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Finding the Essential:

A Phenomenological Look at Hal Hartley's *No Such Thing*

Introduction

Humanity appears to have an inherent desire to project our collective unconscious into and onto unexplainable phenomena. In doing so, we are forever distancing and delaying what we wish not to confront. Hal Hartley's *No Such Thing* entertains this desire for projection and presents a less transcendent and more embodied form of these phenomena. He offers the viewer a cinematic meditation suggesting that in a materialist age our belief in the supernatural fades in importance; and thus, our collective unconscious has less of a need for archetypes of otherworldly proportions. This need for projection, however, does not evaporate. Rather, our unconscious desires and fears become transferred to more identifiable and recognizable phenomena and personae. The analogy to a shift in belief from a wizardly God of the Old Testament and the earthly Christ of the New Testament is illustrative of this transference. It is not as though the murkiness of our unconscious has changed; rather, the entities on which we cast our faith and fears take on a form more coherent with our socio-historical condition. In the case of Hartley's most recent film, it is a society numbed by

information overload with which these archetypes must cohere, a world where nothing is shocking. Hartley's take on society may be grim (although fairly accurate) but he does provide us with a savior: a savior of existential, as well as transcendental significance.

It will help to deepen our understanding of *No Such Thing* if we revisit Paul Schrader's¹ central thesis in *Transcendental Style in Film*. This essay will do so, and then propose a reconfiguration of transcendence in film, applying phenomenological categories to Hartley's thought-provoking cinematic essay. This is not an exercise devised to deconstruct or debunk Schrader's thesis. Rather, what follows should be regarded as an expansion and extrapolation of his account of the transcendent, and how this is figured in cinematic forms. The need for such an expansion is clear: if we remain tied to Schrader's definitions of the Transcendental, there are key aspects of the film (such as the agency of its characters, its narrative progression, its assertion of the alogical, and the subjectivity of the archetype offered therein) that come close to, but nonetheless fall short of, his strictly "Holy" definition of the transcendent. I will begin with an overview of Schrader's main points, followed by a reconfiguration of these, to demonstrate the fruitfulness of adopting an analysis of Hartley's film drawn from existential phenomenology.

I have chosen a work by Hal Hartley for distinct reasons. Hartley has created an oeuvre that, on various levels, attempts to get at the essence of ideas, characters, and social structures. His work is not profoundly religious, but his films repeatedly place characters within a web of philosophical and theological questions, without over-intellectualizing. He seems to imply that puzzlement over existence and society are questions we all wrestle with, but Hartley's characters just do so more openly than most. Other directors might also be seen as engaging in this kind of re-analysis of the transcendental in cinema (David Lynch, Peter Weir, Andrei Tarkovsky, and Lars Von Trier immediately spring to mind). However, in order to restrict my discussion to only one film, I've chosen Hartley and his most recent production. Hartley's work lends itself for phenomenological analysis for several reasons, but most prominently because his characters are continually searching for self-meaning, questioning the bounds (and rules) of relationships, and (in this film in particular) exploring the nature of existence, faith, exploitation, and the miraculous. In addition, characters within his films are rarely allowed to emote, fixing the film itself as an expression-perception of the human condition, an aspect of phenomenology of extreme importance to the film experience². Finally, Hartley's cinematic "minimalism" is instrumental to his continual search for the essence of his characters and the situations they find themselves in. This minimalism, this drive for the essential, is exemplified by a rarified use of camera work, editing, sound, music, and dialogue, that is both cinematically and philosophically poetic.

Schrader on Transcendental Style in Cinema

Paul Schrader's captivating analysis of the films of Ozu, Bresson, and Dreyer revolves around a central concept: the Transcendent. Semantically, Schrader defines this term as simply "a general representative filmic form which expresses the Transcendent."³ Such films embody, according to Schrader, an expression of "the Holy".⁴ His critical method supposes two things: First, the existence of hierophanies, expressions of the transcendent in the world⁵ (here he makes an association to Eliade's⁶⁷ work on comparative religions); and second, that even divergent cultures share common representative artistic forms⁸ (on this latter point his association is aligned with the artistic analysis carried out by Wolfflin^{9,10}). These two critical points are carried forward to discuss how some cinematic forms likewise can express the transcendent (or Holy), and that these representations suggest a kind of universal homogeneity. Indeed, Schrader regards this style as having universal qualities, although he does account for personal and cultural influences as to how this is represented according to different directors. However, he argues that "their similarities are stylistic, and represent a unified reflection of the Transcendent on film."¹¹

Schrader breaks down expressions of the transcendent according to three different thematic forms:

1. The existence or presence of a Holy or Divine

2. Acts expressing something emanating from The Transcendent (i.e. miracles, divine communion, etc.)
3. The experience of transcendence (a character's spiritual path leading toward some form of enlightenment or sanctification).

All of the above may manifest in literal filmic forms, in terms of characters and narrative progression. But, Schrader is quick to note that stylistic elements such as *mise-en-scene*, cinematography, and editing can all contribute to the overall "look" and "feel" of the transcendental style in film.

There are two other points raised by Schrader that are deserving of preliminary discussion and analysis. These pertain to human experiences of phenomena and (in our first analogy to Husserlian phenomenology) how we must learn to strip away epistemologies, scientific theories, and ontologies, if we are to get at "the things themselves". Conventional interpretations of the transcendental style in cinema can often frustrate viewers if they are unable to put their natural attitude "out of play". As Schrader observes, "Transcendental style seeks to maximize the mystery of existence; it eschews all conventional interpretations of reality: realism, naturalism, psychologism, romanticism, expressionism, impressionism, and, finally, rationalism."¹² Applying this to the Monster in *No Such Thing*, transcendental style would maintain his existence as a "mystery".

However, if we move from Schrader's theories and compare a similar statement from Ihde's¹³ discussion on interpretation and description in his 1986 treatise *Experimental Phenomenology*, we may come closer to understanding this character's significance within the film. As Ihde has stated, "Hermeneutic rules establish a strictly descriptive interpretation of experience, which eschews explanation and all hypothetical constructions relying upon, presupposing or seeking to establish accounts of experience that go behind or above experience."¹⁴ Therefore, explanation of the "mysterious" or "unexplainable" (the three miracles, the Monster himself) within Hartley's film, requires, first and foremost, an accounting for what is experienced based on an interpretation free of preconceived notions. During the press conference, for example, the Monster is subjected to a string of questions that presume a mythological nature to his persona, when in fact, his "monstrousness" is of a very different kind than that of fairy tales. The reporters and scientists fail to observe these differences, precisely because of their unwillingness (or inability) to bracket their projected expectations.

In the case of Hartley's film, it is not embodying "the mystery of existence" (as Schrader might see it) that propels the characters and story, but rather a profound meditation on the nature of existence. The randomness of events (such as an unprovoked punch in the stomach or a plane crashing into the sea, or for that matter, there being only one survivor) may in fact eschew conventional

interpretations of reality, but these events exist as phenomena in and among themselves. They are neither provided an explanation, nor do they seem to demand one. Rather, their significance is in what they are (i.e. *that* they exist, not *why* they occurred). And in this Hartley (perhaps unwittingly) offers such events to the spectator as phenomena reduced to their essence. We as spectators are invited (if we are so inclined) to determine the reasons or "logic" behind such events. But we must be cautious not to invest such interpretations with our biases. This is particularly important considering what is characteristic of Hartley's manner of filmmaking, because such events frequently do not stand out so much as punctuations, but flow as part of the narrative progression. Hartley is committed to cutting past the superfluous in film, which is his way of operating outside the assumption that there is often "a certain way [i.e. "natural attitude"] things are done"¹⁵ in cinema. By not making such events out to be spectacular, the spectator is expected to take these as "natural": People *do* get punched, airplanes *do* crash. While open to interpretation, we must be reminded that it is the *experience* of such phenomena that remains primary, especially so with films addressing themes of transcendence.

Taken from another vantage point, Schrader upholds that films which express transcendental style do so by eliminating "elements which are primarily expressive of human experience."¹⁶ He goes on to conclude that "Transcendental style...transforms experience into a repeatable ritual which can be repeatedly

transcended."¹⁷ There are two issues to deal with here; first, human experience is integral to the encounter with phenomena. But the expression of this experience, in many cinematic occasions, can be equated to what Husserl¹⁸ calls our "natural attitude" towards phenomena, if indeed we go no further than a first-hand interpretation. In the case of transcendental cinema, expression of what is individual in human experience is eliminated so as to point towards the transcendental qualities of the phenomenological encounter. Therefore, experience is signified as repeatable, pre-intellectual, pre-cultural, pre-reflective. Hartley's films likewise narrow the boundaries of human expression in order for the experience itself to remain significant. Hartley has commented upon his manner of directing actors, which does not allow them to provide any emotional pitch to their dialogue, avoiding such punctuations and theatrical indulgences; in his words, he prefers to let the film as a whole "have a personality".¹⁹ In short, Hartley finds individual expression sloppy because it can too easily obscure the essence of phenomena, and thus, detract from the overall thrust and spirit of the film.

Before I provide a synopsis of Hartley's film, let me first outline my reconfiguration of Schrader's analysis of the transcendental in film. I deviate slightly from Schrader's term "Transcendental style", and opt for the term "transcendence"; noting that this does not suggest a particular style of filmmaking, but is rather a global characteristic of certain films, and thus

becomes a heuristic means for critiquing and deconstructing character and narrative elements.

Re-configuring Schrader's Transcendental Style

The forms of transcendence that I will use to expand Schrader's terms are a slight variation on his original thesis: these include

1. The Transcendent (or Holy): refigured as the Subjective Archetype
2. Spiritual Transcendence: refigured as Anarcho-Catholicism
3. Transcendental Acts: refigured as Agency of the Saint

Items 1,2, and 3 will be compared to Schrader's original three definitions, and (using Hartley's film) I will show how the proposed reconfiguration of these forms of transcendence provide a more insightful and appropriate analysis of transcendence in film.

Schrader's previous point regarding the irrational and abstract provides a good lead-in to a discussion of Hartley's film. *No Such Thing* is ripe with what could commonly be regarded as obscure and illogical plot elements. But, I will argue that a reading of the film from this position would be missing something of great significance to how the film is constructed thematically. Abstract and illogical do not do justice to certain plot elements within Hartley's film, but rather these elements should be seen as alogical (namely, that illogical would suggest a

certain degree of sloppiness or authorial indulgence, while alogical implies that the director and film are not even attempting to subscribe to a system of logic, and therefore the rationale and reasoning falls outside of common notions of what "makes sense" or is "logical"). Hartley's manner of filmmaking is often regarded as "minimalist". This comes closer to the point, but still does not account for the rationale for the choice of style here. I prefer to see his "minimalism" as a means of getting past the superfluous, a means which Hartley himself has identified²⁰ as getting at the "essence" of things. And this is akin to the *epoché*, or bracketing reductions, which are characteristic of phenomenological analysis.

Synopsis of *No Such Thing*

No Such Thing is a story that involves a monster, a young woman, and the mass media. It entertains themes of forgiveness, compassion, trust, faith and sanctification, while providing a biting commentary on society run amok, ineffectual and totalitarian governmental control, the often inhumane nature of scientific inquiry, and the mass media's relentless appetite for sensationalism. In the course of the story a young girl named Beatrice experiences three "miracles", and thus takes on a "saint-like" persona. The Monster, whose only wish is to die, is exploited by the media and quickly transformed into a valuable commodity. Eagerly scavenging for headlines, aggressively constructing a glitzy exposé

revolving around the Monster and Beatrice; recasting the unassuming young lady as a sexy ingenue, and subjecting the Monster to a media onslaught, Beatrice's employers (represented by a chain smoking Helen Mirren) finally pawn him off to scientific experimentations. In fact, it could be suggested that the "real" monster in the film does not appear to be the beast who breathes fire, but rather the media types who conspire against him.

The Monster is indestructible and ageless (although at the outset of the film he admits he's "not the monster [he] used to be"). His physique and demeanor are gargantuan though nearly human, except for the horns above his brow and his reptilian complexion. At the beginning of the film we find him in mid-monologue, hiding out in Northern Iceland, reclusive and in utter misery. He sends out a call for help using an audio recorder, booty from a news crew that previously had come to interview him (and who were subsequently "torn to pieces"). In this message he presents an ultimatum to humanity: He wants to die, to be killed (and thus, in his eyes, "saved"), and if humans are unwilling to help him, then he'll be forced to go on a rampage and kill every last one of us (seemingly, humanity is the source of his misery). The message is received by Beatrice, who works for a large New York City news agency, under the direction of a brooding despot. Despite her lowly position within the news department (e.g. answering phones, making coffee, etc.), Beatrice requests to be the one sent to Iceland to investigate, but her real motivation lies neither in substantiating the

"monster story" nor in attempting to help the monster. Rather, she wants to discover what has happened to her fiancé, who was a member of the missing news crew (and, unbeknownst to her, had been slaughtered).

Before Beatrice even boards the plane to Iceland, she encounters domestic terrorism, arms smuggling, a demolition crew, and a contorted junky experiencing violent withdrawal who assaults and mugs her. She barely makes her flight to Iceland. However, Beatrice's journey (which is classically obtuse) is an even more perilous one. Her trip is circuitously rerouted via Brussels and Lisbon – and before reaching Brussels her plane crashes into the sea. Everyone on board perishing, leaving her as the sole survivor. This marks the first "miracle" that Beatrice undergoes.

Beatrice may have survived the plane crash, but she is badly injured and even temporarily paralyzed from the neck down. After politely refusing to give her boss an exclusive story on the “drama” of the plane crash, Beatrice decides to test her luck further by subjecting herself to a highly experimental form of intensive surgery, while under the care of a sympathetic doctor at a Reykjavik hospital. The surgery is done in order to restore her ability to walk, but it involves little or no anesthetic (hence its experimental and rather dangerous nature). The agony of the surgery is represented through Hartley's traditional mastery of cinematic minimalism (her scream is muted, quickly followed by a flash of white light),

making her suffering and tremendous pain all the more moving to the audience. Beatrice survives this operation (a second miracle), and within six months continues on her journey towards the monster; at first by car and cane, and then by horseback and foot, across the stark landscape of Iceland. In a telling moment (that further suggests the saintly nature of Beatrice) as she leaves the hospital, the young children of Reykjavik surround her in amazement, gently vying to touch her blonde hair, in an effort to make physical contact with the embodiment of a miracle. Beatrice's recovery from the operation is nothing short of miraculous; it restores her unscathed and able to walk amongst the living.

The third miracle Beatrice undergoes is surviving her confrontation with the Monster. The Monster's reputation and appetite for killing has already been established, so when Beatrice first encounters him, it is not so much a "maiden within the monster's lair" type of situation (which might be expected from other directors). Instead, their first encounter is redolent with Hartley's rapid-fire and staccato dialogue; Beatrice and the Monster each probe one another verbally as to who they are, what are they doing here, and where they hope to go, etc. Soon the Monster states that even *he* is impressed that she's still alive (meaning he hasn't killed her, for the audience, this line has double meaning, for we have already witnessed two other events which she should not have survived).

Gradually, though tenuously, an element of trust emerges between the Monster and Beatrice. He needs her to help him find an eccentric scientist (Dr. Artaud, apparently the only one who can put the monster out of his misery), but her motivation lies less in something she needs from him (she is already famous from the encounter), but more an expression of compassion. He asked for her help, so being the sensitive and empathetic person she is, she eventually decides to help him, but only after he adheres to her request that he promise not to kill anyone throughout their journey. Though his response is characteristic ("You can't expect me to go out there [into the world] and not kill anyone!"²¹), he sticks to his promise throughout.

The two embark for New York City, and having already contacted the media matriarch, they arrange for a secured arrival in Manhattan. The manner of their arrival foreshadows his celebrity status, complete with crowds, groupies, flash cameras, and news reporters. Once in Manhattan, the Monster and Beatrice are immediately exploited as the latest celebrity couple, and the Monster is predictably treated as no more than a curious peculiarity, a hip freak of nature. Their search for Dr. Artaud is delayed in favor of a press conference, and during his interview the Monster has some thought-provoking things to say about himself, and more importantly, about humanity.

"What made you morons so damned adaptable?" The Monster calmly reflects upon his previous inquiries into such matters, which in the past has compelled him to literally "tear us apart", but upon cracking a human subject open, the monster found nothing of significance; much to his disappointment, he discovered only a crude display of "blood, guts, and shit, same as everything else. Pointless, absurd. Just another fucking accident." This assessment of our human condition points to one thing; that physiologically and anatomically our species is no different from the other life-forms that share our eco-systems. What makes us "so damned adaptable" may be our cognitive ability to conceptualize and project ideas, thoughts, fears and desires, for doing so allows us to distance and delay the need for confronting what troubles us. Of course, this cognitive means of projection has its more immediate advantages for survival, such as the capability of our hominid ancestors to "plan ahead" for securing their next meal. But Hartley is more concerned with the projection of our unconscious and the (literal) forms this may take. He puts a curious spin on this idea which is reminiscent of certain theories associated with quantum physics²²; namely, that the mere act of thinking of something gives it an existence. Hartley carries this further to suggest that ideas, fears, concepts, etc. can take on material form, and therefore exercise affectivity in the "real" world; hence, the undeniable materialization and a highly animated Monster.

"Let's get right down to the main issue here:
 A monster, in this day and age?
 I mean, don't you just find that – you know, like irrelevant?"

News Reporter

The reporter's rather frank and direct question is seen as a challenge to the Monster's very existence; the snide "what are *you* doing *here*?" kind of question that might be asked of an uninvited guest at an upscale cocktail party. The question signals modern society's waning need for the supernatural, particularly striking in a Western culture obsessed with materialism. The age of monsters and gods has given way to more practical, observable phenomena. But it's not that we no longer believe in monsters, but that they have lost significance within our materialist world: As the news producer asks rather dryly, upon her first meeting with the Monster; "So, you're the monster, I guess." As if to be saying "you're the monster...so what?". Thus, his existence is less monstrous and more anomalous, if not trivial. In light of our discontinued belief in the supernatural, however, the death of monsters is not so easily accomplished. This one's angry, and he's not just going to go away.

Immediately following his encounter with the press, instead of being taken to the kindly Dr. Artaud, the Monster is escorted to the lab of an insensitive, almost robot-like scientist, where he is subsequently tortured; all in the name of objective scientific enquiry. Thereafter the Monster, helpless – for he honors his promise not to kill anyone – is released into the world where he is subjected to various random assaults and humiliations at the hands of a cruel and taunting

public. Eventually, through the help of Beatrice and a few sympathetic accomplices, he returns to Iceland to be destroyed.

But his destruction (realizing for himself, that he is only a materialization of humanity's fears) may suggest only that his time has past; the age of monsters and superstition giving way to a more recognizable form and manifestation of belief. This is where the scenario becomes a little cloudy. Hartley himself has stated²³ that the monster "symbolizes nothing". But it is tempting to see these two characters as having significant biblical implications. On the one hand, we can regard the Monster as standing in for the God of the Old Testament (exhibiting the arcane attributes of a destroyer, a grand manipulator and indestructible entity wielding supernatural powers), while Beatrice may represent a more earthly form of divinity, much like the Savior of the New Testament (corporeal, yet exhibiting the divine qualities of innocence, compassion, forgiveness, faith, and the grace to survive various trials/miracles). If the monster has become disenchanted with humanity, Beatrice embraces the potential good in all beings (human or otherwise), thus exhibiting an extreme measure of faith in humanity, despite the corruption, exploitation, and violence characteristic of early 21st century society.

"Matter is one, yes of course. That's easy.
But you see, at different densities.
Heavy and light. It can interpenetrate."
Dr. Artaud

In the last sequence of the film, the Monster is "destroyed" through the aid of Dr. Artaud and his quizzical "matter eradicator". According to the eccentric doctor's theories, all things have matter – even concepts, beliefs, etc. – however, these exist at different densities. It is presumed that the Monster's existence is therefore a materialization of our beliefs (or more appropriately, our fears). He is a concept made material. But it appears that a waning of belief in his existence is not enough to terminate him. And this is where a pinch of phenomenology can aid in analysis. To the Monster, his existence is solipsistic, and therefore, his termination requires the recognition of his own subjectivity. Following Husserl, the idea of self is only possible in reference to an other. If the Monster is to cease to exist, then he must be made aware that his existence itself is no more than a projection. At this point in history, Hartley seems to suggest humanity no longer needs to believe in monsters and myths, that we live in an age obsessed only with materiality, the observable, and the immediate.

Through the recognition of his own subjectivity as merely a projection, the Monster attains his goal of non-existence. Yet, due to some remarkably quick and stylish editing and lighting, Hartley hints at a transference from the Monster to Beatrice; and in doing so suggests that she may embody humanity's salvation. The age of monsters is behind us, as is the age of faith and belief in what we cannot see. And within the age of materialism, if there is to be any salvation, it is

through miracles we can actually witness (such as the trials/portents associated with Beatrice). Perhaps the materialist age requires a material beacon, not a conceptual one? The final sequence of the film rapidly cuts between the Monster and Beatrice, suggesting that his existence does not simply fade, but converges with Beatrice; she absorbs all that has been projected upon him. As the projection of our fears ceases to take on the image of monsters, such projections (along with our hopes and desires) are put upon the existential and benevolent Beatrice. In so doing, she assumes a similar, though more corporeally-rooted, transcendental, archetypal essence. Hartley's final image in the film draws from Christian iconography to underscore this point: Beatrice in close up, blonde hair flowing, eyes crystalline, a devastatingly beautiful and tranquil face bathed in white light – numinous.

The Transcendental Refigured as The Subjective Archetype

Hartley himself has described the monster as a being who is simply in search of his own purpose.²⁴ He does not know *why* he exists, just *that* he does. Further, his only desire is to be put to rest. These two things hold great significance to understanding his character: that while he may sport weathered horns above his brow, he is less the terrible, thoughtless violent monster that his reputation speaks of, but more the contemplative, psychologically tormented being who just wants to know why he's here. In the end, he simply wants to be destroyed; which posits him as closer to a mortal than a supernatural phenomenon.

Contrary to Schrader's definition, Hartley's film suggests that "The Transcendental" does not reside in some heavenly or divine locale *outside* of the main characters, but exists within them. Therefore, it is necessary to refigure Schrader's definition, and situate (or look for) the transcendental as a quality that exists within the two main characters of the Monster and Beatrice. To see it properly in this light, neither the Monster nor Beatrice represent the Transcendental in any classical sense, but rather are existential beings who exhibit transcendental qualities (subjective and existential archetypes). I have suggested above that Hartley has adorned both of these characters with these qualities, and, in this connection, character and plot elements that Schrader might posit as "Holy" can be better understood if subjected to phenomenological description.

"I want to die but I can't. I'm indestructible. I'm sorry, it's not my fault; must be yours.

I know of no god who could be that cruel.

I know of no God...unless, of course, I am God.

But then what difference would that make? I'd still be fucked."

The Monster

The Monster is apparently indestructible and ageless (well, almost – as we can presume his termination during the final sequence of the film). Yet, he is no more than a projection. He has become what we have intended him to be as an animation, an archetype generated by our unconscious. Without going beyond a

transcendental explanation for his existence – as Ihde²⁵ has critiqued of transcendental phenomenology – for the scientist and the news producer within the film, the Monster confirms them in their narrowly rationalistic metaphysics. That is, the Monster is encountered as verifying their preconceptions of who he is. If indeed he is no more than a projection of humanity's fears, this makes him akin to the monsters and deities we have created out of a need to provide explanations for the unknown. He is an anthro-projection, God-like, but his existence remains contingent upon our beliefs, and therefore his "divinity" is subjective, and not omnipresent and eternal.

I remember when you were young. Pond scum.
Just another ooze at the edge of the local warm water.
I was there. I saw you evolve."

The Monster

Following Ihde's discussion of Husserlian phenomenology²⁶, the transcendental is an "I" which presumably lies above and outside the correlation between noesis and noema (the experience and that which is experienced), rather than being constituted reflexively *within* the correlation. The Monster assumes a transcendental state – an "ideal observer" as Ihde²⁷ might refer to him – because he is projected as such. But as a projection he is part of this equation. Therefore, re-inserting him into the correlation between noema and noesis amounts to no less than his self-reflection. His self-reflection being a projection – of an idea made physical – the realization of this conditional existence results in his extinction. By means of the "matter eradicator" the Monster is subjected to what

Idhe has called "the mirror of the world". In this position, the Monster is forced to take on a reflexive turn: to see himself within the correlation between noema and noesis and not outside of this.

We encounter the Monster and are provided no explanation for his existence: he just does. His supernatural qualities are not explained. During the Monster's subjugation to experimentation, the lab scientist states that since science can't explain his existence, then he simply does not exist. Yet, there he is, howling, strapped to an operating table, his body wired up to an elaborate display of technology. Hartley seems to be alluding to the "blindness" of science; that in its experimentations to determine the nature of things, it misses what is right in front of its eyes: A sentient, living, (fire)breathing being. If we follow Husserl's phenomenological reductions, then we must delay our desire for scientific theories in order to observe the phenomenon for how it appears to us. Only Beatrice and Dr. Artaud are able to encounter and account for the Monster for what he is; a sorrowful and irritable creature in pain. The two scientists in the film (Dr. Artaud and the lab scientist) exist as an interesting contrast on how the Monster is encountered. As I stated above, the laboratory scientist refuses to "see" the Monster. He is too deeply immersed in his technology. As a counterpoint, Dr. Artaud (who incidentally has impaired optical vision, signified by his spectacles with lenses of tremendous girth) is able to encounter the Monster as a sentient being. It can be said that the Monster is both saved by and

tortured by science. But it is not science itself that imposes these ends upon him; rather it is the individual characters who practice such endeavors. Hartley, in his sympathetic depiction of the "mad" Dr. Artaud, seems to indicate that if science is to be made humane, it must be willing to think unscientifically from time to time. To do so, one must encounter phenomena with methods that respond to the phenomena themselves.

Spiritual Transcendence: refigured as Anarcho-Catholicism

In terms of narrative structure and cinematic stylization, Schrader draws from Maritain's^{28,29} concepts of "sparse" and "abundant" means in art and applies these to the transcendental style. As Schrader uses these terms, abundant means are those associated with practicality, physical needs and goods, and sensual feelings. Sparse means, conversely, are those cinematic elements concerned with the domain and cultivation of the spirit. He notes, however, that sparse means are not ordered toward tangible success, but toward elevation of the spirit. Therefore, we can regard these as plot elements that either contain a *corporeal* or a *spiritual* significance. And, further, Schrader states that the gradual shift from abundant to sparse means should be a clear sign of spiritual progression: "One way to determine the 'spiritual quality' of a cinematic style, therefore, is to examine the manner in which it disposes of its inherent abundant means and substitutes sparse means."³⁰ However, Hartley provides the inverse of this spiritual equation, what I call Anarcho-Catholicism.

Hartley's playful reinterpretation and recasting of the "saintly path", through the character of Beatrice, provides a reversal in the progression from abundant to sparse means. In doing so Beatrice presents a similarly sparse, though slightly different representation of the Transcendent as the Monster. She appears mortal; she sleeps, drinks, smokes, copulates, etc., but all the same, retains Christ-like qualities. She enters into and emerges from three miraculous situations. However, it would be simplistic and misguided to regard these miracles as signs of divine intervention. Rather, they are illustrative of Beatrice's ability to encounter phenomena existentially; i.e., in a pre-judgmental, pre-reflective fashion. The three miracles are linked, not random; one is the result of the previous, etc. Further, they are experiences necessary for Beatrice – trials meant to illustrate an unfolding of something inherent within her. It would appear, therefore, that subjecting the progression of Beatrice's character to Schrader's means of analysis would consider such corporeal acts as signifying her gradual corruption. Rather, what Hartley shows is not the perversion of Beatrice, but the inversion of Schrader's sparse and abundant means as a route toward sanctification.

Beatrice first appears dressed in a rather plain manner; her pony-tailed hair and frumpy, gray dress deny her womanly figure. As the story unfolds, her clothing progressively accentuates her attractive form and her behavior becomes more

"enworlded" (e.g. smoking cigarettes, drinking and getting inebriated, firing a pistol, having sex). It is undeniable that her character progression is an inversion of Schrader's predicted path toward sainthood: Beatrice moves from sparse to abundant means. In doing so, Beatrice undergoes and enters into trying experiences that are necessary for her to assume a transcendental state: one exhibiting both transcendent and existential characteristics. Beatrice ultimately exists as a divine being of human proportions; a living, breathing individual that has undergone miraculous trials, and emerged unscathed, retaining the benevolent qualities of faith and virtue. What might be regarded as corruptive activities are, on the contrary, experiences that fortify her corporeal and spiritual essence. And, in this way, Hartley's depiction of her character progression is what I identify as a form of anarcho-catholicism; suggesting that the saintly route need not be shrouded in asceticism; on the contrary, through encountering the world in an existential manner, the virtues of Beatrice's character become all the more remarkable and deserving of praise.

Transcendental Acts: refigured as Agency of the Saint

Hartley provides another inversion of the Transcendental style in film, in that he denies the possibility of divine intervention on the world of his characters (an apparent disavowal of the concept of hierophanies). Rather, Beatrice, along her saintly route, encounters adverse conditions and successfully emerges due to her ability to put her "natural attitude" out of play in the various trying situations she

encounters. Her character has been described³¹ as not naïve, but wisely innocent, indicating that her experience of phenomena and characters is one that is advantageously pre-intellectual, pre-reflective, without judgement or fear. Therefore, it can be argued, that her character is not necessarily "blessed" (as it is even suggested at one point in the film). Her perseverance is not the result of protection from above, but from her own non-judgmental and pre-reflective attitude and behavior. Surviving the plane crash may take this to an extreme, but her survival of the operation and her confrontation with the Monster demonstrate that her endurance emanates from the existential quality of openly encountering phenomena for what they are.

Beatrice can also be seen as performing a series of "reductions" reminiscent (and illustrative) of Husserl's phenomenology, in exhibiting an attitude free of socio-cultural prejudices. She is subjected to several warnings about the Monster's diabolical ferociousness, but nonetheless sustains her resolve, thus refusing to be spooked by all of the fear, paranoia, and even skeletal evidence and fire-breathing threats made apparent to her. In their initial confrontation she encounters him not as monster, but simply as other. And by not projecting psychological or societal fears upon him, he (these) cannot harm her.

So, in the end, Beatrice does not seem to behave according to some divine code or logic, rather it is her ability to encounter people and the world alogically;

innocent but with wisdom. It is difficult to regard her as a person traversing a *spiritual* path, at least according to Schrader's definitions. Though it appears that she assumes a saintly persona at the end of the film, in essence, she has changed little. She is always already open, trusting, compassionate, etc. It is perhaps the world (we can only hope) that will encounter her differently; see her as more than a servant girl (to the news producer), more than a princess and "ingenue" (as a media icon), and in the end as a sort of savior (as I've suggested earlier, the parallel shift between the Monster and Beatrice to the God of the Old Testament and the Savior of the New).

Final Thoughts

Throughout the film, both Beatrice and the spectator are confronted with seemingly inexplicable phenomena. But Beatrice refuses the temptation (or gut reaction) to simply "explain" the Monster away; rather, she manages to encounter him pre-reflectively. Similarly no explanation is offered to the spectator for the Monster's existence; he is taken "as is", that is, as a brute fact. He breathes fire, period. Beatrice survives three miraculous brushes with death, period. Explanation would cloud these plot elements. Thus, the film spectator must encounter the same anomalies as Beatrice does – alogically (outside of logical constructs) – in order to move forward. And this is typical of Hartley's style as a filmmaker and screenwriter. He only puts in what is necessary to get to the essence of his characters and scenarios. It may be minimalism, but I would

suggest that this brings us back to one of the functional attributes of Schrader's thesis, particularly his discussion of "sparse" means in cinema, and how these lend a certain transcendental quality to cinematic meditations on the nature and bounds of existence.

The interplay between sparse and abundant means in film, and particularly within transcendental film, can be used to reinforce expressions of the transcendental. Schrader regards the sparse as indicative of both character development along a spiritual path, and to cinematic construction. I have taken issue with Schrader's application of this theory on character development, and hope that I have demonstrated that, in this regard, it does not always hold true. However, concerning cinematic construction, the sparse means of minimalism do allow for the essence of the story and its characters to emerge. While abundant means are used to sustain audience interest (suspension of disbelief) this is done while rejecting the empathetic rationale for that interest, in order to set up a new priority. Schrader³² suggests that indeed film is particularly well-suited for pointing to the transcendental, since film is the most realistic of artistic media, and therefore a departure from this (i.e. Hartley's minimalism and circumvention of the superfluous) presents perhaps the greatest means of signifying the transcendent. As a whole, then, Hal Hartley's film aptly displays this kind of cinematic sparseness, and in doing so exemplifies the transcendental and essential qualities of his characters and story, without sacrificing a

significant emphasis on the embodied, existential attributes of encountering a world filled with monsters, saints, and the miraculous.

¹ P. Schrader, *Transcendental Style in Film* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1972).

² V. Sobchack, *The Address of the Eye* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992), p. 10.

³ Schrader, pp. 8-9.

⁴ *Ibid.* p. 3.

⁵ *Ibid.* p. 8.

⁶ M. Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1959).

⁷ M. Eliade, *Patterns in Comparative Religion* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1958).

⁸ Schrader, p. 9.

⁹ H. Wofflin, *Classic Art* (New York: Dover Publications, 1952).

¹⁰ H. Wofflin, *Principles of Art History* (New York: Dover Publications, 1950).

¹¹ Schrader, p. 10.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ D. Ihde, *Experimental Phenomenology* (Albany: State University of New York, 1986).

¹⁴ *Ibid.* p. 54.

¹⁵ H. Hartley, *Simple Men and Trust* (Boston: Faber and Faber, 1992) p. xiii.

¹⁶ Schrader, p. 11.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ E. Husserl, *Cartesian Meditations*, D. Cairns, trans. (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1960).

¹⁹ Hartley, p. xxix.

²⁰ *Ibid.* p. xiii.

²¹ All passages of dialogue have been transcribed from the film, *No Such Thing*, and may or may not appear exactly as is in the screenplay.

²² F. Capra, *The Tao of Physics* (Boston: Shambala Publications, Inc., 1983).

²³ Taken from an interview with Hal Hartley available through the Independent Film Channel Web site (www.ifctv.com).

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ Ihde, p. 38.

²⁶ *Ibid.* p. 51.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ J. Maritain, *Religion and Culture, The Social and Political Philosophy of Jacques Maritain* (Garden City: Doubleday).

²⁹ J. Maritain, *art and Scholasticism and the Frontiers of Poetry* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons).

³⁰ Schrader, p. 159.

³¹ Taken from an interview with Sarah Polley (the actress who plays Beatrice in the film) from the Independent Film Channel Web site (www.ifctv.com).

³² Schrader, p. 160.