

‘Broken promises don’t upset me. I just think, why did they believe me?’

--Jack Handey, *Deepest Thoughts: So Deep They Squeak*

Part way through our recorded dialogues, and then more explicitly and purposefully toward the end, Ian Angus addresses the old Greek philosophical question of the distinction between being and seeming. In our conversations this was framed in part through ideas of soil or roots and nihilism, yet the layered question and distinction offer more than merely a way into considering aspects of Dostoevsky’s thought and how it retains its fire for us now—we are drawn near to the potentially nihilistic nucleus of our own time and place.

In order to keep its integrity nihilism must deny soil, for soil gives way to roots and roots offer a form which may be appropriate for cultivating our life together. In this way soil and roots shape the ground for certain rhythms of life, but since—like nihilism—soil and roots are ‘underground’ things, it is often difficult to discern which rhythms of life are essentially rooted in rich soil and which rhythms of life are essentially nihilistic. To sharpen our sense of this basic difference, it may be useful to distinguish broadly between two kinds of designed or deliberate rhythms of life and their respective tonalities—spectacle and ritual.

Spectacle, which is a form of posturing, is fashioned to sway one—it moves one away from or out of what is real through the use of ‘spontaneity’ or ‘studied emotion’ (Bresson), and dissimulates for particular ends. In this category we find a great deal of public politics, the circus, the pageant, pornography, and the world of Hollywood movies—everything for which its end is not its own. Ritual, which remains its own and yet open, becomes a form of presence—it draws one near to and moves one to participate in what proves real through repetition and renewal for particular ends, and sustains and deepens our comprehension of the elemental rhythms of life. In this more delimited category we find ancient Greek drama, certain liturgical traditions, some customs of folklife, and elements of chant and polyphonic music.

After Dostoevsky, two great artists of the twentieth century address these matters in notably interesting ways which pertain here, and both perceive the matter of rhythm through the prism of form: Hermann Broch, who has a great talent for analysis, concentrates on form and idea, and Robert Bresson, who has a great talent for apophysis, focuses on form and truth. Further, both artists draw together form and what is essential or appropriate.

Broch’s most profound insight has to do with the nature of modern kitsch (in this he may echo certain of Dostoevsky’s concerns with truth and lying in *The Brothers Karamazov*), especially as this matter is played out in the field of ethics and art. In ‘The Style of the Mythical Age’, Broch writes: ‘If art can or may exist further, it has to set itself the task of striving for the essential, of becoming a counterbalance to the hypertrophic calamity of the world. And imposing such a task on the arts, this epoch of disintegration imposes on them the style of old age, the style of the essential, the style of the abstract’. The ‘style of the essential’ is the corrective vision applied to the matters of a counterfeit system of thought based on finite absolutes (kitsch). The style of the essential works to discern the ends of ideas based on their incarnate form; kitsch is an idea whose only end is certain effect and thus closely related to nothing—to nihilism. Kitsch renders something counterfeit, and

this often takes disproportionate or inappropriate form and becomes a 'hypertrophic calamity'. The style of the essential, the ethos of which is akin to ritual, intends to combat this inflation and this confusion, which prove the evidence of seeming.

The singular genius of Robert Bresson is rooted in particular notions of what is possible to make with film. In *Notes on the Cinematograph*, Bresson writes:

'No actors. (No directing of actors.)  
No parts. (No learning of parts.)  
No staging.  
But the use of working models, taken from life.  
BEING (models) instead of SEEMING (actors).'

This approach to art involves 'neither inflation nor overloading' but instead one being 'passionate for the appropriate'. In Bresson's hands, this means addressing only what belongs to something or someone—what is essential—and thus art means 'not to deform or invent persons or things', but rather to 'tie new relationships between persons and things which are, and *as they are*'.

To draw near to that which is and as it is—this is the apophatic endeavour, which seeks not its own but the truth of another. The distinction between being and seeming becomes clear only in proximity, and both may play a part in what is felt to be real. Yet their blending is ruinous—'the mixture of true and false yields falsity' (Bresson)—for the design of spectacle is not innocent. This is the ground for apophatic patience when considering image and illusion.

Bresson's response to this situation, for both his 'models' and his audience, is to counsel 'movement from the exterior to the interior'—counsel distinct from how we often understand the reality of human activity and response, and distinct also from an appropriate sense of authority as that which emerges and endures from within and in relation. 'Movement from the exterior to the interior' is the basic activity of drawing near without identification which comprehends the murky energy of the personality and thus may lead to the apprehension of its truth—distinct from its falsity, its kitsch, its spectacle, its seeming. This is approximate participation in that which inwardly forms person and thing and thus one's own being in relation across the abyss from nihilism.