

review / SARAH BREEN LOVETT

Boris B. Bertram (Dir.) *Human Shelter*

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INTERSTICES 20

For me, *Human Shelter* is a deeply poignant documentary film about transcendence. That is, transcending beyond different climatic, political, or social contexts of human shelter into a broader awareness, of varying kinds. While the notion of transcendence is spoken about directly by only one of the homes' occupants in the film, it is alluded to by all situations presented to different degrees, and is drawn out more explicitly in this review through reflection upon the filmic content in relation to the writing of Abraham Maslow.

The notion of home being the catalyst for transcendence can be understood as a rethinking of Maslow's well-known *Hierarchy of Needs* (1943: 370-396), extended by his lesser known *The Farther Reaches of Human Nature* (1971) and most specifically "Various Meanings of Transcendence" (1971: 259-269). If we are fortunate, our *hierarchy of needs*—physiological, safety, love, esteem, and self-actualisation (1943: 372-384)—are met, at least partially, by our home. But, contrary to Maslow's notion of *pre-potency* (1943: 370), rather than seeing a deficiency in needs (such as physiological, safety, and love) as a blockage to other needs (such as esteem and self-actualisation), they can be considered a catalyst for transcending toward these, and beyond. This is articulated in Maslow's later writings about transcendence as an experience of shifting from the *deficiency-realm* to the *being-realm* (1971: 245-253). To clarify, Maslow's focus on *being* is not an end goal, as in to be in a static transcendent state, but rather transcendence is the process of flux, of simultaneously *becoming* and *being* (1971: 56-57, 108). I shall briefly outline each of the human shelters, to illustrate how the contrasting contexts are communicated as a basis for different types of transcendence to occur.

On the Norwegian horizon a vivid pink sun breaks through crisp white clouds. An iridescent field of light lilac snow spans as far as the eye can see. Variations in icy texture mark movement across the landscape. Small trees outline the filmic frame, and groups of static reindeer are almost indecipherable. Once they begin to move, a silhouetted human on an ice mobile becomes visible amongst the herd, and the whole seem to move together as one. Here, human shelter is a very small moveable hut covered in ice, but it is experienced in the broader context of the arrival of different seasons, and the sublime nature and the community of reindeer that lives within it. Here it is said that "time is of little importance". This experience of transcendence through the home can be reflected upon in terms of

Maslow's concepts of being in the present moment, and transcending time (1971: 59-60, 124, 259), as well as the notion of being deeply connected to nature as something beyond the self (1971: 60, 124, 265-266, 321). Here, due to the freezing conditions, lack of human community, and small living quarters, transcendence occurs due to a deep connection with the environment, a unique awareness of time and awareness of self in relation to it.



Boris B. Bertram (Dir.). In Norway, a reindeer herder removes ice from a miniature moveable hut in a landscape of light lilac snow [Film still]

A curator from MOMA in New York City brushes teeth and makes a warm bed adjacent to a vast library of books while coffee boils. The curator says that his understanding of home is as a place you can leave and come back to. However, this comfortable home in a developed city also provides this curator with the opportunity for transcendence beyond one's own life and concerns, into the concerns of others. This curator's quest is to find out when a "shelter becomes a home" and what defines "home" for the 60 million refugees roaming the earth, searching for a place to feel more secure. This reminds me of Maslow's concepts around transcendence of self, to focus on something which is at service to broader humanity, or a meta-motivation (1971: 261, 289-291). This curator's concerns are expressed through his sensitive and thorough exhibition called *Insecurities: Tracing Displacement and Shelter* at MOMA, which shows documentation of the global refugee emergency and features a flat-packed UNICEF home designed to house refugees, and featured in the next scene.

Amidst dust, rocks, and sandy dunes, barbed wire circumvents refugee tents in Iraq covered with plastic tarps and reflective foil. Concrete blocks hold down satellite dishes on tin drums. The importance of safety is most acutely felt in these homes; we are told that if this place did not exist, these occupants would be dead. A young poet pleads, "Dear God, help me to be able to be with all the people [. . .] please help me, help me so I can get to my community." Here the needs of being in a warm, stable, safe environment with one's family and familiar community are not met, but this situation is transcended and other needs of self-esteem and creative expression are fulfilled. Here, I cannot help but think of Maslow's notion of transcendence through adversity (1971: 262). The ability of the human spirit to transcend this difficult situation is evident when the poet asserts that "[h]ome is the place where I live. Welcome to my home, everyone's tent and mine." The tents are adorned in ornamental fabrics and rugs, businesspeople continue to get dressed



Fig. 2 Boris B. Bertram (Dir.). In Iraq an occupant of the dusty desert adorns a refugee with ornamental fabrics and rugs [Film still]

in suits, young children dance and play games despite the circumstances of being confined to a refugee camp, and hoping to return to a life, as it was—one day.

A similarly barren rocky landscape of brown earth and grey sky sits in contrast to a small white dome fed by solar power and yellow tubes. This is the Mars simulated NASA camp on the edge of a volcano in Hawaii. Here, future astronauts attempt basic human inhabitation amidst alien atmospheric conditions for eight months. Relying on oxygen supply and hermeneutic envelopes, plants are grown in the dome, not purely for physical survival, but also as a psychological escape, a connection to what is home and ultimately what it means to be human. Once released from the simulated experiment and allowed to go outside without oxygen tanks, an astronaut begins to play violin in the empty landscape, she reflects “if we are creating, then we are human”. In this scene, the astronauts are transcending human culture, seeing their own experience through a distant lens, to understand it in Maslow’s terms of a simultaneously experiencing and self-observing manner (1971: 260). The astronaut’s occupation of space and display of human creativity sit in stark observable contrast to the inhabitable environment and scientific means of habitation.

Fig. 3 Boris B. Bertram (Dir.). In Hawaii on the edge of a volcano a future astronaut plays violin outside a hermeneutic home [Film still]



A cacophony of country and western music, cicadas and tropical birds, overlay images of peeling green paint, loose timber boarding, and filtered sunlight in a tree house in Uganda. Seemingly without facilities such as bathrooms or kitchens, it is built on a constantly growing and moving structure—a tree. The occupant of the house reflects it was made to communicate to people that we should respect the environment, not only trees, but all living things. The occupant says the reason for this choice to live in a tree was “inspired by the environment, or to be the environmentalist.” Here transcendence may resonate with Maslow’s shift from the meta-motivation of environmental injustices into self-actualisation (1971: 267-268, 291-296). Transcendence is realised through the home, the beliefs one holds, and expression of who one is; it is communicated through a palpable bliss experienced by the occupant.

A Japanese Buddhist monk chants and rings bells on a busy Tokyo street, where passers-by are more interested in their mobile phones. A shared apartment of fifteen occupants, full of comradeship and communal meals, is placed in contrast to a lonely photographer, who lives and works in a six square metre capsule hotel. Photographing lovers on the streets from a distance, and returning to this small home to process film in the same space where teeth are cleaned, the occupant, when reflecting upon her lone existence in contrast to the business of the world outside, says, “I get to a point where I forget myself and kind of transcend.” This kind of transcendence can be thought of by Maslow’s notion of transcendence through dichotomy (1971: 263), where contrasting extremes can lead one to a state of transcendence, of moving beyond the situation of place into another space of consciousness.



Fig. 4 Boris B. Bertram (Dir.). In Nigeria, a boater navigates through a floating community of stilted houses [Film still]

Stilted timber slats and corrugated iron homes sit alongside overflowing garbage mounds and smoking fires that float upon the water in Nigeria. To go anywhere one must use a canoe. Paper thin and half-height walls in the homes make privacy a luxury, and the extremes of weather are felt explicitly. Despite this, the feeling of community is remarkable, and occupants praise the pleasurable sensation of a floating home. It is described as a “cool feeling of floating”, a “fresh soothing sea breeze blows in, calms your nerves and makes your night restful”. Rather than focusing on the unstable, cramped living conditions, concentrating upon community and natural phenomena enables a transcendence to an

appreciation of what one has. This type of transcendence can be thought through Maslow's merging of sensation of place with identification (1971: 243, 262). Here, the belonging to place and community seems to transcend many less congested, more developed, land-based living arrangements.

A landscape of black sand surrounds a seasonal glacier in Finland, which is now permanently receding. A lone cabin stands adjacent to it, handed down through generations. The family members reflect upon themselves in relation to the cabin, the position of the glacier, and the smell of spring that arrives with its melting. A father speaks of the effect of this place to the very depths of his soul, saying: "When you go to a small cabin that has nothing and you have nothing with you, you can actually feel most at home. Your soul feels most at home." He goes on to describe his understanding of the home, despite being on the edge of monumental environmental change, as being "in the context of the waves, clouds and rocks, something firm and eternal." This can be reflected upon in terms of Maslow's notion of a deficiency-realm, to move into a deeper experience of the being-realm (1971: 124, 242, 265). Here he literally transcends into a deeper connection with himself and place through having less, but seeing it in the context of all.

REFERENCES

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This closing scene circles back to the sentiment of the opening, that proximity to sublime natural landscapes can lead to heightened experiences of transcendence. However, the real depth of the film, and engagement with the notion of transcendence, can be, as seen in the array of living environments in this film, that transcendence is attained in different ways in all situations despite (and often because of) its context. This film is recommended viewing, because it gives hope. It poetically and beautifully communicates how transcendence is possible in all situations. Further, the film illustrates the complex relationships we have with our environments, which when appreciated at a deep level, can allow us to shift consciousness to a more positive state.