

Laughing Before We Die: Transcendental Comic Style in Film

by

Troy Peterson

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Roberto Benigni, John Lurie, and Tom Waits sit around a campfire and chew on rabbit. The three men were separated for a while, torn apart by clashing egos and divergent views on survival, but have reunited once again to break rabbit in lieu of bread, renourish their ailing bodies, and endure, side by side, in the face of certain death within the lifeless forest wastes of the American south. They are alive, but the squirrel tastes bad: “Like a rubber tire,” observes Lurie, sending smiles and giggles among the crew as the camera continues its uninterrupted, static long take and allows the men to simply exist, eat, and laugh in time and in direct opposition to the pitch darkness of the gnarled forest surrounding them. They laugh, the campfire glows, and we cut to a static long shot of the same forest, but at dawn: early morning light peers through the endless rows of trees, a light wind rustles tall strands of grass, and all is quiet and still.

Down by Law (Jarmusch, 1986) is but one film of an under-recognized trend in American and International art cinema that combines two seemingly disparate cinematic styles—deadpan comedy and arthouse transcendental style—to create a distinctly spiritual form of comedy that captures the endurance of the human spirit within visual aesthetics. Hereafter referred to as transcendental comedy, this peculiar stylistic trend sprouted in multiple, distant corners of the world around roughly the same time—the mid-1980s—and continues to thrive in discreet pockets of the contemporary cinematic landscape. No single filmmaker’s body of work completely and entirely adheres to the formal peculiarities of transcendental comedy, but Jim Jarmusch, Tsai Ming-Liang, and Aki Kaurismäki—from America, Taiwan, and Finland, respectively—all capture humor, despair, and joy within reductive forms in order to suggest the

intangible experience of transcending one's bleak, physical environments for a higher plane of emotional and spiritual existence.

The idea of transcendental style—capturing the intangible and invisible with the tangible, visible, and visual medium of film—originates in Paul Schrader's 1972 text *Transcendental Style in Film*, in which he posits the idea of a universal cinematic style that is capable of suggesting the presence of the otherworldly, God, or the spiritual through a combination of formal reduction, structural patterning, and emotional withholding. Transcendental filmmakers fabricate cold, formalistic everyday environments, shatter them with the force of previously unexpressed and unfeared human emotions, and capture those almost otherworldly expressions in still images of peace, unity, and transcendence. Schrader applies this model to Yasujiro Ozu, Robert Bresson, and Carl Theodor Dreyer, and frequently returns to the idea of a bridge of style—rather than content—but sometimes complicates his argument by placing his triptych of directors within strictly religious frameworks; he argues for stylistic universality, yet spends a majority of the text proving the religious sensibilities of the directors and, therefore, the validity of their work as transcendental artists *beyond* their use of the transcendental style. This paper, however, pushes Schrader's concept of style-over-content to the extreme and argues for transcendental style's ability to transcend generic boundaries and, therefore, be utilized by filmmakers of all backgrounds and, in turn, analyzed without fear of a certain film's content not being outwardly religious enough. The presence of the transcendental style, therefore, determines the transcendental nature of a film; religious content need not be a defining factor.

Transcendental filmmakers strive to capture the unknowable, the unthinkable, and the intangible within form, but comedy, laughter, and humor examine what seems to be the exact

opposite: the materiality, corporeality, and physicality of human experience and, more specifically, the human body in relation to and retaliation against deathly society. Comedy in other words, favors the material over the immaterial, and this potential incongruity between comedy and transcendental style must be addressed before making any further connections between the two forms. Mikhail Bakhtin, for example, explains how in the Medieval period, “laughter was a drama of bodily life (copulation, birth, growth, eating, drinking, defecation)” and expressive of humanity’s endless renewal. Carnival celebration and bodily laughter, in other words, topple hierarchies, return power to humanity, and allow us to endure perpetually, laughing in the face of death. Noël Carroll, on the other hand, in his analysis of Buster Keaton’s deadpan humor, details how “the largest and most important comic routines in [*The General* (1926)] revolve around the performance of physical tasks and concrete operations whose success or failure depends upon whether they are discharged with prereflective bodily mindfulness or not” (Bakhtin 88, Carroll 7). Humor, therefore, arises from the physical realm, and a wide range of comedy theory focuses on the body: not only does laughter symbolize a liberation of the body’s grotesque impulses, but humor more often than not arises from the sheer spectacle of physical movement. In direct opposition to the characteristics of transcendental style, comedy places emotion, movement, and action in the foreground rather than silence, introspection, and inaction; the form represents rather than withholds, runs rather than sits, and smiles rather than stares blankly. The beyond may as well not exist.

Transcendental style and comedy may seem incompatible upon first glance but further investigation into the genre’s philosophical, emotional, and spiritual concerns reveals an interest in humanism and spiritual survival that connects directly with Schrader’s theories on human

emotion. Suzanne K. Langer, for example, believes that the genre of comedy primarily concerns itself with the struggle of “maintain[ing] the pattern of vitality in a non-living universe” and connecting with the “pure sense of life” flowing beneath the material world. The comic hero thus embodies this vital force, defeats death, and symbolizes humanity’s ability to endure. Paul H. Grawe mirrors Langer’s sentiments and views comedy as the “celebration of ongoing life” and argues that “comedy’s emotional power is the power to evoke any emotional response people may have to a remembrance of the faith that the human race is destined to survive” (Langer 328, 327, Grawe 62). Humanity, therefore, endures in comedy: the life force flows through time, the spirit lives on, and transcendental style brings these concepts to their logical aesthetic conclusion, favoring stillness over movement, emotion and contemplation over action, and the intangible over the material in order to capture the human spirit in its purest form.

Through a comprehensive analysis of the critical and analytical literature surrounding transcendental style and comedy, this paper will theorize a definition of transcendental comedy, investigate the current cinematic landscape through the lens of this definition, and apply a newly-theorized transcendental comedy model to the films of Aki Kaurismäki and Jim Jarmusch in order to reach a specific and thorough understanding of transcendental comedy’s effects. The paper will then conclude with a discussion of potential avenues for further research into the topic, including a debate over the style’s potential universality.

Part I: How to Make Paul Schrader Laugh: Crafting a Transcendental Comic Style Model

1a. Enter Schrader

Paul Schrader defines the Transcendent as anything “beyond normal sense experience” which—although undeniably and unavoidably vague—allows for a multitude of interpretations regarding what constitutes the beyond, the unknowable, the unseeable, and the intangible in transcendental films (Schrader 37). Schrader more often than not refers to “the Holy,” “the Ideal,” and “the Wholly Other” in reference to the Transcendent and the deific beings which may or may not exist just beyond the edges of thought and sensuality, but his controlling argument favors emotion rather than explicit religiosity. For example, in his introduction to *Transcendental Style in Film*, he connects spirituality with emotion and writes “unrelated cultures [have] found similar ways to express similar spiritual emotions” through art and argues that the transcendental style continues such a tradition (35). When interpreted through his definition of the Transcendent—i.e., anything “beyond normal sense experience”—Schrader’s idea of “spiritual emotion” becomes a signifier for emotions unfelt, unexpressed, hidden underneath the coldness of everyday life, and thus unattainable by humanity (37). The transcendental style thereby develops emotion into a spiritual or transcendental phenomenon by *subtracting* emotion, erasing emotion from a film’s diegesis so as to suggest an immense absence within the world *and* an undeniable presence beyond the world and surrounding the characters. Emotion exists in transcendental films, yet it cannot be seen, cannot be felt—unless expressed through a unique individual as in *Ordet* (Dreyer, 1955) or *Down by Law*—and characters must learn how to reach this otherworldly source of feeling, to reach beyond their “normal” environments and deeper within themselves in order to achieve spiritual awareness and transcend their despairing surroundings.

1b. How to Achieve Transcendence: A Four-Step Guide

In order to suggest the presence of spiritual emotion in cinema—and eventually capture otherworldly emotions within visual aesthetics—filmmakers utilize a transcendental style comprised of four stylistic steps: the everyday, disparity, decisive action, and stasis. Although its form is “not intrinsically transcendental or religious,” the transcendental style limits emotion, movement, and action to the point of erasure in order to generate cold, still worlds in which the existence of profound human connection, love, and compassion seems—on the surface at least—impossible (35). It is thus through transcendental intervention—most frequently represented through shattering and uncharacteristic displays of emotion—that these dead zones become imbued with love, sadness, *pure emotion*, and characters reach a higher plane of emotional and spiritual understanding.

The first step on the road to cinematic transcendence—the creation of the everyday—“prepares reality for the intrusion of the transcendent” by meticulously representing the “dull, banal commonplaces of everyday living” (Schrader 67). The goal is not to create a “realistic” atmosphere but, rather, compose a stylized reality where “silence,” “stillness,” and flatness permeate the surroundings and inflict the characters with spells of chronic blankness and spiritual emptiness (67). Yasujiro Ozu—the filmmaker through whom Schrader introduces the transcendental style—is particularly famous for his “abstentious [stylistic] rigor” and “aspiring to the ultimate in limitation,” and utilizes static, restrained camerawork, repetitive character actions, sparse soundtracks, repeated shots, and affectless performances to develop ritualistic, everyday environments where human emotion simply fails to exist (51). When an Ozu character eventually cries, or displays any sort of emotion, the results are shattering.

Before spiritual emotion flows through the individual and breaks through the everyday, however, transcendental filmmakers generate “disparity,” or the feeling that there “might be more to life than day-to-day existence” (Schrader 70). As the everyday actions of the characters unfold onscreen, and the filmmakers’ banal, stylistic rituals continue their uninterrupted patterns, the viewer will begin to sense “deep, untapped feelings just below the surface” of the film’s dead, robotic world (72). Human emotion, human flaws, “human gestures” break through the crust of the everyday like glimmering bubbles of hope and vanish in the blink of an eye, thereby suggesting a hidden well of emotion just beyond the film’s diegesis, for no feeling could arise from the everyday (72). Ozu, for example, creates disparity with “unexpected flash[es] of human density:” his film *Late Spring* (Ozu, 1949) features a scene where an aunt and her niece lose their balance when attempting to bow in sync, and *Tokyo Story*’s (Ozu, 1953) “unblinking camera” refuses to cut away when the Shukichi gets drunk with a friend and spouts “ludicrous,” “noble,” nostalgia-tinged observations about death while swaying gently against the soft waves of inebriation (72). These moments of human folly—although minute—refuse to conform to the pre-established contexts of the everyday and, therefore, suggest a transcendental realm *beyond* the diegesis of the film. Human density—represented by rare glimpses of humor, irony, *humanity*—becomes “spiritual density” through the transcendental style (74).

As the tension between the everyday and the Transcendent grows, and glimmers of humanity continue to peek through the cracks of disparity, the “schizoid” imbalance of the film reaches a breaking point in the form of a “decisive action,” or an “outburst of spiritual emotion totally inexplicable within the everyday” (71). Hirayama’s tears at the end of *An Autumn Afternoon* (Ozu, 1962), for example, act not as an “expression of the individual” but, rather, “an

expression of the Transcendent itself” considering the surrounding form of the everyday.

Emotion suddenly enters an emotionless environment and Hirayama’s tears stream as if from another world entirely (55).

The final, and perhaps most integral step on the path to cinematic transcendence—stasis—directly succeeds the decisive action and captures spiritual emotion within visual aesthetics. In *Tokyo Story*, for example, after Noriko purges her tears in front of Shukichi after learning of Tomi’s death in the last minutes of the film, Ozu cuts to a static long shot of an elementary school on a hillside: a woman holding a parasol walks down a path with two small children, bushes pop through a wooden fence surrounding the school, and a children’s choir sings gently of the soundtrack. Ozu lingers on this shot for twelve seconds, and completes the transcendental style with stasis: Noriko’s outpour of spiritual emotion transfers directly to the peaceful, still image—indicative of Japan’s future and humanity’s ability to endure—the young choir’s song swells on the soundtrack, and “empathy” transforms into “aesthetic appreciation, experience into expression,” and “emotions into form” (77). In a life where emotion once failed to exist, her tears break through, human compassion and empathy express themselves through the conduit of one individual, and stasis captures transcendental emotion—the Transcendent itself—in a single, “unified, permanent” cinematic frame (77).

1c. Secular Spirituality: Moving Beyond Schrader

Although Schrader argues for a universal transcendental style, he often complicates his argument with lengthy discussions of content, or, rather, the religious preoccupations of his director subjects. Indeed, he dedicates a large portion of the Ozu chapter to an analysis of Ozu’s

relation to Zen culture—thus positing the idea that filmmakers must be religious or explicitly spiritual in some way in order to be transcendental artists—yet never presents a wholly convincing argument. One of the only pieces of evidence Schrader provides in regards to Ozu’s connection to Zen tradition, for example, fails to reference any substantial personal detail: “Ozu is permeated with *mu* [the Zen term for ‘negation, emptiness, and void’]; it is the single character inscribed on his tomb of Engaku-ji” (59, 56). Beyond that somewhat flimsy factoid, Schrader never proves that: a) Ozu had any sort of meaningful relationship with Zen Buddhism and b) possessed the desire to translate that belief into film. In fact, Ozu’s youth was “consumed by a passion for Western culture” and he often dismissed Zen readings of his work. In reference to Western critics, Ozu believed that they often failed to “understand [his films]” and, in turn, labelled them “Zen or something like that,” thus complicating Schrader’s assertions (Bordwell 27).

Beyond his attempt to place Ozu within the context of Zen culture, Schrader defends his pantheon of transcendental filmmakers from supposed imposters constantly throughout the text. When referencing Michelangelo Antonioni, for example, he questions the director’s religious intentions and argues that “stasis does not make Antonioni a transcendental artist” because he is “not exclusively concerned with the Transcendent,” even though—as Schrader states later—“stasis is the culmination of the transcendental style” (Schrader 80, 83). The ending of *L’Eclisse* (Antonioni, 1962) in particular showcases what may be described as stasis extremis or, rather, stasis that never truly settles. After Monica Vitti and Alain Delon reject each other and abandon their plans to reconnect, Antonioni fills the last five minutes of the film with “silent” shots of imposing architecture, glowing street lights, and abandoned nighttime streets. Although

unorthodox considering the lack of emotion that precedes these concluding shots, Antonioni's use of stasis (or quasi-stasis) nevertheless hints at the world *beyond* the diegesis—the otherworldly emotion that the two main characters failed to reach—and the sheer number of shots tricks the viewer into anticipating an emotional catharsis that never arrives. Water flows into a gutter, buzzing lights burn into the sky, and the viewer is left with a feeling of tremendous absence *and* presence; we yearn for something more, something beyond the surface of existence, and Vitti and Delon's failure to connect leaves us to observe and feel the forces that push the water from the barrel and rustle the tree branches. Antonioni, therefore, is very much in tune with the transcendental style, but Schrader rejects the filmmaker on the grounds of his seemingly non-transcendental intentions.

Complicated distinctions regarding the artistic intentions of filmmakers and the possible presence of the transcendental style in their films not only weaken Schrader's overarching argument, but pose a compelling question: what makes a filmmaker a *transcendental* filmmaker? Naturally, one might agree with Schrader's reasoning and believe that one must harbor some form of relationship with religion, spirituality, and the beyond in order to successfully recreate intangible experience through the cinema, but Ozu complicates such an argument. Indeed, as Robert Boyers writes in *After the Avant-Garde*, "it is not the religious content long associated with transcendental style in which Ozu is primarily interested, but the formal properties of the style and their adaptation to the urgencies of the present," most notably "fundamental human experience" (Boyers 209, 227). In other words, although Ozu expressed no interest in adapting Zen culture for the cinema through the use of transcendental style, the undeniable utilization of the form in his oeuvre serves a purpose nonetheless by enhancing the emotionality of everyday

human experience to the point of spiritual resonance. Religiosity, therefore, does not determine transcendental style; the presence of the style itself determines such.

1d. Weak Laughter: Schrader's Doubts About Comedy

While analyzing Ozu in *Transcendental Style in Film*, Schrader highlights laughter's apparent inability to unify one with the Transcendent and, therefore, dismisses the possibility of transcendental comedy: "the compassion of Ozu's later films is so overburdening and disparate that rapprochement cannot be achieved by laughter as in light comedy, but only by deep spiritual awareness" (Schrader 74). In other words, laughter—or, more specifically, the emotions associated with laughter—are not spiritual emotions, and thus cannot embody or express the "Transcendent itself"; only streaming tears and dramatic stares can guide one to the hidden well of compassion that underlies everyday life, to spiritual awareness and transcendence. Ozu's comedy *Good Morning* (Ozu, 1959), however, tests Schrader's assumption: the film not only substitutes laughter for Ozu's commonplace cries, but it encases those all-too-rare outbursts of life and happiness within stillness, unity, the transcendental style, and thus achieves stasis *through* laughter, and captures the Transcendent—hidden compassion, vitality, and joy—on film without a tear in sight.

Schrader may argue for laughter's inability to catalyze spiritual transcendence, but *Good Morning* advances an alternative view of the transcendental style in which the spectrum of "spiritual emotions" spans areas beyond the borders of sadness; tears may destroy all preconceptions of the everyday, but what of smiles and laughs? *Good Morning*, in a way, legitimizes the emotional and spiritual resonances of comedy itself by applying the

transcendental style to content that would normally be critiqued for its sophomoric inadequacies and thus entreats viewers to reexamine the genre of comedy as a whole. Indeed, a rich pool of comedy theory examines the form's preoccupations with the human spirit and, more specifically, the ability of this personal yet communal spirit to endure through time, evolve, and transcend the oppressive and destructive boundaries of death, thus connecting directly to the spiritual concerns of Schrader's text. By probing deeply into various theories of comedy, humor, and laughter, and examining the emotions associated with the genre, the following sections bridge the gap between transcendental style and comedy and argue for comedy's spiritual potency and emotional validity in order to craft a working definition of transcendental comic style. Laughter may escape from the body, but we find its source in the human spirit.

1e. Lifeforce Carnival: The Spirit of Comedy

The body dominates in comedy scholarship. Laughter bursts from guts and escapes via mouths, film comedians, like Buster Keaton, structure their most elaborate gags around stunning acts of bodily function and malfunction, and wild, mirthful, carnivalesque celebration topples strict social hierarchies, liberates humanity's grotesque impulses, and allows the collective human body to endure through time via biological reproduction, thus defying the world's turbulent, oppressive, and deathly forces. Comedy, therefore, appears to be somewhat uninterested in the immaterial, the spiritual, and the more intangible aspects of human experience. In fact, Mikhail Bakhtin, in *Rabelais and His World*—an analysis of popular humor, folk, and carnival culture in the Middle Ages and Renaissance—writes of comedy's *rejection* of the immaterial and explains that “folk culture brought the world close to man, gave it a bodily

form, and established a link through the body and bodily life, in contrast to the abstract and spiritual mastery sought by Romanticism” (39). Laughter, humor, and carnivalesque celebration, in other words, not only liberate humanity from abstract, oppressive intellectualism and spiritualism by toppling all social norms and manifesting their mirthful powers in the “grotesque” and unchained human form—the “leading images” of which are “fertility, growth, and a brimming-over abundance”—but they also represent life itself and the endurance of the human race (19). We laugh, we eat, we copulate, and the carnival “degrades” all that is “high, spiritual, ideal, abstract,” inaccessible, and “transfers it to the material level, to the sphere of earth and body in their indissoluble unity” (20). In comedy, therefore, humanity as a collective holds the power to survive, to thrive, to live; the intangible has no place, holds no power. All that matters is food, drink, and the celebration of ongoing life.

Bakhtin’s theories on the carnival are unabashedly corporeal and undeniably critical of the immaterial aspects of existence, but the unifying and universal nature of the carnival’s forces hints at its cosmic, almost transcendent power. When defining the carnival, for example, Bakhtin writes that “during carnival time life is subject only to its laws, that is, the laws of its own freedom. It has a universal spirit; it is a special condition of the entire world, of the world’s revival and renewal, in which all take part” (7). This idea of the carnival’s enduring “universal spirit” and its ability to unite the entire world with the power of gayety, brightness, and vitality not only establishes laughter, celebration, and happiness in comedy as almost transcendent phenomena existing “beyond normal sense experience”—a single smile becomes part of a much larger form in carnival time and resonates on a “cosmic” level—but the “universal spirit” legitimizes comedy as a genre rife with transcendental possibilities; it not only has a spirit, but a

universal spirit, expressed most prominently through “festive laughter,” or the “laughter of all the people” (11). In transcendental films, a tear unites one with the beyond—the hidden well of compassion flowing beneath the surface of everyday existence—but in comedy, laughter unites one with the liberated, vital, collective human spirit. The carnival itself is not necessarily a transcendental phenomenon, but its “cosmic” and spiritual implications help us realize how the form may be adapted within the transcendental style, and the human spirit represented visually.

Bakhtin may reject abstract spiritualism, but he embraces the spirit of the carnival, the spirit of humanity, and writes of comedy’s ability to “liberate the world from all that is dark and terrifying,” a concept echoed heavily in Susanne K. Langer’s chapter on the comic rhythm in *Feeling and Form* (47). An American philosopher, Langer argues that comedy possesses an inherently spiritual and emotional quality and holds the power to represent a unifying emotional force through its form. In fact, the controlling concept of her theory resembles Schrader’s own views on disparity and, more specifically, his idea that untapped emotions exist behind everyday life’s cold flatness: “the pure sense of life is the underlying feeling of comedy” (Langer 327). In other words, an undercurrent of concentrated life and pure emotion flows under, around, and through the comedic form, and the comic hero not only expresses this “pure sense of life” throughout their respective works but must *maintain* this impulse while struggling through an otherwise meaningless and chaotic universe. A character’s ability to transcend their deathly surroundings, therefore, exists at the heart of comedy.

The pure sense of life is both otherworldly and intrinsic, instinctual yet unattainable, and ultimately unifying. As Langer states: “to maintain the pattern of vitality in a non-living universe is the most elementary instinctual purpose,” and, therefore, every being possesses the ability to

do so—thus unifying us all—yet the act remains elusive and challenging because of another universal presence: the death force (Langer 328). One’s personal, yet universal, struggle to maintain one’s aliveness (or “vital balance”) amid the destructive forces of the everyday creates what Langer describes as the “basic rhythm of life”—full of imbalance and balance, destruction and evolution—and the “pure sense of life” springs from this “basic rhythm” of existence, for in the face of certain death, we “search for as much life as possible” (330, 335). Comedy, therefore, provides hope for humankind, and “expresses the continuous balance of sheer vitality that belongs to society and is exemplified briefly in each individual” (333). In other words, just as transcendental films depict small glimmers of the otherworldly through characters’ outpours of emotion, comedies present the otherworldly through characters who possess and express a sort of “life force” (“sheer vitality”), thus transforming them into living, breathing manifestations of the beyond, if just for a short moment.

Although this “life force” or “pure sense of life” is “always new, always complex,” “infinitely variable in its possible expressions,” and exists beyond description, the comedic artist, as Langer argues, achieves representation—or suggestion—through two primary methods: laughter and “triumph over the surrounding world” (Langer 327, 348). Indeed, one must realize that the term “comic” does not necessarily mean “funny,” but the “natural vein of comedy” is, nevertheless, “humorous,” and “laughter springs from its very structure” (338). Langer defines laughter as the “culmination of feeling—the crest of a wave of felt vitality” that “lifts” the laughter above their chaotic, dangerous surroundings, and merges them with the pure essence of life, thereby suggesting transcendent experience. Although she never explicitly connects the act of laughing to the representation of the life force *within* the comedic form (i.e., if a character in a

comedy laughs, that does not necessarily mean that they have defeated death and reached a new emotional plane, etc.), the very fact that she ascribes the gut-busting act to an uncontrollable overflow of hidden feeling within the viewer hints at the idea that laughter is an externalization of the otherworldly, arising *out of* and *because of* the comedic form. Comedy, therefore, induces laughter and transcendent experience within the viewer by “abstract[ing] and reincarnat[ing]...the motion and rhythm of living” and “enhancing vital feeling” (344). In other words, by exaggerating the everyday life vs. death conflict to such a degree and having the comedic hero defeat deathly nature and evil society around every turn—thus embodying the spirit of life—comedy’s pure “exhibition of vitality rises to a breaking point,” induces mirth and laughter within the viewer, and “lifts” them to some purer plane of feeling (344).

This does not mean, however, that comedy succeeds in capturing or suggesting the otherworldly within its form. Comedy, instead, represents a relatively straightforward conflict—sans transcendent experience—and allows the viewer to experience an emotional catharsis as life prevails continuously before them. The comic hero may defeat death, defeat the World—the “real antagonist”—and embody the “life force,” but since “the comic rhythm is that of vital continuity, the protagonist does not change” and, therefore, does not discover the beyond; it has always been there, and no transcendent experience occurs (349, 335). Traditional comedy, therefore, does not hide the “pure sense of life,” but engages with it to such a degree that it no longer becomes otherworldly, just as Bakhtin’s communal human spirit manifests itself in the physical rather than the spiritual realm.

By examining the work of Mikhail Bakhtin and Susanne K. Langer, we have highlighted the spiritual undercurrents of comedy and hinted at the immense joy that the form can represent

and produce within audiences. A tension, however, remains unresolved in these writings: both theorists write of communal human spirits, life forces that connect us all and allow us to endure through time and defeat death, but comedy represents these spiritual concepts in purely physical ways. For Bakhtin, comedy, humor, and carnivalesque celebration finds its ultimate form in the grotesque human body, and Langer's analysis of comedy involves the comic hero completely embodying the "pure essence of life" by defeating death around every turn, thus representing the almost otherworldly well of vitality to the point of overexposure and, therefore, negation.

Although it may seem pointless to highlight such a tension—for can the unseeable truly be represented in any other realm beyond the physical?—it is necessary to discuss these conflicts in order to establish how the transcendental style will bring the spiritual essence of comedy to its logical, perhaps ideal aesthetic conclusion—through suggestion rather than representation—and capture the endurance of the human spirit within form.

1f. Happy Endings: The Emotions of Comedy

Before analyzing how the transcendental style might function within the context of film comedy, we must first discuss the emotions of comedy in order to establish how these seemingly basic human feelings will be redacted by and eventually expressed through the style and thus transformed into spiritual emotions.

Little has been explicitly written about comedy's representative emotions, but a sort of unspoken truth exists within much of the scholarship: comedies are happy. Steve Neale and Frank Krutnik, for example, in *Popular Film and Television Comedy*, distinguish comedy from other genres—most notably tragedy—by positing that "comedy is not just 'light' and 'amusing'"

but also “marked by ‘happy endings’” (Neale 11). They continue to explain that a “happy ending can be the primary—occasionally, even, the only— convention” that distinguishes comedy from other forms, but also acknowledge the limitations of this “neoclassical” concept, which neglects non-narrative forms like stand-up routines (13). T.G.A. Nelson, however, mirrors Neale and Krutnik’s sentiments and defines comedy as consisting of the “movement of a story towards an ending characterized by harmony, festivity, and celebration,” and this definition remains constant throughout most of the scholarly literature (Nelson 22).

What the “happy ending” convention fails to acknowledge, however, is the variety of emotions that may be represented or expressed during comedy’s harmonious resolutions and preceding segments more generally. This may seem like a frivolous, perhaps even oxymoronic question to investigate, but we must explicitly define comedy’s emotions before refracting them through the transcendental style. Bakhtin aids us in this respect by constantly referring to the “gay” spirit of the carnival and describes its effects as “completely gay and bright” (Bakhtin 47). Expressed through “universal,” “festive laughter,” the carnival spirit encompasses the world in its “gay relativity,” renews life perpetually, and, therefore, provides humankind with many happy beginnings; there is no end (11).

Paul H. Grawe echoes Bakhtin’s optimistic ruminations and posits hope as the dominant emotion of comedy, writing: “comedy’s emotional power is the power to evoke any emotional response people may have to a remembrance of the faith that the human race is destined to survive” (Grawe 62). Comedy, therefore, not only generates perpetual joy, but hope *through* this joy. The human race will indeed survive, a concept embodied by Langer’s comic hero—emblematic of humanity as a whole—who harbors an untarnished, indestructible “sense of

vitality” that allows them to defeat death around every turn (Langer 341). Indeed, perhaps the defining positive emotion—or sensation—that comedy conveys is this “pure sense of life” or “vital feeling” flowing around us, through us, within us, and between us, as represented in the form itself by the enduring comic hero brimming with life and the laughter they produce within the audience (340).

Comedy not only possesses a spirit—or, more specifically, a resonant belief in the human spirit’s endurance—but it also fosters a spectrum of positive emotions. Joy, hope, vitality, and “transcendent love”—a defining feature of Buster Keaton’s comedies, according to Noël Carroll—all pervade comedy’s off-kilter, silly, and celebratory spaces, and ultimately create an all-encompassing belief that joy, love, and harmony will topple the world’s destructive forces and lead us all to the “light” (Carroll 159). The transcendental style thus transforms these positive emotions into spiritual emotions—and captures the human spirit within visual aesthetics—by erasing them from a film’s diegesis and eventually shattering all preconceptions of the film’s dead world with unspeakable expressions of humanity’s happiness. Characters smile instead of stare blankly, laugh instead of collapse into tears, and the death force vanishes in the face of comedy’s hope. Having established comedy’s spirit and emotions, we may now devise a lens through which to locate the transcendental comic style in film.

1g. Laughing Before We Die: A Transcendental Comic Style Model

The transcendental comic style creates a cold, flat, and still everyday where positive emotions like joy, love, hope, and the “pure sense of life” fail to exist. Death pervades the surroundings, soaks into the still cinematography, the sparse dialogue, and prevents the

characters from connecting with one another, resulting in a world where the life force—flowing beneath the surface of everyday existence—struggles to defeat the death force, and the pursuit of happiness becomes seemingly trivial and impossible. Transcendental comedy’s primary concern, therefore, is whether or not the characters will be able to reach the “pure sense of life,” defeat the deathly forces of nature, society, and the unknown like Langer’s comic hero, obtain happiness, feel love, and achieve transcendence.

The absence of vitality in the everyday—as opposed to *too much* vitality in traditional comedy—makes the eventual moments of laughter, happiness, and life all the more moving, all the more joyful, and all the more transcendent. As the narrative progresses, the viewer—lost in a sea of coldness, death, and emotionlessness—begins to feel a sort of imbalance, a conflict of emotion, a “disparity.” in other words, they begin to experience the “rhythm of life,” the battle between life and death, order and disorder, balance and imbalance, happiness and sadness, comedy and tragedy out of which the “pure essence of life” will eventually arise. Happiness and vitality do, indeed, exist—appearing as faint smiles, short laughs, simple acts of kindness, glimmers of hope—and since these positive forces cannot possibly arise from the dead everyday, their source lies somewhere else, somewhere beyond, somewhere within.

As the “pure essence of life” and emotion continue to break through the everyday’s surface and the disparity between life and death progressively builds to a near-“schizoid”-breaking point, the “decisive action,” “a bold expression of emotion,” erupts through the dead everyday like a burst of bright light and dismisses “any pretense of the everyday reality.” Smiles replace frowns, laughs replace tears, happiness replaces sadness, and death, if just for a moment, ceases to rule the world. Mrs. Haraguchi’s laughing fit in *Good*

Morning, for example, perfectly represents the life force's ability to embody the coldest of characters and restore warmth to the everyday, the latter of which Ozu—and transcendental artists in general—achieve through the model's final step: stasis. As Mrs. Haraguchi continues to laugh, Ozu cuts to an extreme long-shot of the suburban neighborhood in which all the characters live, and he lingers on it for multiple seconds, allowing the laughter to permeate the surroundings and the shot itself to absorb the essence of feeling. This lingering, this stillness, therefore, captures Mrs. Haraguchi's life force, the "pure essence of life," and otherworldly emotion *within form*, thus allowing humanity's vital spirit to endure through time, and extend beyond all boundaries of thought and feeling.

Part II: Transcendental Comic Style in Film

2a. Stale Beer and Halitosis: Aki Kaurismäki and the Virtues of Ultra-Deadpan

Although countless filmmakers, actors, and stand-up comics dabble in deadpan modes of comedy—the American remake of *The Office* acting as perhaps the ultimate example of how such an approach to humor can resonate with audiences—none have quite matched the incongruous, absurd, borderline-agonizing ultra-deadpan stylings of Finland's most popular (and most frequently inebriated) director, Aki Kaurismäki. Relatively underappreciated here in the United States, and wrongfully underrepresented in scholarly literature, Kaurismäki has established himself over the past thirty years as a sort of oddball auteur with a flair for the anachronistic and a penchant for socially-conscious subject matter. In fact, what little scholarship exists about the eccentric director often focuses solely on the political resonances of his content

rather than the peculiarities of his minimalist style, which not only draws from the masterful deadpan antics of Buster Keaton, but also the emotionally subdued humanism of Ozu and the visual restraint of Bresson. These seemingly disparate sources combine to create an ideal representation of the transcendental comic style.

Similarly to Ozu, Kaurismäki remakes the same film perpetually in order to erase contrived, plot-driven conflict from his everyday environments and attune the viewer to the repetitive rhythms of his loser characters' boring, but emotionally potent and subtly dramatic lives. *Shadows in Paradise* (1986), *Ariel* (1988), *Leningrad Cowboys Go America* (1989), and *The Match Factory Girl* (1990), for example, all follow working-class individuals who experience tragedies or hardships in the first minutes of the film, embark on impromptu road trips through the decrepit wastes of their respective locations, find love, lose love, find love again, and escape their miserable lives for potentially brighter futures via cruises en route to much warmer locales like Jamaica. Kaurismäki, therefore, rejects plot—and other dramatic “screens” like expressive performances and camera movement—in order to elevate the humdrum, hilarious, and human conflicts of everyday life into the realm of emotional, spiritual, and comedic transcendence and supply dramatic importance to seemingly insignificant occurrences. Life may seem despairing, bleak, and dull, but adventure is possible, and happiness attainable.

Not all of Kaurismäki's films utilize the transcendental style, however, though his fascination with impenetrable deadpan is immediately realized in his earliest works. His fifth film *Ariel*, for example, generates humor and “comic amusement” through intense incongruity, or a tension created when a “deviation from some presupposed norm—an anomaly or an

incongruity relative to some framework governing the ways in which we think the world is or should be”—is presented to the viewer (Carroll 17). Kaurismäki generates incongruity primarily through deadpan performance and directs his actors to “refrain from conventionally expressive vocal, facial, and bodily gestures and adopt instead a deadpan delivery of dialogue, even when their characters are confronted with stressful, violent, and melodramatic situations” (Austin 2). By reacting to the world with complete blankness, with non-reaction, Kaurismäki’s characters completely subvert all preconceptions of basic human behavior—much like Ozu and Bresson’s blank characters—and supply a humorous tension to the bleakest of scenarios. *Ariel*, for example, begins with an uncharacteristically funny suicide: after a very brief discussion with his son—the film’s protagonist, Taisto—the father slams his car keys on the table, pushes himself from his chair, says “I’ve had it with this shit,” pulls a gun from his jacket, instructs his son to “don’t do what I do,” and disappears into the bathroom. Meanwhile, upbeat polka music plays throughout the café and Kaurismäki pans rightward from the bathroom door to Taisto lighting a cigarette in uneager anticipation of the fatal sound. We linger on him in a medium shot for about six seconds until the gunshot cracks from the left side of the stereo soundscape—providing a spatial realism to the off-screen action—and fails to disturb Taisto in the slightest; he does not even flinch. As if annoyed, he eventually walks to the bathroom as the café’s polka music transitions into an elaborate accordion solo. He reaches the door, and Kaurismäki cuts to a low-angle medium shot of the supposedly bereaved son entering the repulsive orange and green bathroom, his father’s body lying just beyond the edge of the frame. He stares down neutrally, takes a drag from his cigarette, and squints like Clint Eastwood.

Although *Ariel* does not conform to the particularities of the transcendental style, its incongruous deadpan acts as a prelude to Kaurismäki's more austere attempts at transcendental comedy. His relegation of dramatic events to off-screen space, for example, not only indicates a clear Bressonian influence, but also a disinterest in dramatic sensationalism, and his actors' non-reactive deadpan almost functions like an extreme version of the everyday's stylistic codes, generating affectless incongruity to the point of laughter. The film diverts from Schrader's formula, however, in its form: along with *Ariel*, Kaurismäki's earlier films move at a brisk pace—*Ariel* clocks in at a scant seventy-one minutes—and his camera is constantly mobile, tracking through doorways, following characters with energetic pans, and dollying forward into neutral individuals to emphasize and externalize their deeply hidden emotional states through quasi-classical visual techniques. *Le Havre* (2011), on the other hand, brings these inklings of the transcendental style—the anti-dramatic narratives, bleak environments, and affectless performances—and comedic resonances—death forces, happy endings, and humorous incongruities—to their ultimate aesthetic expressions by favoring character emotion over action, camera stasis over camera movement, and hope over crippling despair.

2b. Incongruous Pineapples: Transcendental Comic Style in *Le Havre*

The film begins with death. Marcel Marx—the film's shoeshiner protagonist—and Chang—his partner in shining—stand like statues and stare at the gray ground in a lonely wide shot. The dull blue and gray train station in which they stand houses thousands of passengers arriving and departing—all off-screen—but none generous or aware enough to donate their shoes and time to the shiners. An army of footwear stomps across the stained concrete in a high-angle

medium close-up, but the people remain anonymous, their shadows flickering across Marcel and Chang's shine boxes like speedy apparitions. Human connection becomes a reality for a brief moment, however, when a stoic businessman sits on Marcel's stool. Decked-out in all-gray formal wear and handcuffed to a briefcase, he scans the train station as Marcel goes to work on his already spotless shoes: he notices a man wearing a beige trench coat, black gloves, and dark sunglasses resting on his left, and another presumably troublesome character—a black-fedora-wearing baddie—emanating from the shadows to his right. As is the Kaurismäkian way, these men stare at each other blankly for about thirty seconds before the handcuffed man says “Enough,” pays Marcel, and motivates a backward-tracking camera movement by standing up and walking away. Instead of following the character, however, Kaurismäki returns to Marcel and Chang and quotes *Ariel* with a series of violent off-screen sounds including screeching tires, three gunshots, and a woman's scream. Marcel and Chang stare neutrally at the off-screen carnage and the camera dollies forward: “luckily he had time to pay,” says Marcel.

As evidenced by this introductory scene, the death force permeates *Le Havre*. All of the everyday trademarks are present—the blank faces, the static long takes, the incongruous situations courtesy of deadpan dialogue deliveries—but Kaurismäki places significant visual emphasis on death or, more specifically, the death *force* throughout the scene. When the businessman-thug enters the station, for example, Kaurismäki breaks the codes of his cold, mundane everyday environment with a variety of camera movements: the camera tilts down when the man sits down, pans to the right to reveal the man's handcuffs, and tilts down from Marcel's face to the businessman's shoes after the shoeshiner notices his client's peculiar bracelet. This mysterious, darkly-robed man, therefore, brings an entirely different visual energy

to the scene. Whereas the introductory shots are typically transcendental, the businessman shots are subtly dynamic, and the most drastic visual shift occurs when the man departs the station—and his life—and motivates not only one, but two tracking shots. The camera tracks backward as he leaves—the man almost pushing the camera with his deathly energy—and also forward when his death occurs off-screen, thus returning the death force to Marcel and Chang, who stare expressionless into the distance. Although this random, supposedly violent death does not necessarily phase the characters—Marcel’s incongruous reaction a result of the everyday’s overbearing emotionlessness—the push-in indicates an internal shift; he even says “Better go, they’ll blame me anyway” after the murder, fearful of how the authorities (another deathly, oppressive force in the film) will wrongfully punish him.

Kaurismäki further establishes his death force-imbued everyday in the film’s opening credits as Marcel walks through the desolate city streets, the camera pans with his leftward walk—thus continuing the death force’s camera movements and overpowering the character with a bleak energy—and a church bell rings in the distance in lieu of a death knell. A variety of static wide shots isolate Marcel within grand expanses of dull grayness, and oppressive forces lurk behind every corner. When he attempts to shine a well-dressed client’s shoes, for example, a inexplicably-angry store owner wearing all-black—in contrast to Marcel’s toasted-brown jacket and tan turtleneck—calls Marcel a “terrorist,” threatens to notify the police of his wrongdoings, and kicks his polishing supplies into the street. Kaurismäki follows this incident of inexplicable human indecency with a static medium long-shot of Marcel sitting still and alone in an empty café as if frozen by melancholy. Framed in the middle of the image and surrounded by emptiness and teal-tinged glass—Kaurismäki even conceals the waiter’s presence by focusing solely on his

hands in close-up when he serves the quiet guest—Marcel smokes a cigarette, munches on olives, and languishes in loneliness, his neutral expression and blank one hundred-yard stare transcending sadness and generating a humorous, incongruous tension. The only respite from the cool blue paint, colder reflective surfaces, and general emotional coldness of the distant shot itself takes form in a small bouquet of purple, pink, and yellow flowers on the right side of the frame, whose colors match Marcel's warm, earthy jacket and provide a balance to the shot via natural rather than produced elements. Nature, therefore, creates unity, harmony, and imbues the main character with a power apart from the dark forces of the everyday's coldness. He *can* obtain happiness, create happiness, yet fails to realize such, and shuffles home, alone, and surrounded by nothingness.

When Marcel moves away from the industrialized section of the city—the land of trains, gangsters, and disconnection—and into the countryside—the land of gravel pathways, wooden shacks, and freshly-baked bread—happiness and human connection become possibilities once again. Although the blue interior of his home mirrors the sad café's pale paint, his homecoming contains significant visual differences. When he enters his house, he walks into an intimate close-up—his face lit by a high-key but warm tungsten light—and *smirks* for about a millisecond before greeting his wife with a “I'm home.” In the presence of another human being, happiness breaks through the everyday for the briefest of moments, generates disparity—Kaurismäki, by this point, has established the everyday as a realm devoid of emotion, connection, and life—and provides a glimmer of hope for the residents of Le Havre. That is, until about a minute later, when the death force arrives yet again in the form of an unmotivated push-in on Marcel's wife—Arletty—when she is struck by a mysterious stomach pain. She pauses her onion-slicing,

stares off-screen, and the camera dollies forward from a medium long shot to a medium close-up, emphasizing an internal shift as in the beginning of the film. Kaurismäki then cuts to a close-up of her hands as she grabs her stomach, tilts up to reveal her still-blank face, and down again when she rests her head on the table. She remains expressionless throughout the ordeal, but the camera's movements imply a fatal change.

The death force finds its ultimate visual expression—and counterpoint—a few scenes later in a shipyard, which Kaurismäki introduces in the dead of night. A shadowy figure limps across the expansive, wide frame toward one of the massive stacks of red, blue, and black shipping crates that frame the shot. Rain falling on the dark asphalt forms pitch-black puddles, the bright moon creates rectangular shadow shafts, and the shipping crates loom over the tiny figure like skyscrapers ready to tumble, creating an atmosphere of overwhelming darkness. Armed with a flashlight and stick, the shaggy, bearded security guard draped in all-black attire beats the containers and listens: a baby's cry emanates from within a crate, sparking a police investigation the following morning. Bystanders gather around the crate and question the police ruckus: "More living dead," a man states. Inspector Monet—yet another black-robed character—and his crew open the crate to reveal a tableau of African refugees. The phrase "living dead" itself is incongruous and oxymoronic, and Kaurismäki photographs the refugees with this disparity in mind: shafts of light set their faces aglow in a series of medium close-ups—thus highlighting their vitality— but they are frozen, expressionless, trapped, surrounded by death. They are, in other words, physical embodiments of disparity, beings both vital and dead, loving but hated, hopeful but doomed.

One of the refugees refuses to submit, however. Idrissa—a young boy wearing a black sweater and yellow undershirt—stares into the bright light and stands up, motivating the camera to tilt with him and land in a heroic low angle. Whereas a majority of the camera movements from earlier in the film are motivated by deathly forces—the gangster’s murder, Arletty’s stomach pain—Idrissa introduces a new energy to the film (the life force, indicated by his hidden yellow shirt) and Kaurismäki underscores his introduction with an uncharacteristic swell of orchestral music a la Bresson to further enhance the power of his arrival and imbue the cold, dead everyday with a tinge of hope and beauty. After a few moments of hesitation, he darts from the crate and freezes at the sight of three machine gun-wielding policemen, two of whom stand in the immediate foreground of the long shot and dwarf the center-framed child. He runs away. Policeman #3 then raises his rifle to shoot the fleeing suspect before Inspector Monet grabs the weapon and states “Are you mad? It’s a child.” The melancholy score continues to play over Idrissa’s rather tension-less escape—no police pursue the boy and Kaurismäki composes the scene entirely with static wide shots in order to emphasize the underlying hope of the scene rather than drama—and he disappears among the crumbling, graffitied walls of the port, a glimmer of brightness in an otherwise deadly universe. The music disappears, and the everyday resolves itself.

Aside from Idrissa’s introduction—one of the most prominent instances of disparity in the film—Kaurismäki generates emotional tension in the everyday via incongruous deadpan humor. When a doctor diagnoses Arletty with a mysterious terminal illness, for example, he assures her that “miracles do happen,” to which she replies “not in my neighborhood.” Although the line contributes to the overarching hopelessness of the film—Kaurismäki traps Arletty in yet

another cold blue room lit with stark white light—Kati Outinen’s extreme deadpan delivery of the line upends traditional norms of human behavior and thus creates an incongruous, humorous tension. The characters’ inability to realize the absurdity of the moment also contributes to the scene’s disparity, for even though the viewer feels the emotion, the lift of comic amusement and vital feeling underneath the film’s surface, the oppressive everyday prevents the characters from experiencing these sensations.

In rare moments, however, emotion breaks through, and usually during scenes of communal celebration of the Bakhtin tradition. Marcel’s busy local bar (La Moderne), for example, always houses a group of jolly individuals seemingly unaffected by the bleakness surrounding them—everyone drinks, smiles, and listens to music in the tight wood-paneled space—and human connection brings joy and hope to the everyday once again when Marcel visits a group of fugitive refugees living on the outskirts of civilization. Rocky green hills surround the group of men, music trickles from a dingy pocket radio, and red stew boils over a small fire, comforting the crew as Marcel cracks jokes and induces laughter in his compatriots. Before Kaurismäki can capture these decisive actions within stasis, however, he abruptly transitions to a much bleaker scene at a refugee center. Ominous hums replace the radio’s tune, thick cement walls clash with the previous scene’s green hills, and the death force takes control yet again.

As the film steadily travels toward its conclusion and Inspector Monet, shady tattle-tales, and terminal illnesses increasingly encroach upon the lives of Kaurismäki’s characters, Idrissa’s life force enlivens Le Havre’s community of outcasts and motivates two transcendental experiences. After Arletty falls ill, for example, and Idrissa falls under the care of Marcel, the

disheveled shoeshiner enlists the help of Little Bob—a local rockstar—to hold a fundraising concert for Idrissa’s illegal transport to London. In order to convince Little Bob to quit his solemn, late-night drinking escapades and return to the stage, he reunites him with his estranged wife—Mimie—and generates a decisive action. Bob sits at a bar and stares at the six empty shot glasses resting before him, his face shrouded in shadow. The bartender adds a seventh glass to the collection and Marcel enters, eager for Little Bob’s assistance. While lamenting his altercation with Mimie—over “something trivial”—Bob refuses to break eye-contact with his shot glasses, and turns around only when Mimie enters. She approaches the bar, the two stare longingly into each other’s eyes, and a shaft of light lands upon the duo as they smile away. The lifeforce expresses itself through these two reconnected individuals, the orchestra swells—echoing Idrissa’s introduction—and Kaurismäki cuts to a static wide shot of Le Havre’s port at dawn. Small specks of golden light pepper the rich blue hues of early morning, happiness and love transfer to the peaceful eight-second shot, and stasis is achieved.

As if one moment of stasis were not enough, Kaurismäki concludes the film with a miracle a la Dreyer’s *Ordet*. After successfully evading the police and delivering Idrissa to the proper evacuators, Marcel visits Arletty in the hospital, only to find her bed empty. He expects the worst as a nurse leads him down the hallway, the low-angle camera tracking him with the force of death. When he enters the room, however, the doctors greet him happily, for Arletty has miraculously defeated the disease. Marcel turns to his right, and Kaurismäki cuts to a medium long shot of Arletty doused in yellow sunlight, wearing a yellow dress, and smiling; the camera dollies forward into a close-up, and she says: “I’m cured. The disease is gone. Let’s go home, Marcel.” And they do: sunlight beams upon the wooden shacks, birds chirp, and trees bloom.

Marcel and Arletty enter their yard, arm and arm, and gaze upon their cherry tree, never-before-shown in the film. They then turn to each other, smile once more, and enter the house. Kaurismäki reveals the tree: white and green flowers sway in the afternoon wind, golden light bounces from the pedals, and the branches dance. We rest in this moment of stasis for twenty-five seconds, and the film ends. Humanity endures.

2c. We All Scream for Ice Cream: Jim Jarmusch and the Transcendental Comic Style

In order to establish the transcendental comic style as a formal device beyond the scope of just one filmmaker's vision, we must analyze its presence in other films. Jim Jarmusch's stylistic sensibilities not only match Kaurismäki's—Jarmusch composes every scene of his second film, *Stranger Than Paradise* (1984), entirely with static long takes—but the two often collaborate on projects. Jarmusch, for example, plays a grubby used car salesman in *Leningrad Cowboys Go America*, and the Helsinki section of his film *Night on Earth* (1991) features Matti Pellonpää, who appears in many of Kaurismäki's works, so the two are very much aware of their cinematic brotherhood. Jarmusch's style, however, tends to be even more reductive than Kaurismäki's, and less incongruous; his actors embrace affectlessness, but the humor of his films often arises from more traditional sources—such as Roberto Benigni's character in *Down by Law*—and often vanishes in favor of coolness and melancholy. Stylistic differences aside, Jarmusch's work undoubtedly features hints of the transcendental comic style, and the following section will analyze his film *Down by Law* in order to further investigate the peculiarities of its effects, and posit its potential universality.

The film opens with a graveyard. In a long shot at eye-level, a large tree semi-obstructs a row of mausoleums from view, the jet black tail-end of a hearse sits imposingly on the left of the frame, dead leaves coat the dirty sidewalk, and a blank gray sky fills-out the rest of the bleak image. Moving laterally (to the left) the camera slowly and smoothly pulls away from the graveyard like a hearse departing for another delivery, beginning its ghostly travels through the barren streets and bayous of New Orleans; the viewer is a dead body, peering out of the wide 1.85:1-sized window. Tom Waits's "Jockey Full of Bourbon" plays over Robby Müller's sad black and white images, and the first lyric sings "Edna Million in a drop-dead suit," thus adding to the overwhelming sense of death that Jarmusch establishes in only a matter of seconds. The hearse floats through run-down neighborhoods and inky black bayou waters, revealing decrepit wooden shacks and garbage-strewn lawns, and passersby enter and exit the frame rapidly like apparitions because of the camera's speed. Vitality has no home in any of these images, but the fact that the camera is moving—Jarmusch almost never moves the camera for the rest of the film—suggests a vital presence, and life under the death.

Once the hearse prologue (or travelogue) comes to a close, Jarmusch continues to establish the deathly everyday through restrained, static camerawork, lingering shots focusing on mundane actions, crumbling characters, and death-infused dialogue. For example, after Zack (Tom Waits) quite literally gets tossed out of his apartment—his enraged girlfriend, Laurette, propelling everything from his shoes to his record collection out of a two-story window in a sequence composed of three static long takes—Jarmusch cuts to an extreme long shot of the street below, littered with Zack's destroyed livelihood. The displaced shell of a man shuffles down the road, lightly kicking the remnants of his relationship like a pouty child, then tiredly sits

down on the curb. As Zack, hunched over, generally depressed, and surrounded by shattered records and radios, changes his shoes in the shadowy, silent night, the viewer remembers a comment that his girlfriend made during the fight: “you’re digging your own grave.” Framed in a low angle, Zack has, indeed, reached an ultimate low point in his life and buried himself under piles of pride—he proudly states “I never jerk people off” when arguing with his girlfriend—symbolized by the fancy shoes he dons. The presence of radios and records also highlights the fact that his “downfall” occurred because of his refusal to work for DJs other than himself, as if to suggest that life flows through human connection, and death thrives in selfishness. Jarmusch relays all of this information in one long, flat shot, thereby adding an extra layer of dourness and “deadness” to the scene by forcing the viewer to mundanely experience Zack’s attempt at clinging to a sense of self (i.e., the shoes), and wallow in his spiritual and emotional death as he blankly stares at the lifeless debris around him. Death, therefore, comes at Zack from three different angles: the film’s form, the bleak destroyed world, and within himself.

Jarmusch then transports the viewer to yet another tense apartment where Jack—a skinny, skeleton-like pimp played by a nearly affectless John Lurie—and his girlfriend, Bobbie, have a quasi-argument about his inability to “understand any kind of people,” just like Zack. His simple reply of “you sure can talk, can’t you baby?” to Bobbie’s lengthy rant hints at his hubris and emotional coldness, and the physical distance between the two—presented through the film’s trademark static camerawork—only emphasizes the lifelessness of their relationship. For example, in one of the two different shots that form the scene, Jack, illuminated, sits with his back to Bobbie in the right foreground, while she, in the left background, naked and doused in shadow, yearns for some sort of recognition; she might as well not even be there. Jack eventually

gives Bobbie a revolver—in case one of their customers “gets smart”—and Jarmusch cuts to a reverse shot with Bobbie in the left foreground; acting as both a metaphor for their dead relationship and foreshadowing for Jack’s eventual arrest, she aims the gun at his back for about six seconds, but refuses to pull the trigger. He’s dead anyway.

Jarmusch creates lifelessness through a variety of forms—cinematography, setting, character, performance, dialogue—and practically turns Zack and Jack into mere extensions of the rotten, decrepit neighborhoods and bayous from the beginning of the film rather than fully fleshed-out individuals; even their similar names suggest a lack of true identity. Almost no line exists between the subject (Zack and Jack) and the object (the world)—which Jarmusch emphasizes by allowing death to talk through the characters with lines like “I’m serious as cancer” and “you’re gonna die when you see her”—thus connecting back to Langer’s statement that “the World is the real antagonist.” Zack and Jack, therefore, are essentially embodiments of the everyday, and almost no sense of vitality seems to exist under their world...at first. One of the primary scenes of disparity (i.e., the tension between the life force and the death force, happiness and sadness) occurs when Zack drunkenly sings nonsensical ballads to himself outside of a ratty bar. Jarmusch shoots him from such a lengthy distance away that he almost blends into the surroundings, and one could easily mistake him for a trash can if he were not moving. As he continues his tune, now framed in a closer long shot, a man enters the left of the frame out of nowhere (with his back towards the camera) and proudly states “It’s a sad and beautiful world.” Not only does the line itself present a disparity-like relationship between “sad” and “beautiful”—a concept that Müller mirrors in his rich cinematography—but it marks a small moment of levity in an otherwise bleak film because of the sheer randomness of its delivery and,

therefore, its incongruous nature. Where did this guy come from? Why would he say such a thing? With these questions mind, the man almost acts like an embodiment of the otherworldly, the life force popping up through the everyday unexpectedly. For example, when Zack, embodying the death force, tells the innocent man to “buzz off,” he replies with “Ah! Thank you. Buzz offa to you too” thus signifying that he does not comprehend negativity or death. He even laughs—the first laugh of the film—because he interprets the phrase as a term of endearment, and proceeds to write it down in his phrasebook while repeating it over and over again. Zack eventually wins out, however, and shoos the otherworldly man away, thus hampering the life force, but his continued singing of “it’s a sad a beautiful world” signals a transference of the “pure essence of life,” an awakening and, therefore, hope for his future.

Hope does not arrive, in a traditional sense. Zack, Jack, and Bob—the otherworldly man who happens to be an Italian tourist, played with hilarious innocence by Roberto Benigni—all get arrested for three separate, accidental reasons and are brought together by forces way beyond their control and comprehension. The true irony of their captivity, however, is that Zack and Jack finally *connect* with other human beings while incarcerated and sheltered from the deadly forces of the world; prison, in other words, frees them in true *Pickpocket* (1959) fashion, and Bob acts as the catalyst for their eventual transcendence. Their first meeting presents more disparity to the viewer—Bob, while desperately trying to connect with the two uninterested men, paces around the cell, fidgets with his phrasebook, and attempts joke delivery, thus symbolizing the life force’s struggle to survive in an area of hate and disconnectedness—but as their relationship strengthens, disparity morphs into decisive action, and the “pure essence of life” erupts from all three of the men. For example, when playing cards on the ground of the jail cell, Jack, after winning the

round, makes a raspy celebration noise that resembles a terminal breath more than anything else, but one can sense his happiness, sense life in the decrepit cell, and sense disparity. Bob, confused, asks what the noise is: “Screaming,” replies Jack. His answer provokes Bob to eagerly scroll through his phrasebook and discover the following note: “I scream-a, you scream-a, we all scream-a, for ice cream-a!” Not before long, the three prisoners start to repeat the phrase endlessly, the volume increasing and forming a wave of sound with each repetition. An indestructible smile takes up permanent residence on Bob’s face while the triptych stands up and forms an endlessly moving circle, going round and round in their cell as the entire prison joins in on their chant of life. Even Jack smiles, and Zack screams the phrase with enough happy fervor to erase all worries from his psyche—all that matters in this instant is the “ice cream,” the vitality, the life exploding from the dead surface of the everyday, the decisive action. Connecting back to Langer, the viewer laughs because of the sheer power of the concentrated life presented before them, achieving transcendence along with the characters, and then the screaming stops. Guards. Zack, Jack, and Bob return to their positions on the ground, feign calmness, and wipe the smiles from their faces. The death world blocks stasis—the guards look like imposing, underworldly shadows at the low angle from which they are filmed—the three men do not achieve true transcendence, and Jarmusch does not capture the pure essence of life in form.

But they eventually do. After escaping from prison, Zack and Jack, now reconnected to the death world that consumed them earlier in the film, revert back to their old ways: they bicker about who should lead the group, attempt to assert their dominance on one another, and eventually split-up when the ego battle gets too heated, leaving Bob to fend for himself in the backcountry bayous filled with “red ants that can eat a whole family in half-an-hour,”

eighteen-foot alligators, and, quite simply, death. He catches a rabbit, however, and proceeds to roast it over a fire while reminiscing about his “strange mother,” whom he still loved no matter her strangeness, furthering the idea that he is the living embodiment of the life force, accepting of everyone. The darkness closes in around him, and a twig snaps; Jarmusch cuts abruptly to a wide, high angle, revealing two death figures: Zack and Jack, who abandon the darkness for the warmth of the campfire, the warmth of Bob, the warmth of community, and the warmth of life. He implores them to taste the rabbit, and they do so, describing the meal as “tire”-like and generally unpleasant, but they all laugh anyway. Even in the darkest of places, the slightest glimmers of hope can be found, can be enjoyed and shared. Together, they are alive, and that is enough. Jarmusch cuts to a forest at dawn, the sky bright, and the high grass swaying. A bird chirps. Laughter and happiness imbue the image. Jarmusch captures the “pure sense of life” in form. Finally: stasis.

Part III: Sad and Beautiful Worlds: Topics for Further Discussion

By combining Paul Schrader’s definition of transcendental cinematic style with theories of comedy ranging from Mikhail Bakhtin to Suzanne K. Langer, we generated a transcendental comic style model through which to analyze the films of Aki Kaurismäki and Jim Jarmusch and charted the peculiar form’s emotional and spiritual effects. Many questions, however, remain unanswered. Schrader, for example, refers to the transcendental style as an “expression” of the “Transcendent itself” rather than an “experience,” but how should we account for the viewer (Schrader 74)? Are they supposed to experience transcendence along with the characters, *as* the characters, or does the transcendental style merely capture the Transcendent—i.e., spiritual

emotion—within form? I briefly mention the viewer's role in the Langer and Jarmusch sections, but a more thorough investigation into this topic is required to reach a greater understanding of the transcendental style's power and purpose, particularly in relation to character identification, empathy, and viewer response.

Schrader's text also universalizes the transcendental style and—for the most part—ignores cultural specificity, but how does a filmmaker's national and personal identity factor into the style? Should a filmmaker's influences be taken into account? Can a film style truly be universal? This paper never addresses these questions—in fact, it draws connections between a Finnish and American director—and would benefit from analyzing the generalizing, homogenizing, potentially harmful implications of erasing cultural identity from transcendental films.

This project also raises questions about genre, and where one should draw the line between comedy and drama (or tragedy). Neale, Krutnik, and Nelson argue that “happy endings” define the boundaries, but what of films that dwell in more ambiguous or emotionally complex territory? Kaurismäki's *The Match Factory Girl* concludes with the titular character poisoning her ex-boyfriend, parents, and some nasty bar patrons, but Kaurismäki somehow frames these events as hopeful and liberating rather than disturbing and, therefore, concludes the film on a darkly optimistic note. Should we label it a transcendental comedy? Even Bresson can be funny sometimes—incongruity goes a long way—so distinct boundaries need to be established when discussing genre in order to craft a more comprehensive definition of transcendental comic style.

Discussions of genre also lead us back to Jim Jarmusch's filmography, which includes everything from comedies—*Down by Law*—to westerns—*Dead Man* (1995)—samurai/gangster

film hybrids—*Ghost Dog: The Way of the Samurai* (1999)—and even zombie movies—*The Dead Don't Die* (2019). How does the transcendental style function within these varying contexts? What are the spiritual emotions of westerns, of romances? In order to broaden the range of transcendental scholarship, we must reject narrow-mindedness and search for the transcendental style's presence in *all* films. Explicit religious undertones (or overtones) need not be a defining factor of transcendental art—as evidenced by *Le Havre* and *Down by Law*—because *human* emotion, human flaws, human struggles become spiritual through the transcendental style. Comedy is frequently derided for being juvenile, overly optimistic, and sentimental, but many do not realize the emotional and spiritual resonances of the form. As expressed through the transcendental comic style, laughter erases all of our troubles, transports us to a space where nothing else exists besides joy, love, and vitality; laughter, therefore, connects us to some beyond, some emotional force not of this world. It is a sad and beautiful world, and we must laugh and smile because of the absurdity of life, because we are alive, because the rabbit tastes like a tire, because of Ozu's fart jokes, because of beauty, because of ice cream-a. We must laugh with humanity, community, family, and must not accept death, because laughter is survival, laughter is transcendence, and we will never die.

(not) the end

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