45. A woman holds her mirror up to the actors head.



Figure 5: Mishima: A Life in Four Chapters, directed by Paul Schrader, 1985, 18:29. The golden pavilion splits open.

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