



Mesmerized by Mysticism: The Transcendental Style of Bruno Dumont's *Hadewijch*

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Abstract: The French filmmaker Bruno Dumont takes his inspiration from medieval mystic texts, since they teach us that spiritual matters can only be suggested via detours, never directly. His fascination with mysticism comes explicitly to the fore in (the title of) his fifth feature, *Hadewijch*, named after the well-known 13th century beguine who lived near Antwerp. This contribution examines how this film is informed by both her *Poems in Stanzas*, nowadays better known as *Songs* – about the violent longing for 'Minne' – and her *Book of Visions* on the visual perception of His Countenance. By staging an encounter between an ascetic virgin and a radical Muslim, Dumont's *Hadewijch* seems concerned with addressing the thin line between God as Beloved and God as the Almighty Judge. I will then proceed to read the film through the lens of the 'transcendental style' of the cinema of Robert Bresson. This style shares with *Hadewijch*'s texts an attempt to explore the 'limit of the unexpressive', albeit that their strategies are contrasted, due to a difference in medium. The mystic writings are characterized by 'abundant means' – lyrical expressions full of passions – whereas Dumont's cinematic style advocates sparse means – a humble aspect ratio, non-psychological acting, elliptical cutting, static closure – in a medium which is said to be 'abundant at birth'.

Keywords: Mysticism, Visions, *Hadewijch*, Cinema, Bruno Dumont, Robert Bresson, Transcendental style

After more than five speechless minutes, the very first words in Bruno Dumont's film *Hadewijch* (2009) are a lengthy quote from vision six by the thirteenth century mystic Hadewijch. She was a beguine whose collection of poems, letters and visions – some of the earliest literary writings in Dutch/Flemish history – have only started to be properly appreciated since the past century. Here is the beginning of the passage, as recited by the mother superior (Brigitte Mayeux-Clerget): [28]

And then I heard a Voice speaking to me; it was terrible and unheard-of. It spoke to me with imagery and said: 'Behold who I am!' And I saw him whom I sought. His Countenance revealed itself with such clarity that I recognized in it all the countenances and all the forms that ever existed and ever shall exist, wherefrom he received honor and service in all right.¹

Any attempt to picture the one to whom the Voice belongs is fraught with difficulties. Descriptions of the visual perception of His Countenance are marked by such deliberate inconsistencies as to make the appearance of God inconceivable in a strict sense. In the

Hadewijch quote used in Dumont's film, the vision is announced by an 'unheard-of voice', while His Countenance reveals itself in 'all the forms that ever existed'. In vision one, Hadewijch describes the eyes of the Beloved as 'marvelously unspeakable to see' and the great beauty as rendering her 'unable to find any comparison for it or any metaphor'.² Similarly, in vision twelve Someone sits on a round disk which runs in an abyss 'of such unheard-of depth and so dark that no horror can be compared to it'.³ These encounters are visual in nature, but defy the imagination.

Time and again, a vision in Hadewijch's texts manifests itself in reaction to a 'psychological withdrawal from self' during liturgical feasts.⁴ As Veerle Fraeters observes in describing the well-structured pattern of the fourteen sections in Hadewijch's *Book of Visions*, the feasts trigger such an intense longing to see 'the throne of God and the countenance of the One sitting upon it' that God gracefully takes her up 'in the spirit'.⁵ The various visual experiences which happen to her are 'perceived with the inner senses of sight and hearing'.⁶ This sensory perception can function as a catalyst for the transportation to another level, for which she consistently uses the fixed formula that 'she falls out of the spirit'.⁷ She then enjoys the sight of His Countenance, but this extraordinary and ecstatic experience can only be described in terms which confront us with the inadequacy of language – unspeakable, incomparable to anything, incorporeal. The visionary experiences a mystical union with God in which seeing and hearing turn blind and mute, for this ineffable phase is one of imageless contemplation, which transcends rational comprehension.

For the present-day northern French filmmaker Bruno Dumont, the mystical texts of Hadewijch and her *Book of Visions* in particular, are, above all, a source of inspiration. He even claimed in an interview with Damon Smith that 'mysticism is essentially cinematographic. It's present in my form of expression, it's a vision that is very rich and something that I think has a lot in common with cinema. In fact, I think that mystical experience helps me understand cinema better'.⁸ This statement may surprise us if we take Dumont's educational background into account. He used to lecture about Plato, Aristotle, Kant and Hegel for a few years but, despite his previous occupation, he considers medieval mysticism as superior to philosophical reflection. The special charm of mystical texts for him resides in [29] the articulation of the inexpressible. In approaching mysticism, Dumont has said, the order of rational logic is suspended, since one enters into areas touching on ecstatic experiences. With his film-making he also hopes to 'reach over into this other side', to attain 'this non-logical, non-verbal area'.⁹ For Dumont films are like incantations and spells.¹⁰ Cinema is a mystery, in which he as the director aims to evoke by visual means what defies representation.

In order to grasp how cinema works, Dumont recommends reading medieval texts, since they teach us that spiritual matters can only be suggested via detours, never directly. Dumont's fascination with medieval spirituality comes explicitly to the fore in (the title of) his fifth feature, *Hadewijch*. This film is not an adaptation of the beguine's writings, but it is obliquely informed by them. In this article I will read *Hadewijch* through the lens of Dumont's Hadewijch by focusing upon those elements from her works which resonate in the film. Furthermore, I aim to highlight the cinematographic methods used by Dumont to suggest an analogy between mysticism and cinema, or, to put it differently, how Dumont has used Hadewijch's texts as a functional vehicle for his own views of cinema.

‘Love is Terrible and Implacable’

Any statement about Hadewijch's life has to be tentative. Scholars assume that she was born just before 1200 and there is little doubt that she belonged to the higher classes. She later became the leader of a small community of beguines, which are laywomen who opted for a life of apostolic poverty and contemplation without taking vows as nun.¹¹ Beguines lived in enclosed convents, but they could also decide to interact with the ordinary world. The beguine lifestyle, as Elizabeth Dreyer points out, was a ‘distinctive blend of this-worldly and otherworldly values’.¹² Although Hadewijch never labels herself a beguine in her writings, there are some clues suggesting that she kept the canonical hours of prayer. She probably lived in the duchy of Brabant, in the vicinity of Antwerp, but there is no consensus about this biographical note. She wrote in four genres: *Poems in Stanzas*, now more commonly known as *Songs* (45 in total), *Poems in Couplets* (16), *Letters* (31), and a *Book of Visions* (14). The latter were presumably written between 1239 and 1246. Hadewijch owes part of her fame to the fact that she pioneered a mixture of the courtly love tradition and a description of the mystical path. The ultimate goal of this path is the union with *Minne*, a Middle Dutch word used by Hadewijch to refer to an enlightened and overwhelming encounter with an infinite, personalized mystery, which may go by the name of God, Christ or other spiritual figures. Actually, *Minne* is a multi-faceted term, designed to articulate how a human could ascend to the Beloved by putting his or her mystical life in the service of love for God. Moreover, *Minne* can also be used to refer to the inexpressible nature of the mystical relation with the Beloved.¹³ One of the reasons why Hadewijch's writings have been regarded as difficult, if not perplexing, is [30] that this divine power of love is a ‘paradoxical fusion of fruition and fear’.¹⁴ *Minne* is not only identified as a loving bond, as light, as a living spring but it is also a name of terror: ‘Hell is the seventh name / Of this Love wherein I suffer’.¹⁵ Repeatedly, Hadewijch complains in her poems about how much the search for *Minne* fills her with suffering and grief.

Although *Minne* is forever Presence, the mystic experiences *Minne*'s nearness only in temporary spells. Most of the time, the mystic lover has to abide and keep her passionate impatience in check for an ecstatic experience to happen. A recurrent element in the writings by Hadewijch is that she is, as she puts it in vision ten, piteously lamenting her abandonment. In *Poems in Stanzas*, Hadewijch compares her suffering with that of the knight-errant: he is a dedicated follower of the courtly lady in the hope of catching her attention. Similarly, the mystic has to go to great pains and show superhuman courage in order to win the love of *Minne*. One must be prepared to be ‘reduced to nothingness in Love’.¹⁶ Occasionally, Hadewijch compares the required fierceness and ardent desire to Job's strong determination, in the Bible, to keep his faith in God, regardless of all the misery that befalls him. Since ‘Love is always possessed in violent longing’,¹⁷ there is no other option for Hadewijch than to persevere and prepare for the unconditional surrender to *Minne*. As soon as the mystic suddenly experiences *Minne*'s inexplicable Nearness, she regards it as a ‘free gift, a bounty, grace freely given’.¹⁸ This usually brief experience is generally described in ferocious terms: the mystic feels ‘[a]bsorbed, engulfed, overwhelmed, ravished’.¹⁹

Mommaers has pointed out that Hadewijch's references to her religious experiences constantly oscillate between two poles: either she is totally devastated and depressed or she undergoes an overwhelming feeling of rapture. What these opposing moods share is the absence of sense: both her misery and her joyful bliss escape meaning as she cannot fathom God's ways.²⁰ God has provoked a raving desire in her, ‘which cannot be expressed by any

language or any person I know'²¹ and, initially, she expects her longing to be fulfilled. Hadewijch assumes that *Minne* has violated its promise by no longer making its Presence felt to her. She can only endure her bouts of depression because she blindly trusts that moments of ecstasy will happen to her again. It is part of her learning process that she grows to appreciate the absence of *Minne* as a necessary interruption. The mystic is not in a position to appropriate the Beloved; it is not her prerogative to make the Beloved hers. He can only make his Presence felt provided that she is estranged from herself.²² She has to put herself at the service of *Minne*, who has 'engulfed the substance of my spirit'.²³ *Minne* is insatiable and the mystic should be prepared to be devoured by *Minne* at the cost of any notion of self. As Hadewijch writes in vision eleven, 'Love is terrible and implacable, devouring and burning without regard for anything ... Thus with rapidity the Godhead has engulfed human nature wholly in itself'.²⁴ Oneness with *Minne*, with 'my awe-inspiring, my unspeakably sweet Beloved',²⁵ can only take place as an incomprehensible [31] alternation between enjoyment and want, through discovering bliss in misery. When this occurs, Hadewijch feels 'engulfed and lost, without any comprehension of other knowledge, or sight, or spiritual understanding, except to be one with him and to have fruition of this union'.²⁶

Despite the emphasis in *Book of Visions* on experiences 'out of the spirit', the apex of the mystical path does not consist in an ecstatic disappearance of man in God. In the last vision of the collection, number fourteen, which is a reflective analysis rather than a visionary report, Hadewijch comes to understand, as Fraeters points out, that she has to embrace an earthly existence in exile and suffering, in imitation of Jesus.²⁷ Like him, she has to undergo the painful experience of being abandoned by God. Only in her misery can she become equal to Christ, who has already told her when appearing to her in vision one: 'If you wish to be like me in my Humanity, you shall desire to be poor, miserable, and despised by all men; and all griefs will taste sweeter to you than all earthly pleasures ...'.²⁸ Hence, in *Book of Visions* Hadewijch is ultimately taught the responsibility to 'return in woe' in order to guide her friends.²⁹ If loneliness and suffering are advocated, it is not because mysticism has a 'perverse propensity for pain', Mommaers argues, but because these feelings are able to create the best conditions 'to taste everything that belongs to the concrete, disconcerting, human Humanity'.³⁰

Bruno Dumont's Film *Hadewijch*

One would assume that some knowledge of Hadewijch's writings would enable the viewer to fill in a number of gaps in the story as elliptically told in Dumont's film. The importance of her texts as basic material seems to be stressed at the start when the mother superior recites, mostly off-screen, a long passage from Hadewijch's vision six. Moreover, a fair-skinned, twenty-year old virgin (Julie Sokolowski) who lives in the convent under the name of 'Hadewijch', has chosen an ardent life style inspired by the mystic. In silent prayer she cherishes a picture of Christ as an absent lover. She goes outside coolly dressed to deliberately stand the freezing cold while she feeds the sparrows the breadcrumbs of her starvation diet. This excessive asceticism may be in accordance with the lifestyle of the medieval Hadewijch, but the mother superior expresses her dismay with the novice's behaviour by calling her a 'caricature of a nun'. The girl mistakenly believes that isolation from the world is the only way to come closer to God.³¹ With the message that her true desires may be revealed to her in the practice of everyday life, the young virgin is sent away from the cloister. She re-emerges under her birth name Céline, the only child of a minister, living in a wealthy part of Paris – to be taken as a reference to the

medieval *Hadewijch*'s presumed aristocratic background. Back in the real world, the female protagonist of Dumont's film will persist in [32] her austere lifestyle and sticks to *Hadewijch*'s principles as a guideline: Céline is still prepared to devote her life to the Beloved.

At this point, however, the texts written by *Hadewijch* and the film script seem to diverge, confirming Dumont's claim that he had mainly used the mystical writings as a starting point. Haphazardly, Céline gets into contact with some Arab youngsters from the outskirts of Paris. One of them, Yassine (Yassine Salihine) is taken by her unprejudiced attitude and the two spend some time together despite their obvious differences. He is a brazen teenager, cruising the city on stolen mopeds while she sticks to purity, refusing physical intimacy. Via Yassine, Céline becomes acquainted with his older brother Nassir (Karl Sarafidis) who leads Qu'ran discussions in the back of a kebab shop. Céline attends a session during which Nassir tells the audience that the principle of belief is to experience the presence of the Almighty in his invisibility. When Céline afterwards confesses, in tears, to Nassir that she so dearly misses Him who used to appear so often to her and who has shown her what Love is, he understands her. He then teaches her that He manifests Himself in adoration, but that He cannot make His Presence felt if she is only prepared to offer passive suffering.

The conversations between Céline and Nassir suggest similarities between *Hadewijch*'s mysticism and political Islam. Like the medieval beguine who considers herself a servant of *Minne*, shackled by her ecstatic love for the Beloved, Nassir identifies himself as an obedient servant of the Almighty. When Nassir compares Muslims to soldiers who place their lives in the service of their religious faith, this resonates with *Hadewijch*'s poems of the knight-errant who strives for *Minne*'s attention. The similarities are almost absolute, yet not entirely so. In contrast to *Hadewijch*'s choice of a life of pious abstinence, Nassir pleads the case for Islamic soldiers taking up action to react to the violence inflicted on them. Subsequently, Céline shows Nassir the convent where she was 'born as *Hadewijch*', and when, in doing so, she looks up at the sky, sunrays light up her face. Irradiated by light, she tells him that she is ready to follow him.³² This moment may seem like a shift to an extreme stance which, however, is not foreign to *Hadewijch*'s texts.

One of the tasks set to the medieval beguine is to surrender her own will totally for the benefit of God.³³ She is driven by mad desires but, despite this insanity of love, she should always be prepared to sacrifice fulfillment of her frenzied longings. Ultimately, she will have to comply with the paradox of wholly forsaking love for the sake of love. Thus *Hadewijch* writes: 'To die for Love's sake is to have lived enough'.³⁴ It seems as if the title heroine in Dumont's film interprets the sunrays on her face as God's graceful answer to the questions about Nassir's mission. Céline/*Hadewijch* looks up to the sky to receive a sign from God as her Beloved, but she actually asked for such a sign on behalf of Nassir's idea of God as an Almighty Judge who, in his words, is the 'sword of injustice'. It is the film's provocative twist to suggest that, due to this confusion of God as Love and God as [33] Judge, an arduous lifestyle of silent suffering can easily lead to a religiously inspired political act.³⁵

From this crucial moment onwards, the film contains a number of unexpected transitions which complicate a clear narrative reconstruction. There is a sudden transition to an unidentified Middle East country – Lebanon probably, judging from the end credits – and Céline and Nassir cross a recently bombed area. Flanked by Nassir and two of his Arab friends, Céline declares that God has led her to this place and that, captivated by the mystery of His Love, she is prepared to battle. Again, there is a sudden transition to Nassir and Céline, taking the underground in Paris. Then a cut to a traffic-filled road in the centre of the French capital

and, after a few seconds, a huge bomb explosion. Symptomatic of the elliptical storytelling in the final part of the film, Céline/Hadewijch is suddenly, without any explanation to the viewers, back at the convent. After finding shelter against heavy rain, she is told that she has visitors. In a next shot we briefly see from a high angle what looks like two police interrogators crossing the corridor. Thereupon Hadewijch returns to her usual place for contemplation, in front of a sculpture of Christ. She recites several lines from Hadewijch's *Poems in Stanzas*:

Alas, Love, temper your mighty power
 You have the days, and I the nights.
 Why, when you force me to go out hunting for you,
 Do you flee so far ahead of me?
 You make me pay such a tribute,
 I shudder that ever I was born a human being.³⁶

The film ends with an attempt to drown herself, but the taciturn construction worker David (David Dewaele) pulls her head above water. When she embraces him, she starts to weep. In the final shot, we see her from behind, still crying, and we see him frontally, in a medium shot, apparently not at ease with the situation.

Due to the suggestive ending, Dumont's *Hadewijch* may invite superficial readings – and Dumont seems all too aware that such a risk is an unavoidable consequence of his poetics. One-dimensional readings may suggest that Hadewijch/Céline acts out of guilt in the final scene and that she can be taken as a tragic victim of her gullibility, exploited by Nassir. The film would thus imply that naivety and religious fervour, represented by the virgin, are easily corrupted into violence. In this viewing, the taciturn saviour David serves as the down-to-earth alternative to religious fanaticism. Significantly, he has a profession similar to Joseph's, the modest version of Jesus's father. From earlier scenes in the film which seem to have been inserted at random, we can gather that David was arrested and has served his sentence, since he is greeted by former inmates. Another inserted scene shows how he pays his mother a visit and from her words we can deduce that his conviction was for a minor offence, not murder or any other major crime. [34] *Hadewijch* might thus suggest that a secular path, with all its shortcomings, is preferable to a devout life of radical chastity, in which all passion is reserved for the Almighty.

I will offer two arguments against this 'superficial' reading, the minor one being that the above reading challenges the value of mysticism, which would not be logical in a film called *Hadewijch*. If the purpose of the film was to disqualify the spirit of the medieval texts, the title 'Céline' would have been more appropriate. Moreover, a recurrent feature in all Dumont films is his attempt to explore the thin line between good and evil, to the point of utter confusion. In his debut *The Life of Jesus* [*La Vie de Jésus*] (1997), we are encouraged to identify with the main protagonist, Freddy (David Douche), who turns out to be an unpleasant character, plagued by (racial) prejudices. The price paid for the viewer's willingness to identify with Freddy is a relentless sense of discomfort. As another informative example of this fascination, Dumont himself has referred to the dual nature of the historical Joan of Arc, who is considered a saintly figure while at the same time not refraining from killing in the name of God. Such ambiguity intrigues Dumont and, in the case of *Hadewijch*, the puzzling idea, as expressed by the medieval beguine, that the 'sweetest thing about love is its violence', could summarize the movie. In acknowledging the affinities between Céline/Hadewijch and Nassir, one may be tempted to conclude that if one were to subtract the violent action – only present for a few

isolated seconds in the film – from the radical branch of Islam, the result would be Hadewijch's mysticism and its 'violent longing' for *Minne*. Her writings do not make for comfortable reading but for Dumont they illustrate that love and violence are two sides of the same coin. They are inextricably intertwined since, as Dumont's interpretation of *Hadewijch* highlights, her raving desire for *Minne* is always at risk of turning into a destructive loss of the self. In rewriting Hadewijch's texts, the film *Hadewijch* suggests that there is only a thin line between such a self-destructive impulse and the willingness to commit a crime in the name of one's religion.

In addition to the political undertone of the film, I still believe that *Hadewijch* stretches beyond the level of 'content' that can be interpreted. I agree with Susan Sontag's argument that style and content are inseparable. She argues that style is often seen as ornamental by mistake, as if it were only a curtain that has to be pulled away to fully reveal the content. Sontag actually advocates reversing the hierarchical order. The subject matter is basically a pretext, for the 'knowledge we gain through art is an experience of the form or style' of the work.³⁷ As Sontag puts succinctly, '[t]he matter, the subject, is on the outside; the style is on the inside'.³⁸ An appreciation of Dumont's *Hadewijch* requires that we appreciate the film for the way it approaches a so-called 'transcendental style' and that is exactly my main argument. The term 'transcendental' in this context is helpful for two reasons, as will be shown in the remainder of this article. In the first place, this concept already has a history within film studies. Secondly, literature and poetry [35] are not completely interchangeable with cinema. If I understand 'mysticism' in relation to an extraordinary experience or (visual) object which cannot be put into words, 'transcendental style' (which refers to an experience or object which cannot be visualized) is its filmic counterpart. And to already give a hint regarding Dumont's statement that 'mysticism is essentially cinematographic': Hadewijch's texts clearly can inspire a director to produce transcendental cinema.

Transcendental Style in Cinema: The Legacy of Robert Bresson

The fact that Dumont only made six films over the course of almost fifteen years – *The Life of Jesus, Humanity* [*L'Humanité*] (1999), *Twenty-Nine Palms* (2003), *Flanders* [*Flandres*] (2006), *Hadewijch*, and his latest film *Outside Satan* [*Hors Satan*], premiered at Cannes in 2011 – may be due to his strict, and fairly unique, working methods. He does not write screenplays with their usual shorthand indications like 'close-up', 'long shot', etc. but instead he turns his ideas into a text which comes close to a literary novel, including all kinds of deliberations on the part of the characters. This text is impossible to adapt, Dumont seems to say. Since he does not have a regular script, he is not constrained by its imperatives. A text only functions as a rough guideline, for the process of shooting, to him, basically entails stripping away all the superfluous ornaments to the bare necessities. Four pages of text may ultimately be reduced to a simple twenty-second shot. To give a concrete example, *Hadewijch* was originally meant to have a conversation with David on their first encounter in the film but, while shooting, Dumont decided, after more than twenty takes, to cut down the dialogue to a faint 'hello'. If one were to object that all these previous, worn-out takes are wasted efforts, Dumont will disagree. To him, the fatigue and frustration of all the failed attempts show in the eyes and the facial expression of the characters and thus benefit their appearance. His starting point is not only a wordy text, but the takes may also require some verbal play in order to end up with a film scene with hardly any dialogue.

Dumont does not work with professional actors, since he dislikes the deceit of their 'performance tricks'.³⁹ He casts his actors solely on the basis of their outward appearance, sometimes combined with their regional origin. He also adheres to the uncommon practical principle of giving his actors little information about the film as a whole. They only receive detailed instructions on how to behave and how to move in a particular scene. In doing so, he hopes that the actors will bring some spontaneity to the scene which may compensate for the fact that his overly thorough preparation of the whole project has partly 'blinded' him. Dumont is therefore never certain of the outcome and takes a special delight in being surprised by what is happening at the very moment the camera is running. He does not shy away from on-the-spot decisions and from last-minute adjustments. Dumont tends to push his actors to their limits, and the anecdote that he forbade his main actress in *Hadewijch* to eat or sleep before shooting to get the [36] correct outlook speaks for itself. At the same time, he imposes rules on himself. As usual, he did not want to change anything about the locations, since in his opinion the scenes had to adjust to the chosen set. Furthermore, he used mono sound for *Hadewijch* so that it 'stays right in the picture' and the sound is always contained within the frame.⁴⁰ Last but not least, he chose an aspect ratio of 1:66 instead of the more spectacular widescreen format which is more common today. This relatively modest aspect ratio suited the humbleness practiced by the mystics. Such self-imposed constraints, Dumont says, enable him to keep a sharp focus on the essence of the project at hand.

Amongst contemporary filmmakers, Dumont can be considered as the main heir to Robert Bresson's legacy, even more so than Michael Haneke. Like Dumont, Bresson hated theatricality in acting.⁴¹ Bresson tended to work with non-actors as well, although he was strict about not using them in more than one film. Like Dumont, he preferred mediocre and flat images over overly aestheticized shots and, here again, it has to be noted that Bresson was more rigid than Dumont. Whilst the latter allows himself relatively flamboyant film techniques like high angle perspectives, pans or tracking shots,⁴² the camera in Bresson's cinema is nearly always static and he had the unshakeable habit of placing the camera at chest level of a standing person. Such differences are not crucial, mainly a matter of degree in austerity. Because the similarities are much more important than these minor divergences, I will take the liberty to elaborate on Bresson's influence in order to frame Dumont's poetics as a manifestation of a 'transcendental style' in cinema.⁴³

In his study *Transcendental Style in Film: Ozu, Bresson, Dreyer* (1972), Paul Schrader⁴⁴ states that this style in art/cinema 'strives toward the ineffable and invisible' in an attempt to 'express the Holy'.⁴⁵ He claims that elements of the transcendental style can be found in the work of several directors – such as Roberto Rossellini, Pier Paolo Pasolini, Kenji Mizoguchi, Andy Warhol – but only two can be called 'prescriptive' on account of their formal rigidity: Yasujiro Ozu in the East, and Robert Bresson in the West.⁴⁶ One of the most astute and self-critical of film directors, Bresson insisted that for him the subject matter was nothing more but the vehicle through which the form operates.⁴⁷ He prefers to downplay the importance of the plot, since it is merely a 'novelist's trick', used to elicit quite predictable audience empathy. In conventional films, formal elements are a means for expressing content. Acting, camerawork, editing and music are all clues to 'understanding' the events and/or the state of mind of the characters. The story manipulates the dramatic events to such an extent that the viewer's emotional involvement is being steered in a certain direction. In psychologically motivated cinema, the actors already decide for the viewer what attitude he should adopt towards the film (scenes).

Bresson resisted this kind of conventional cinema by carefully instructing his actors in non-expressiveness. They had to behave in an automatic manner, as if [37] unaware of themselves. They had to deliver their lines in an extremely flat tone and resist the tendency to perform emotion. Not surprisingly, all other formal aspects were synchronized with this 'cold' approach: no camera movements, deadpan editing, a soundtrack consisting primarily of natural sounds and a rare use of music. He applied the same ascetic style to every single scene, whether filming the distress of a priest, a ballroom sequence or a couple making love.

The stylistic consistency of Bresson has two consequences. Firstly, as Schrader suggests, his rigid formalism may be inspired by spiritual feelings. In religion, repeated rituals like liturgy, mass, prayers and incantations are all formalistic methods designed to honour the Lord.⁴⁸ Secondly, and more importantly, the net result of such extreme stylization and cool detachment is that the viewer lacks any clues or guidance as to how to respond emotionally to the scenes. In the end, Bresson's anti-dramatic style only succeeds in eroding any sympathy for the characters, because identification with them, 'deeply conceived, is an impertinence – an affront to the mystery that is human action and the human heart'.⁴⁹

In her article on the 'spiritual style' in Bresson's films, Susan Sontag takes the view that his rigid form is designed 'to discipline the emotions at the same time that it arouses them'.⁵⁰ In a film with a detached style, the spectator is emotionally distanced from the story. At the same time, such an exploration of the 'limit of the unexpressive', as Sontag calls it, is a 'source of great emotional power'.⁵¹ The emotions in a dramatic film, filled with passionate subjective matter, accompanied by a soundtrack of violins during sentimental scenes, are immediately exhausted, the argument runs. Paradoxically, an anti-dramatic style which works to hold back one's emotions is an appropriate way to intensify them, according to Sontag.⁵²

Its cool detachment notwithstanding, every Bresson film has what Schrader calls a 'moment of transformation', a decisive action. His stylistic rules create a particular universe in which his characters are parachuted at will. Tension grows, since his characters, Schrader argues, always respond to a 'special call'⁵³ and they obsessively stick to this call, at the cost of their own well-being. Their inflexibility makes them unable to adapt to the rigid order of their environment.⁵⁴ In *Diary of a Country Priest* [*Le journal d'un curé de campagne*] (1951), which happens to be Dumont's favourite Bresson film, a young priest (Claude Laydu) is a newcomer to the small town where he is met with hostility by his parishioners. His all-consuming spiritual passion does not find fertile ground in this narrow-minded community. Apart from his social solitude he suffers from poor health. The vicar of Torcy (Adrien Borel) accuses him of following too strict a diet, but he replies that his stomach only digests dry bread, fruit and wine. Realizing that he ultimately is a 'prisoner of the Lord', his sole option for overcoming the estrangement from his surroundings is to escape that other prison, his body.⁵⁵ His martyrdom will culminate in a final, decisive action, acceptance of his own death from stomach cancer. The characters in Bresson's cinema appear to transgress a personal barrier, [38] no matter how minimal the breakthrough may seem at times – it can also be an 'inexplicable expression of love' for a girl by an imprisoned protagonist, as in *Pickpocket* (1959).⁵⁶

The decisive action in a Bresson film has a unique effect upon the viewer, according to Schrader. Because of the aesthetic film style, the spectator has been offered no emotional signposting at all, although the decisive action 'demands an emotional commitment from the viewer'.⁵⁷ This means that in a film that is at odds with psychologically motivated codes, he will have to construct his own emotional 'screen' from scratch. The crowning achievement of the 'moment of transformation' is represented on screen by 'stasis', defined by Schrader as a

‘quiescent, frozen or hieratic scene which follows the decisive action and closes the film’.⁵⁸

Diary of a Country Priest ends with a shot of more than one minute, showing the shadow of a black cross on a white wall, while we hear the vicar in voice-over telling us that the very last words of the priest were: ‘All is grace’. For Dumont, *Diary of a Country Priest* is the epitome of cinema, since it is all designed to lead the viewer, shot by shot, to an ‘absolutely extraordinary’ final shot.⁵⁹ In Schrader’s analysis, this closure reduces the film to stasis, the moment when the image stops and the viewer takes over.

It requires little imagination to find analogies between Bresson’s cinematic principles and Dumont’s *Hadewijch*. Besides the above-mentioned working methods regarding acting or the aspect ratio, the film features a heroine in line with the protagonists of a Bresson film: estranged from her environment, acting as a prisoner of *Minne*. The fact that the introverted Céline/Hadewijch is crying a couple of times seems a nod in the direction of psychologically driven cinema, so loathed by Bresson. Nonetheless, her tears are to a great extent non-expressive, since she does not weep in response to a certain event or situation, but to express her general suffering about His absence or about her loathsome existence. In addition to the detached shot compositions, the elliptical cutting is a preeminent formal feature of *Hadewijch*.

The spectator lacks anchors to answer crucial questions like: Why does Céline join Yassine and his friends in the café – friends, by the way, whom we only see at a brief glance, since the camera shows Céline and Yassine in a lengthy two-shot? Why is she interested in Nassir’s debating group? Why the bomb, and who is the target of the attack? Does the explosion take place at street-level or in the underground perhaps running underneath? Why does she shudder that she exists? Why the suicide attempt? And perhaps most intriguingly, but as unsolvable as the other questions: Has Céline, in the last episode of the film, returned to the convent after the explosion, or do the scenes actually precede the beginning of the film? In the latter case, one might imagine that both Nassir and Céline have blown themselves up with the bomb. All these ‘whys’ are floating in the void and, in withholding clear-cut answers, the plot is riddled with ambiguity. [39]

Due to the elliptical cutting, it is problematic to pinpoint the decisive action. It is tempting to qualify the sunrays on Hadewijch’s face as such, since at that moment the scales tip over in favour of Nassir’s cause. A reading in the spirit of the transcendental style would rather focus on the moment of her distress over the split between her desire for the Beloved and her unworthy, earthly existence. Hence, Hadewijch’s ‘I shudder that I ever was born a human being’, followed by her effort to drown herself, can be taken as the decisive action, in the vein of Bresson’s cinema. The fact that the construction worker comes to her rescue seems to allude to his role as saviour. Tellingly, the frontal shot of David as the final image is accompanied by André Caplet’s musical piece ‘The Mirror of Jesus’ [‘Le miroir de Jésus’]. The overall tone of the film demands that we resist such a seemingly logical option. The succession of scenes is not psychologically coherent, as in conventional cinema. The viewer is constantly invited to fill in the transitions – and hence to provide an answer to all the ‘whys’ – but the clues are too minimal to create clear associative patterns. Seen this way, the film consists of a series of scenes that are too loosely connected to construct a tight narrative. The trick of the film is to offer the promise of a narrative whilst not fulfilling that promise. From this perspective, the final shot, when David holds Céline/Hadewijch in his arms, clearly not at ease with the situation and looking up to the sky, is a supreme example of stasis, as proposed by Schrader. The closure of *Hadewijch* is not the full-stop at the end of a plot, but it is rather an enigmatic tableau. A story with a clear-cut ending would risk boring the viewer, in the perception of Dumont, for once the

riddles seem solved, the film ends. But because a narrative catharsis is ruled out in *Hadewijch*, the point of stasis – of frozen motion – stirs the viewer into contemplating the film, (also) after the credits. The ideal effect of stasis as the end product of transcendental style is to leave the viewer exalted, if not mesmerized.

To illustrate this preference for mesmerism over reason, the presence of two lengthy musical performances is significant in Dumont's film. Music is rarely used in his cinema, but here he makes an exception. Music is the art form *par excellence* which cannot be contained by the rational mind and, hence, it is favoured by mystics 'to express faith' in an attempt to 'obtain a glimpse of the hidden side of the soul', as Dumont puts it.⁶⁰ Moreover, both performances highlight the fact that one can be totally absorbed by the music. During the first musical interlude, the accordionist of the folk punk band seems ecstatic whilst performing a rough version of Bach's *Art of Fugue* in the open air. During the second interlude, the camera shows Céline in complete awe whilst listening to a string quartet playing Bach's *Give Me Back My Jesus* in a church. [40]

The Sparse Means of a Medium, Abundant at Birth

The one remaining question is: why does Dumont consider the visual references in *Hadewijch*'s text as typically cinematographic? At first sight, the beguine's exuberant writing style, filled with intense emotions such as burning desire, madness of love, engulfment and rapture, seems antithetical to the film's cold approach, delaying any emotion. By way of conclusion I believe that this apparent contrast is predominantly due to a difference between a textual medium and an audiovisual medium.

According to Schrader, Bresson's films bear a closer resemblance to Byzantine portraits than to anything from the history of film up to that point. The pictures in Byzantine art were fairly simple compositions with one focal point to give the impression that they were manufactured without human intervention, 'made without hands'.⁶¹ The face of such an icon, Schrader notes, was always non-expressive, 'because God himself was beyond all expression'.⁶² Primitive techniques are privileged since the transcendental style in art requires, as Schrader puts it, that 'sparse means' reign over 'abundant means'.⁶³ The latter are sensual, emotional, humanistic and individualistic, and are meant to inspire sympathy. Sparse means are cold, formalistic and hieratic, and their goal is to encourage respect.⁶⁴ The distinction is of interest when reflecting on the nature of cinema, since Schrader argues that this medium was 'abundant at birth'.⁶⁵ Film is expected to grant the viewer immediate gratification: as a medium of mechanical reproduction, cinema is deemed suitable to satisfy the 'obsession with realism', as the famous French critic André Bazin called it.⁶⁶ In addition, film can fulfill the desire for spectacular scenery and events as well as produce instant empathy. Both popular and classic cinema answer these needs and, remarkably, the religious film is the genre *par excellence* that overuses the abundant artistic means. A film like Cecil B. DeMille's *The Ten Commandments* (1956) is spectacular to the highest degree in depicting, through the camera, any possible 'miraculous event', as if to say: See it, and you will be inspired by faith. Transcendental style in film takes the opposite direction – and to jump on the bandwagon of an elitist distinction: here the filmic (popular/classic) is converted into the cinematographic (artistic/stylistic). This style has to work against the abundant means as the supposed 'essence' of the medium. Cinematography can have a 'spiritual quality', Schrader contends, when the sparse means supersede the abundant ones. That is, when a cold stylization dominates the imitative and

inherently 'realistic' techniques of film. The flatter the film images become and the more enigmatic the shot transitions are – in the last half hour of *Hadewijch*, the editing pattern is particularly elliptical – the more cinema explores the 'limit of the unexpressive'.

The emotional effect of an expressive film of abundant means, full of passionate characters, does not last long – it is exhausted as soon as the film is over, Sontag argues.⁶⁷ Only an unexpressive film, purged of rational and psychological [41] motivations, can seriously affect the viewer, and ideally bring about a mesmerizing experience – just like the viewer may be spellbound by merely watching a non-expressive Byzantine portrait, because its primitivism might suggest that its icon was formed through miraculous contact with a higher being. Likewise, the transcendental style in film will, thanks to the change from the abundance of the medium into sparse means, 'set the viewer in motion'. Since such a film offers suggestions rather than visual proof, opaqueness rather than transparency, puzzles rather than bringing understanding, the final shot of stasis will ideally invite the viewer to keep going, 'moving deeper and deeper, one might say, into the image', to the point of mesmerism.⁶⁸

Unlike the abundant cinema, literature/poetry as a mere textual medium is to be situated on the side of sparse means. *Hadewijch*, however, works against this sparseness by exploring the abundant possibilities of language and uses emotionally charged terms throughout her poems, letters and visions. Especially in her visions, the main source of inspiration for Dumont, she recalls ecstatic experiences by way of the inner sense of sight and hearing, but a transition to a non-cognitive and ineffable union with *Minne*, marked by the formula that she 'falls out of the spirit', occurs five times. This transition definitely borders on inexpressibility. As such, it is equivalent to the transcendental style in cinema which only articulates the inexpressible in an extremely implicit manner.

On a thematic level, Dumont translates mysticism into a present-day context of fundamental beliefs by staging an encounter between an ascetic virgin and a radical Muslim. He appropriates *Hadewijch*'s violent longing for God as the Beloved to explore its minimal distinction from Nassir's notion of God as the Almighty Judge, used to justify violent action. Obviously, this distinction is significant, but, since the bombing itself is hardly emphasized, *Hadewijch* seems above all to defeat any easy categorisations. *Hadewijch*'s texts are rewritten in order to suggest a possible intertwinement of religion and violence in the name of politics. The texts are appropriated so as to explore a consistent fascination of Dumont: can presumed 'goodness' be distinguished from an over-zealous struggle for a cause? In fact, the film subjects the viewer to a mental experiment: How do we value the ('evil') position of radical Islam if we come to realise its close affinities with a ('good') mystic's ascetic lifestyle?

On a stylistic level, Dumont and *Hadewijch* can be termed 'soulmates' in the light of their attempts to articulate the inexpressible. Dumont's unrelenting quest for approaching the inexpressible makes mysticism a guiding principle for his vision of cinema. It should be noted, however, that a director uses his medium differently from a writer and it is this difference that constitutes the leeway between poetic mysticism and a transcendental film style. *Hadewijch* injects her texts with abundant means – lyrical expressions full of passion, resulting into an ineffable union – to counter the sparseness of literature. Conversely, Dumont injects his cinema with sparse means – coldly framed images to withhold psychologically [42] motivated expressions of emotions – as an antidote to cinema as an abundant means.

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Notes

1. Hadewijch, *The Complete Works*, trans. Mother Columba Hart, O.S.B. (New York: Paulist Press, 1980), pp. 278-9.
2. Hadewijch, *The Complete Works*, p. 267.
3. Hadewijch, *The Complete Works*, p. 293. Another example to illustrate the indescribable and puzzling nature of His appearance: '... I lost that manly beauty outwardly in the sight of his form. I saw him completely come to nought and so fade and all at once dissolve that I could no longer recognize or perceive him outside me, and I could no longer distinguish him within me' (Hadewijch, *The Complete Works*, p. 281).
4. Paul Mommaers, 'Preface', Hadewijch, *The Complete Works*, p. xiii.
5. Veerle Fraeters, 'Gender and Genre: The Design of Hadewijch's Book of Visions', in *The Voice of Silence: Women's Literacy in a Men's Church*, ed. by Thérèse de Hemptinne and María Eugenia Góngora. (Turnhout: Brepols, 2004), p. 67.
6. Veerle Fraeters, 'Gender and Genre', p. 70.
7. Veerle Fraeters, 'Gender and Genre', p. 71.
8. Damon Smith, 'Bruno Dumont, Hadewijch', in *Filmmaker Magazine Blog of Independent Film*, 22 December 2010, <http://www.filmmakermagazine.com/news/2010/12/bruno-dumont-hadewijch/> [accessed 18 May 2011].
9. Damon Smith, 'Bruno Dumont, Hadewijch'.
10. Quoted in Mike Naafs, 'Films zijn toverspreuken: Bruno Dumont over Hadewijch', *De Filmkrant* 320, April 2010, <http://www.filmkrant.nl/av/org/filmkran/archief/fk320/du-mont.html> [accessed 18 May 2011].
11. Mother Cornelia Hart, 'Introduction', Hadewijch, *The Complete Works*, p. 3.
12. Elizabeth A. Dreyer, *Passionate Spirituality: Hildegard of Bingen and Hadewijch of Brabant* (New York: Paulist Press, 2005), p. 106.
13. Agatha Anna Caecilia Bardoel, *Vision or Union? Mystical Expression in the Visions of Hadewijch of Brabant (c. 1250)*, unpublished PhD thesis, University of Toronto (1992), p. 240.
14. Bernard McGinn, *The Flowering of Mysticism: Men and Women in the New Mysticism (1200-1350)* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1998), p. 205.
15. Hadewijch, *The Complete Works*, p. 356, *Poems in Couplets* 16, pp. 149-50.
16. Hadewijch, *The Complete Works*, p. 239, *Poems in Stanzas* 38.7.
17. Hadewijch, *The Complete Works*, p. 181; *Poems in Stanzas* 20.6.
18. Marieke van Baest, 'Introductory Essay', in *Poetry of Hadewijch*, trans. by Marieke van Baest (Leuven: Peeters, 1998), p. 23.
19. Van Baest, 'Introductory Essay', p. 24.
20. Paul Mommaers, 'Het visioen bij de mystica Hadewijch', in *Visioenen*, ed. by R. Stuij and C. Vellekoop (Utrecht: Hes, 1986), pp. 196-7.

21. Hadewijch, *The Complete Works*, p. 280; vision seven.
22. Hadewijch, *The Complete Works*, p. 197, Poems in Stanzas 25.3.
23. Hadewijch, *The Complete Works*, p. 171, Poems in Stanzas 16.8.
24. Hadewijch, *The Complete Works*, p. 291, vision eleven.
25. Hadewijch, *The Complete Works*, p. 279, vision six.
26. Hadewijch, *The Complete Works*, p. 279, vision six.
27. Fraeters, 'Gender and Genre', pp. 73-4. [44]
28. Hadewijch, *The Complete Works*, p. 268; vision one.
29. Fraeters, 'Gender and Genre', p. 72.
30. Mommaers, 'Preface', p. xxiii, emphasis in original.
31. Analogies with the medieval texts are not disrupted yet, since the mother superior's comment reminds us that some of the beguines in Hadewijch's days found her 'unremittingly high standards a grievance' (Hart, 'Introduction', p. 4). In her Letters, Hadewijch alludes to covert jealousy and she mentions how 'false brethren' cause trouble, resulting in her being forsaken.
32. About the 'upward glance' of his characters, Dumont has said: 'They're visionaries ... they access the invisible through the visible world. They know how to see. Because they know how to see, they can see what to others is invisible and interior'. See Michael Guillén, 'Raven in the Rain: A Conversation with Bruno Dumont,' <http://mubi.com/notebook/posts/1102> [accessed 18 May 2011].
33. Fraeters, 'Gender and Genre', p. 74.
34. Hadewijch, *The Complete Works*, p. 254, Poems in Stanzas 43.95.
35. I would like to thank Veerle Fraeters for her suggestion to explore the distinction between God as Love and God as Almighty Judge.
36. Hadewijch, *The Complete Works*, p. 256, Poems in Stanzas 44.9.
37. Susan Sontag, 'On Style', in *Against Interpretation and Other Essays*, (London: Penguin Books, 2009), p. 22.
38. Susan Sontag, 'On Style', p. 17.
39. The only time he worked with professional actors was on his third feature, *Twenty-Nine Palms*, but this experience has only convinced him not to do it again.
40. Michael Guillén, 'Raven in the Rain', <http://mubi.com/notebook/posts/1102> [accessed 18 May 2011].
41. Bresson's output is meager. He only made fourteen films between 1944 and 1983.
42. The camera does move in *Hadewijch* but only when the character moves as well. If the character stands still, the camera is static.
43. This focus upon a transcendental style has a drawback. Brian Price has argued that the critique of Bresson tends to privilege the religious dimension of his cinema at the exclusion of the political and the often anti-clerical elements in his work. Although I have relied to a great extent on Schrader's work, I hope that the political edge in Dumont's film will not be overlooked. See Brian Price, 'Sontag,

- Bresson, and the unfixable,' <http://www.freepatentsonline.com/article/Post-Script/172833469.html> [accessed 7 October 2011].
44. Schrader wrote this study when he was only 26 years old. Later he became known as the screenwriter of, amongst others, four Scorsese films: *Taxi Driver* (1976), *Raging Bull* (1980), *The Last Temptation of Christ* (1988) and *Bringing Out the Dead* (1999). The voice-over in *Taxi Driver* is a homage to the voice-over in Bresson's *Diary of a Country Priest*. The list of 18 films he directed includes titles like *American Gigolo* (1980), *Mishima* (1985) and *The Comfort of Strangers* (1990).
 45. Paul Schrader, *Transcendental Style in Film: Ozu, Bresson, Dreyer*, (Berkeley, Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1972), p. 3.
 46. Schrader, *Transcendental Style*, p. 10. [45]
 47. 'Form much more than content touches a viewer and elevates him', according to Bresson (quoted in Schrader, *Transcendental Style*, p. 61).
 48. Schrader, *Transcendental Style*, p. 60.
 49. Sontag, 'Spiritual Style in the Films of Robert Bresson', in *Against Interpretation and Other Essays*, (London: Penguin Books, 2009), p. 181.
 50. Sontag, 'Spiritual Style', p. 180.
 51. Sontag, 'Spiritual Style', p. 185, 181.
 52. Sontag, 'Spiritual Style', p. 181.
 53. Schrader, *Transcendental Style*, p. 77.
 54. Bresson's films are characterized by an interesting paradox: the fate of the characters is already determined in this universe whilst at the same time they can only become 'free' by 'choosing' this predetermined will of God. See Schrader, *Transcendental Style*, pp. 90-3.
 55. Schrader, *Transcendental Style*, p. 91.
 56. Schrader, *Transcendental Style*, p. 79.
 57. Schrader, *Transcendental Style*, p. 81.
 58. Schrader, *Transcendental Style*, p. 82.
 59. Quoted in Michael Brooke, 'Robert Bresson: Alias Grace', in *Sight and Sound* (November 2007), <http://www.bfi.org.uk/sightandsound/feature/49407> [accessed 18 May 2011].
 60. Guillén, 'Raven in the Rain', [accessed 18 May 2011]
 61. Schrader, *Transcendental Style*, p. 98.
 62. Schrader, *Transcendental Style*, p. 99.
 63. For this distinction between abundant means and sparse means, Schrader is indebted to *Religion and Culture* (1930) by Jacques Maritain.
 64. Schrader, *Transcendental Style*, p. 155. Abundant means are characterized by soft lines, realistic portraiture and three-dimensionality, whereas sparse means are marked by abstraction, stylized portraiture and two-dimensionality.
 65. Schrader, *Transcendental Style*, p. 159.

66. André Bazin, *What is Cinema? Vol. 1*, trans. by Hugh Grant. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), p. 12.
67. Sontag, 'Spiritual Style', p. 181.
68. Schrader, *Transcendental Style*, p. 161. Emphasis in original.