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L'Argent and the Aesthetics of Robert Bresson, Reconsidered

Abstract: Robert Bresson's films are even more distinguished for their method or their style than for their individual subject matter. That is because Bresson's subjects pale beside his treatment of them, so much so that it is almost as if the director were making the same movie time after time. Like Bazin's true filmmaker, Bresson thus attained his power through his method, which is less a thing literally to be described or expressed (as in such terms as color, deep focus, handheld camerawork, and long takes) than an inner orientation enabling an outward quest. That quest, in Bresson's case, is to honor God's universe by using film to render the reality of that universe, and, through its reality, both the miracle of its creation and the mystery of its being. In this essay the author reconsiders Bresson's final film, *L'Argent*, from the perspective of its spiritual style, which in this instance (as in the numerous other instances where Bresson adapts a literary source) is consonant with the film's adaptation method.

Keywords: Robert Bresson; *L'Argent*; transcendental style; French film; *Diary of a Country Priest*; *A Man Escaped*.

Oeuvre and Influence

There aren't many art forms where commercial success is relentlessly equated with aesthetic worth. In painting, the idea that Walter Keane is a greater artist than Robert Rauschenberg because many a 1960s tract house had a Walter Keane painting in it would be laughingly dismissed. And anyone claiming that Rod McKuen's "poetry" outranks the work of Ezra Pound because it sold more might invite censure, even arrest. Among the major arts, it's only in film that popular directors – Steven Spielberg and George Lucas spring immediately to mind – merit innumerable awards, miles of media exposure, and armies of imitators trying to re-create both their "artistic" standing and their financial success. This distressing cultural trend has resulted in some serious cinematic casualties, whose work is largely unseen because there is no sense of critical proportion in the film world, no reasonable critical standard. And the most notable victim in this instance may be the French director Robert Bresson.

It's my view, however, that Robert Bresson was one of the great film artists of the twentieth century, one of the great *artists* of that century. The

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viewer who surrenders himself or herself to Bresson's work is not likely to remain unaffected by the extreme intensity of the emotions conveyed, the formal rigor of the style, the utter seriousness of the subjects, or the deep commitment of the filmmaker to his own artistic conceptions. Still, Bresson remains little known or appreciated beyond the most discerning of filmgoers. While the retrospective of his work that traveled throughout the United States and elsewhere in 1998 – organized by James Quandt, senior programmer of the Cinémathèque Ontario – helped to change that situation, many viewers still resist Bresson for the very qualities that define his uniqueness. Focusing less on what he offers than on what he withholds, even foreign-film aficionados preferred (and prefer) his flashier contemporaries – Fellini, Antonioni, Bergman – who embodied their existential angst in the emotive performances of star personalities (by European standards, anyway). Bresson not only renounced the star, he banished professional actors altogether from his increasingly detheatricalized, spartanly cinematic universe.

For many, a Bresson film is a punishing experience thanks to the alleged “severity” of his style and the bleakness of his narratives. Yet the frugality of that style – the exactness of its framing and montage, the elimination of excess – has undeniably influenced a slew of contemporary European filmmakers, including Chantal Akerman, Olivier Assayas, Laurent Cantet, Alain Cavalier, Claire Denis, Jacques Doillon, Bruno Dumont, Eugene Green, Michael Haneke, Benoît Jacquot, Jean-Pierre and Luc Dardenne, and Maurice Pialat, although none of these artists reject actors and expressive performances. Still, the adjective “Bressonian” is misused and overused; and, in the end, this filmmaker is inimitable because his style is inseparable from a stern moral vision. Bresson, as uncompromising as his filmic style, offered it straight up: no ice and no water on the side, which is to say without humor, stars, or entertainment in any conventional sense.

Bresson, then, is a true anomaly even by the exacting standards of intransigent *auteurs* like Carl Dreyer or Josef von Sternberg. He supposedly was born on September 25, 1907, but, following his death on December 18, 1999, obituaries in the press reported that he was born, in fact, on that day six years earlier, in 1901. If this is indeed the case, then Bresson lived for all but twenty-one months or so of the twentieth century. His filmmaking career itself spanned forty years, from 1943 to 1983, during which time he directed thirteen films. (Bresson disowned his first film, a medium-length surrealist comedy with nods to René Clair and Jean Vigo, *Public Affairs* [1934], which was rediscovered in the late 1980s after long being thought lost.) That he deserves the title of the most thoroughly twentieth-century artist, simply by virtue of his birth and death dates if not his filmic production, will strike some as ironic at first glance. A deeply devout man – one who paradoxically described himself as a “Christian atheist” – Bresson, in his attempt in a relatively timeless manner to address good and evil, redemption, the power of

love and self-sacrifice, and other such subjects, may seem to us, and perhaps was, something of a retrogression. Analysis, however, might show that he establishes his modernity as an artist precisely by “retrogressing” in the manner, and under the particular historical circumstances, that he did.

Life and Art, or War, Religion, and Painting

The details of Bresson’s personal life are not well-documented, for he was not given to self-promotion or self-revelation. According to the *New York Times* obituary (Dec. 22, 1999), he challenged a potential interviewer in 1983 by asking, “Have you seen my film?” When the journalist replied that he had, Bresson continued, “Then you know as much as I do. What do we have to talk about?” Nonetheless, we know some of the details of Robert Bresson’s biography. He was born in the small town of Bromont-Lamothe in central France, and first turned to painting after graduating from a Parisian secondary school, where he excelled in Greek, Latin, and philosophy. Marrying at age nineteen (and later remarrying after the death of his first wife), Bresson began in film as a script consultant and collaborated on several scenarios (*C’était un musicien*, *Jumeaux de Brighton*, *Air pur*) before the start of World War II. Soon after joining the French army, he was captured by the Germans and imprisoned for almost two years (1940-41) – which turned out to be a signal event in his artistic, as well as his personal, life.

This formative influence and two others undoubtedly mark Bresson’s films: in addition to Bresson’s experiences as a prisoner of war, his Catholicism – which took the form of the predestinarian French strain known as Jansenism – and his early years as a painter. These influences manifest themselves respectively in the recurrent theme of free will-versus-determinism, in the extreme, austere precision with which Bresson composes each shot, and in the frequent use of the prison motif. Two films of his are located almost entirely inside prisons: *A Man Escaped* (1956) and *The Trial of Joan of Arc* (1962); and Bresson otherwise often used prison as a metaphor for spiritual imprisonment as well as release. A classic case of the latter is *Pickpocket* (1959), where Michel finds redemption from his criminal career only by intentionally being caught, as he tells Jeanne from his prison cell in the famous final scene, “What a strange road I had to take to find you.”

Three of Bresson’s films take place in a wholly Catholic context: *Angels of the Streets* (1943), a metaphysical thriller set in a convent; *Diary of a Country Priest* (1951), a rare instance of a great novel (by Georges Bernanos) being turned into an even greater film; and *The Trial of Joan of Arc*. His Jansenism manifests itself in the way the leading characters are *acted upon* and simply surrender themselves to their fate. In *Au hasard, Balthazar* (*By Chance, Balthazar*, 1966), for example, both the donkey Balthazar and his on-and-off owner Marie passively accept the ill-treatment they both experience, as

opposed to the evil Gérard, who *initiates* much of what causes others to suffer. Indeed, Bresson seemed to become increasingly pessimistic about human nature during his career: his penultimate two films even suggest that he had more concern for animals and the environment than for people, while the characters in his astonishing swansong *L'Argent* (*Money*, 1983) are simply the victims of a chain of circumstances undergirded by the maxim that “the love of money is the root of all evil.”

One effect of the Jansenist influence is Bresson’s total mistrust of psychological motives for a character’s actions. The conventional narrative film – actually, the conventional story of any kind – insists that people have to have reasons for what they do. A motiveless murder in a detective story would be unacceptable, for instance. In Bresson, however, people act for no obvious reason, behave “out of character,” and in general simply follow the destiny that has been mapped out for them. Often a character will state an intention, and in the very next scene do the opposite. Characters who appear to be out-and-out rogues will unaccountably do something good, an example being the sacked camera-shop assistant in *L'Argent*, who gives his ill-gotten gains to charity. At the same time, Bresson did not predetermine how his films would finally emerge; instead, it was a process of discovery for him to see what would finally be revealed, or experienced, by his non-professional actors (or “models,” as he designated them) after he had trained them for their parts.

Bresson’s second influence, his early experience as a painter, is manifested in the austerity of his compositions. A painter has to decide what to put in, a filmmaker what to leave out. And with Bresson nothing unnecessary is shown; indeed, he goes further, often leaving the viewer to infer what is happening *outside* the frame. Thus we often see shots of hands, doorknobs, even *parts* of things in instances where any other filmmaker would show the whole. A Bresson film consequently requires unbroken concentration on the viewer’s part, and I myself have occasionally felt literally breathless after watching one because of the concentration required. It is in fact on account of their economy that many of Bresson’s films are exceptionally fast-moving in their narrative. (One exception is the almost contemplative *Four Nights of a Dreamer* [1971], where little actually happens in this story of unrequited love, whose central character, interestingly, is a painter.) If *L'Argent*, for one, were remade as a Hollywood thriller, it would have at least double the running time and would dwell at length on the brutal violence in the last section, which is merely elliptically hinted at by Bresson. The running time of *L'Argent* is eighty-five minutes, and the running time of each of Bresson’s other films similarly averages under ninety minutes, yet the viewer can be surprised at the amount that happens in that time.

A Man Escaped and *Pickpocket*, for example, may be first-person narratives of impeccable integrity, yet neither film wastes time establishing character in a conventional – or convenient – novelistic way. Instead, each relies on

economical actions to reveal the psychology of its protagonist. Thus as we watch Fontaine, condemned prisoner of the Vichy government, convert the objects of his cell into the means of escape, we discern the qualities of his character – determination, discipline, patience, perseverance, and resourcefulness. We are told at the beginning of *Pickpocket*, by contrast, that Michel has embarked upon an adventure to which he is not suited, but the internal conflict this implies is expressed less in complex dialogue or voice-over narration than in the increasingly detached, de-dramatized manner in which his thefts are filmed. In both pictures, then, it is the physical *action*, meticulously composed and edited, that consumes most of the screen time, in the process giving the audience adventures in audio-visual perception as acutely tuned as those of the protagonists.

Having achieved in *Pickpocket* and *A Man Escaped* what he believed was a truly “cinematographic” (more on this term soon) art, Bresson turned to *The Trial of Joan of Arc*, at sixty-five minutes his shortest work, in which the dominating principle – ironically for this artist – is language. Still inadequately appreciated, it is perhaps the most extraordinary rationale for his style, perfectly suited to the sober business of presenting the texts of Joan’s two trials – the one that condemned her and the one that rehabilitated her years after her death – without drama, excess, or theatrical flair. Next to Carl Theodor Dreyer’s eloquent, expressionist meditation on the same subject (*La Passion de Jeanne d’Arc*, 1928), Bresson’s film, an exercise in control and reserve, seems as committed to a terse, documentary-like approach to history as Pontecorvo’s *The Battle of Algiers* (1966).

Bressonian Sound, Acting, and Script

Along with Bresson’s painterly eye for what should and should not be shown, he made exquisite use of sound: off-screen sound itself is of key importance. The raking of leaves during the intense confrontation between the priest and the countess in *Diary of a Country Priest*; the scraping of the guard’s keys along the metal railings and the far-off sound of trains in *A Man Escaped*; the whinnying of horses in *Lancelot du Lac* (*Lancelot of the Lake*, 1974) – all these sounds serve to heighten the sense that a time of crisis has arrived for the central characters. Voice-over narration is also used, in combination with dialogue – in *Diary of a Country Priest* and *A Man Escaped* as well as *Pickpocket* – to underline the impression of an interior world constantly impinging on, and being impinged upon, by reality. Music, for its part, is used increasingly sparingly as Bresson’s career progresses: a specially composed score can be heard in the early films, but in *A Man Escaped* there are only occasional snatches of Mozart, in *Pickpocket* of Lully, in *Au hasard, Balthazar* of Schubert; and in late Bresson, non-diegetic music is dispensed with altogether.

A key ingredient of Bresson's method – indeed, of his ellipticism – is his view of actors, his “models.” From *Diary of a Country Priest* on he used only non-professionals, and was even reported to be upset when two of his actors (Anne Wiazemsky from *Au hasard, Balthazar* and Dominique Sanda from *A Gentle Creature* [1969]) went on to have professional acting careers. Only one actor ever appeared in two of his films: Jean-Claude Guilbert in *Au hasard, Balthazar* and *Mouchette* (1967). Actors were chosen by Bresson not for their ability but for their appearance, often for an intense facial asceticism, like Claude Laydu as the *curé* d'Ambricourt or Martin Lasalle as Michel the pickpocket. He then trained them to speak with a fast, monotonic delivery and to remove all traces of theatricality.

It is for this reason that Bresson rejected the word “cinema,” which he regarded as merely filmed theater, and instead used the word “cinematography” (not to be confused with the art of camerawork). As an integral part of this cinematography, all the movements of the actors were strictly controlled by the director: when they walked they had to take a precise number of steps; and eye movements became extremely important – the lowering of the eyes toward the ground almost becoming a Bresson trademark. The result of this approach is that the viewer connects not with a character's surface appearance but with the core of his being, his soul. Bresson's first two features – *Angels of the Streets* and *Les Dames du Bois de Boulogne* (*Ladies of the Park*, 1945) – do use professionals, even “stars” (in addition to featuring “literary” scripts, a certain artificiality in the lighting, and even a baroque quality to some dramatic sequences), and though they are both excellent films that anticipate the director's later thematic concerns, each would probably have been even more satisfying if “models” had been used in the major roles.

As for their scripts, all of Bresson's features after *Angels of the Streets* have literary antecedents of one form or another, albeit updated. Two are from Dostoyevsky (*A Gentle Creature* and *Four Nights of a Dreamer*), two from Bernanos (*Mouchette* in addition to *Diary of a Country Priest*), one from Tolstoy (*L'Argent*), one from Diderot (*Les Dames du Bois de Boulogne*), while *A Man Escaped* and *The Trial of Joan of Arc* are based on written accounts of true events. In addition, *Pickpocket* is clearly influenced by Dostoyevsky's *Crime and Punishment* and *Au hasard, Balthazar* has a premise similar to the same author's *The Idiot*. *Lancelot du Lac*, for its part, is derived from Sir Thomas Malory's Arthurian legends, while *The Devil, Probably* (1977) was inspired by a newspaper report, as stated at the start of the film. Even a longstanding, unrealized film project of Bresson's was to come from a literary source – in this case, the Book of Genesis (*Genèse*) – but Bresson reportedly said that, unlike his human “models,” animals could not be trained to do as they were told!

Bresson's radical reinterpretation of literary material, however, frequently made it unrecognizable. A superb manipulator of narrative incident (though

he called himself, not a *metteur en scène*, the ordinary French term for “director,” but *metteur en ordre*,” or “one who puts things in order”), he focused increasingly on slight, seemingly irrelevant details in a story, often obscuring or hiding major narrative developments. Bresson’s films are difficult at first (and at last) precisely because they lack such familiar and reassuring elements as “plot twists” and establishing shots. “One does not create by adding, but by taking away” (Bresson 1977, 48), he asserted. Just so, his films are composed of hundreds of relatively brief shots, each one fairly “flat,” with the opening shot as likely to be of a foot or an object as it is of a face or an entire body. Camera movement is kept to a minimum, for – to repeat – the camera shows only what is important and nothing more. Painting taught Bresson that one should make, “not beautiful images, but necessary images” (Bresson 1977, 45). Necessary words, as well, for dialogue in his films is extremely limited, and the performers, though they may bear features of a mesmerizing intensity, speak “undramatically” or (as I described earlier) “monotonically,” as if they were talking to themselves; even their movements are subdued as well as stiff.

Bresson, Philosophy, and the Cinema

Thus, to describe the thirteen films of Robert Bresson and delineate their themes would probably do little to convey their overall impact. For Bresson worked at the emotional truth of his films with an almost unbearable, even ineffable, intensity, out of a deep feeling of responsibility toward his audience. It was not the aim of his filmmaking to impress viewers with his brilliance or the brilliance of his performers, but to make his audience share something of his own simultaneously tragic and ecstatic vision. “Make visible what, without you, might never have been seen,” he wrote (Bresson 1977, 39). Accordingly, the dramatic elements in Bresson’s films are built up painstakingly, often through a pattern of repetition-cum-variation. There are no grand finales, since the truth of any of his works lies in every single frame. At the conclusion of a Bresson film one feels, above all else, that one has been brought face to face with an essential problem or condition, and that whatever the specific nature of this director’s world-view, the overall effect has been a deeply human, finally humane one – utterly free of condescension and utterly full of seriousness.

Bresson’s subject, despite the lack of reference in his work to contemporary events, was clearly life in the twentieth century. Yet, in answer to a question about his attitude toward the realistic treatment of that subject, he responded: “I wish and make myself as realistic as possible, using only raw material taken from real life. But I aim at a final realism that is not ‘realism’” (Braudy 1978, 92). And who is to say that his holy trinity of humanity, nature, and the object world did not attain a higher truth than the one attained

through the pragmatic, empirical approach adopted by most of his contemporaries? Where they saw the operation of freedom of choice as inevitably joined to the necessity for action, Bresson saw free will operating in tandem with divine grace. Where his contemporaries in the film world saw the material interconnection of all things, he saw the mystical unity of the spiritual and the material. Where they saw man's intuition into the fathomable workings of nature, Robert Bresson saw man's communion with supernatural forces that are ultimately beyond our ken.

Indeed, his work seems to play out the sentiment once voiced by Leon Bloy, the turn-of-the-twentieth-century writer who helped bring about the Catholic renaissance in France that certainly marked Bresson's life and thinking: "The only tragedy is not to be a saint" (Maritain 1949, 117; my translation). On the other hand, the force for Bresson of such a sentiment may have been the product of his reaction against the Sartrean existentialism that dominated postwar French cultural life – the very period of Bresson's emergence as a major filmmaker. However, although spiritual essence clearly precedes material existence in his films of that period, it could be argued that the films after *Au hasard*, *Balthazar* incline toward the reverse, that *Mouchette*, *A Gentle Creature*, *Lancelot du Lac*, *The Devil, Probably*, and *L'Argent* go beyond existentialism in their chronicling of a total collapse of moral and ethical values in a world gone madly materialistic. *L'Argent*, in fact, appears to be an endorsement of Bloy's own early attack on the corruptibility of money.

Au hasard, *Balthazar* itself was a radical departure in many ways, not least because as an allegory of the Christian story, its use of a donkey was the first indication that Bresson had left behind narratives with noble figures in the mold of the country priest, Fontaine of *A Man Escaped*, and Joan of Arc. In addition, as a passive creature – beaten and broken in, nearly worked to death, then hailed as a saint, only to be shot to death by an officer of the law – Balthazar prefigured the protagonists of much of the later work, who, out of indifference or weakness, fail to significantly affect the world around them. *Lancelot du Lac*, for example, is an account of the ineluctable collapse of the age of chivalry, a theme that seems to prefigure the *la ronde*-like study of the nefarious effects of capitalism in *L'Argent* as well as the dissolution of Western values in *The Devil, Probably* (where the mockery of all "solutions" to personal and social ills – whether religious, political, or psychological – affirms a global, apocalyptic pessimism, symbolized by the youthful protagonist's hiring of someone to kill him as a gesture of protest against humanity as well as society).

For her part, *Mouchette*, the loveless, abused, humiliated young daughter of an alcoholic father and a dying mother, leads so relentlessly oppressive a life (one that includes rape by the village poacher she has befriended) that, rather than resist it, she drowns herself in shame and misery. The "femme douce" also commits suicide – at the start of the film. Having thereby drained

the drama from *A Gentle Creature* (as well as the color, in this his first color film, which is composed almost entirely of blue and green tones) by beginning it at the end, Bresson then proceeds to reconstruct the woman and her husband's impossible relationship through a series of flashbacks that show the unbridgeable gulf between them.

Yet this issue of "dark" versus "light" Bresson warrants further examination. For while we continue to divide the corpus of his work into the early films that end in redemption and the later ones of increasing pessimism (even as I earlier did the same), the force of the latter should inspire us to examine the former more closely. Can we dismiss the possibility, for instance, that however deeply spiritual the country priest is, his consumption of bad wine and his poor diet constitute an unconscious death wish that allows him to feel closer to the sufferings of Christ with which he identifies? Bresson himself was no less seized by, and passionate about, his art, every facet of which was infused by his personal and religious convictions, down to the very shaping and cutting of the world in his own image – an enactment of the artist as God that exhibits more control over the filmic universe than the God of most religions exerts over the actual one.

What closer examination reveals is that, however assured and clear Bresson's narratives (early or late) seem – and their lean, uncluttered style certainly contributes to such an impression – they are never as simple as critical judgment has often made them appear. The darkness that characterizes almost every Bresson film from *Au hasard*, *Balthazar* to *L'Argent* is already discernible, I would argue, in the image of human nature to be found in *Angels of the Streets*, where the corruptions of the world outside can barely be contained within the convent. From the beginning, careful viewing reveals, Bresson's characters are consumed by an arrogance and pride that have the capacity to destroy. It is precisely these flaws or sins that the novice Anne-Marie must overcome in *Angels of the Streets* before she can die and redeem the convict Thérèse. By contrast, Hélène, the *femme fatale* of *Les Dames du Bois de Boulogne*, unrepentantly believes that she has taken revenge on her former lover by luring him into marriage to a woman who (she later tells him) is a prostitute, only because, in her all-consuming narcissism, she cannot fathom the possibility of genuine, all-transcendent love between two human beings.

Spiritual Style

Ironically, it was American champions of Bresson who, taking their cues from the subject matter of the first half of his career, christened his style "spiritual" (Susan Sontag, among others) or "transcendental," a term first used by the critic-turned-filmmaker Paul Schrader. (The great French Catholic film critic André Bazin, who did not live to see most of Bresson's films, himself championed *Diary of a Country Priest* – in an essay hailed by his

English translator, Hugh Gray, as “the most perfectly wrought piece of film criticism” [Gray 1967, 7] he had ever read – as “a film in which the only genuine incidents, the only perceptible movements, are those of the life of the spirit . . . [offering] us a new dramatic form that is specifically religious – or, better still, specifically theological” [Bazin 1967, 136].) These terms continue to haunt anyone writing on Bresson, be it in light of the nascently cynical tone of the earlier films or the decidedly more cynical one of the later pictures. For Bresson, in fact, was out of sync with the ecumenical spirit that seized the Catholic Church in the 1960s, and while many of his films employ Catholic imagery, they are almost all – early as well as late – characterized by a particularly harsh strain of religious thinking closer to that of one of the novelist Georges Bernanos, one of whose novels, as previously indicated, inspired perhaps Bresson’s best-known film, *Diary of a Country Priest*. In it, the gray gloom of the French provinces is matched by an unrelieved focus on bleakness and cruelty. For Bresson’s priest is no cheery, uplifting humanist but instead a man whose youth belies an uncanny ability to penetrate the troubled hearts of parishioners who hardly acknowledge his existence, and whose fierce dedication parallels his own slow death from cancer.

Tone, theme, and point of view aside, Bresson’s films, from first to last, trace one of the most disciplined, intricate, and satisfying artistic achievements in the history of the medium. No less than D. W. Griffith and Sergei Eisenstein, Robert Bresson sought to advance the art of the cinema, to create a purely filmic narrative form through a progressive refinement of this young art’s tools and strategies – through the mastery, in his words, of “cinematography” over the “cinema.” Like a dutiful student of Rudolf Arnheim and the theory that called for film to free itself from the established arts and discover its “inherent” nature, Bresson discarded, film by film, the inherited conventions – not only the actor but the dramatic structure of scenes in favor of a series of neutral sequences, often using sound to avoid visual redundancy. This meant not only later renouncing such memorable performances as those of Renée Faure and Sylvie (Louise Sylvain) in *Angels of the Streets* and Marie Casarès in *Les Dames du Bois de Boulogne*, but even L. H. Burel’s atmospheric cinematography in *Diary of a Country Priest*, which he came to think was too picturesque. Moreover, the emphasis on precise framing and editing in the films that followed – *A Man Escaped*, *Pickpocket*, and *The Trial of Joan of Arc* – was a move toward an increasingly minimal filmmaking style in which every gesture, every image, every word counted.

For Bresson, getting to the essence of each narrative was synonymous with getting to the essence of the medium. As he himself declared, his films were not made “for a stroll with the eyes, but for going right into, for being totally absorbed in” (Bresson 1977, 47). So much is this the case that Susan Sontag was moved to characterize the very *watching* of Bresson’s films as an experience requiring a discipline and reflection on the viewer’s part as

demanding as the tests of will his protagonists had to endure (Sontag 2009, 32). The reward for such discipline and reflection is the feeling, as Gilbert Adair wrote in *Flickers* of the Japanese director Kenji Mizoguchi, that “his films are among those for whose sake the cinema exists” (Adair 1995, 121).

***L'Argent* and Other Bresson Films**

One of those films is his last, *L'Argent*, by which time Bresson was probably the oldest active director in the world. But his evolution had been in striking contrast to that of his contemporaries. Even if we do not take into account those filmmakers whose declines had been conspicuous, most of the senior statesmen of the cinema showed in their later phases a serenity of style, an autumnal detachment from reality, which compares with that of elder artists in other genres such as the drama, the novel, and poetry. Not so with Bresson. *L'Argent*, his thirteenth film (freely adapted from Tolstoy's 1905 novella *The Counterfeit Note*), was made in essentially the same strict, tense, controlled style – here used in the depiction of extraordinary violence – that he used in *Angels of the Streets* in 1943.

Hence George-Louis Buffon was mistaken: style is not the man himself – as Buffon said it was in 1753 in his “Discourse on Style” (Roger 1997, 432) – it's the universe as seen by the man. (Many a disorderly person has been an artist with an orderly style.) But neither is style a separable system into which an artist feeds material. Van Gogh didn't look at the night sky and decide that it would be pretty to paint the constellations as whirls. And Joyce didn't decide it would be clever to describe that same sky as “the heaventree of stars hung with humid nightblue fruit” (Joyce 1992, 698). Neither artist had, in a sense, much choice. His style, of course, was refined through a lifetime and first drafts were not often final drafts, but the temper and vision of that style were given from the start.

Thus it's impossible to imagine Bresson *deciding* to make *L'Argent* as he did. On the basis of his career, we can assume that, at some time after he had read Tolstoy's story, his mind and imagination shaped the structure and look of his film in ways that his mind and imagination had long been doing. It's a kind of fatalism, I believe. Not all fine artists work in the same way all their lives: the Japanese director Yasujiro Ozu is one who did not. But some, like Bresson, do.

Consequently, you know, if you're familiar with Bresson's *oeuvre*, that *L'Argent* was made with non-actors. Moreover, he instructed his “models” to speak their lines and move their bodies without conscious interpretation or motivation, in a determined attempt on this director's part to keep them from psychologizing their characters. Bresson hated acting and often said so. He chose people instead who had what he considered the right personal qualities for their roles, and he said that he never used people twice because the

second time they would try to give him what he wanted in place of what they were. It's as if he were guided by Kleist's line that "Grace appears most purely in that human form which either has no consciousness at all or an infinite one: that is, in a puppet or in a god" (Kleist 2013, 47). Since Bresson couldn't employ gods, he got as close as possible to puppets – with non-actors. They enact the story of *L'Argent*, as of Bresson's other films, much as medieval townsfolk might have enacted a mystery or morality play, with little skill and much conviction.

Apart from the acting – or non-acting – you also know, if you've seen Bresson's films, that if the subject was contemporary (as it is in *L'Argent*), the sounds of metropolitan life were probably heard under the credits, as if to adumbrate the role that such sound, *any* sound, would play in the film to follow. You recall that the story was told with almost Trappist austerity and emotional economy, in such an elliptical, fragmentary, even lacunary way that only in its interstices can be found its poetry – indeed, much of its meaning. You recall as well that Bresson's camera fixed on places a moment before characters entered and remained a moment after they left, not only to include environment as a character but also to signify that humans are transient in the world; and you are aware that, in any one of his films, probably a chain of consequences would begin with an event seemingly unrelated to the conclusion.

In our time, when we are saturated more than ever with images of the most superficially realistic kind, particularly on television, Bresson thus tried to wash our eyes and lead us to see differently – to bathe our vision, as it were, in an alternative reality. Moreover, his distrust of words – Bresson's laconic dialogue is almost as characteristic of his work as the neutral tone of its delivery – often made him choose characters (like Mouchette in the 1967 film of the same name, or like the truck driver of *L'Argent*) who have little or no ability to speak, and who therefore suffer their oppression in silence. And often we see as little of them as we hear of their dialogue, for Bresson liked to focus his camera on a door through which a person passed or on a "headless" body approaching a door, turning the knob, and passing through. (His rare moving shots were usually reserved for that kind of traversal.)

When it isn't doorknobs in *L'Argent*, it's cell doors – in prisons that are so clean and well-run, so intensely physical as well as aural, so much a part of society's organization, that they freeze the marrow. (The suggestion, of course, is that humanity itself, inside or outside prison, is trapped behind four walls. Possibly prisons figure so often in Bresson's films – in addition to *L'Argent*, they can be found in *A Man Escaped*, *Pickpocket*, *The Trial of Joan of Arc*, and as early as *Angels of the Streets* – and are the most emblematic of his décors, because he himself spent eighteen months in a German P.O.W. camp during World War II.) Bresson thus put places, things, and people on virtually the same plane of importance. Other directors do this, too – Antonioni,

for instance. But with Antonioni, it's to show that the physical world is inescapable, almost a person itself; Bresson, by contrast, wanted to show that the world and the things in it are as much a part of God's mind as the people in the world.

***L'Argent*: Money, Money**

Let me address the world of *L'Argent* in a bit more detail, because its pattern is simple yet common in the work of Bresson: a pebble is moved, and the eventual result is an avalanche. A teenaged Parisian from a wealthy home asks his father for extra money, besides his weekly allowance, to repay a debt. The money is refused. The teenager then consults a friend of his age and station, who has counterfeit banknotes (no explanation of the source) and knows where to pass them (no explanation of the knowledge). The youths pass off a false note to a woman in a camera shop. When her husband discovers the fraud, he passes off the note to the driver of an oil-delivery truck. The truck driver is subsequently framed as a passer of counterfeit money and the ensuing scandal causes him to lose his job. In order to continue supporting his family, he tries driving a getaway car for some criminals, but their heist doesn't go so well and he is sent to prison for three years. While incarcerated, his child dies of diphtheria and his wife leaves him. Crazy upon release from jail, the former husband and father turns to theft, violent crime, and eventually cold-blooded murder before turning himself in to the police – for good, as it were.

This seemingly random and ultimately sensationalistic story holds because, as in all of Bresson, the focus is not on the story, it's on matters of which we get only some visible-audible evidence. That is to say, to the devoutly Catholic Bresson, evil is as much a part of life as good, and what happens here en route to God's judgment is not to be taken as proof or disproof of God's being. Though the sentimentalist in Tolstoy (on display in *The Counterfeit Note*) would disagree, God does not prove, does not want to prove, his existence by making the good prosper and the wicked suffer, by aiding the morally weak or rescuing the ethically misled. (The most religious person in the film becomes a murder victim.) This world is, after all, only this world, says *L'Argent*; God alone knows everything, the suffering of the faithful and also the suffering of the sinner.

Bresson's world-view is well conveyed here by his two cinematographers, Emmanuel Machuel and Pasqualino de Santis (the latter of whom had worked for Bresson before). All the colors look pre-Raphaelite, conveying the innocent idea of blue or red or any other color. And this fits Bresson's "innocent" method: violence runs through *L'Argent* but is never seen. When

the truckdriver commits a double murder, for instance, all we see of it is the tap water that runs red in a basin for a few moments as he washes his hands. When he commits ax killings, the only stroke we see occurs when he hits a lamp. This “innocence” extends to the last sequence of the film. The driver, who has killed off a family in an isolated country house, goes to an inn, where he sits and has a cognac. It is then that he turns himself in: by calmly walking over to some policemen standing at the bar and confessing his crimes. In the next shot we are with the crowd outside the inn door. As they watch, the police come out, taking the driver away. We never see him again; instead, the camera places us with the innocent bystanders, who continue to watch the door, watching for more police, more prisoners. But there will be no more, and the film ends on the image of the crowd, waiting and watching – the constant disposition of every moviegoer as well, to be sure, but, even more so, the habitual stance of the audience of any Bresson film, where the emphasis falls on the watching (and the hearing) *while* you’re waiting.

The other remarkable aspect of Bresson’s *oeuvre*, aside from the consistency of his style, can be deduced from the content of *L'Argent* as summarized above: to wit, forty years after his real beginning in 1943 with *Angels of the Streets*, his films still had the power to create scandal. Even as *Pickpocket* was rejected by many at the time of its release (but hailed by New Wave filmmakers like François Truffaut, Jean-Luc Godard, and Louis Malle, then making their first films, as a landmark in modern cinema), *L'Argent* was booed by the audience at Cannes in 1983 despite the fact that it won the Grand Prize for creative cinema (together with Andrei Tarkovsky’s *Nostalgia*).

The director himself faced a violent reaction when he received the award from Orson Welles – himself no stranger to rejection and scandal. The irony in this instance was that Bresson, the avowed Catholic and a political conservative, was attacked by all the right-wing newspapers in France that in the past had defended his films. At the core of this attack, one can detect an exasperation with, even a hostility toward, an artist whose lack of commercial success had nonetheless never made him sacrifice one iota of his integrity, and who always maintained his rigorous artistic standards.

In Summa, Bresson

It is sometimes forgotten that part of Bresson’s integrity – his moral or ethical rigor, if you will – was his insistence on treating his share of socially as well as linguistically marginalized characters, in such films as *Pickpocket*, *Au hasard*, *Balthazar*, and *Mouchette*. Yet no one would ever have called him a working-class naturalist like Luc and Jean-Pierre Dardenne, whose pictures, even though they sometimes have an implicit Christian component (especially

Rosetta [1999] and *The Son* [2002]), are closer in subject to the social-problem play tradition of the European naturalistic theater. Bresson, by contrast, was a transcendental stylist (to use Paul Schrader's term) concerned to unite the spiritualism of religious cinema with realism's redemption of the physical world in its organic wholeness if not otherness, its inviolable mystery, and its eternal primacy or self-evidence.

From first to last, then, Bresson's films trace one of the most disciplined, intricate, and satisfying artistic achievements in the history of the medium. No less than D. W. Griffith and Sergei Eisenstein, Robert Bresson sought to advance the art of the cinema, to create a purely filmic narrative form through a progressive refinement of this young art's tools and strategies – through the mastery, in his words, of “cinematography” over the “cinema.” Like a dutiful student of Rudolf Arnheim and the theory that called for film to free itself from the established arts and discover its “inherent” nature, Bresson discarded, film by film, the inherited conventions – not only the actor but the dramatic structure of scenes in favor of a series of neutral sequences, often using sound to avoid visual redundancy. For Bresson, getting to the essence of each film narrative was synonymous with getting to the essence of the medium.

To be sure, not everyone agrees about Bresson's stature and importance: he did, and does, have his dissenters, certainly among members of the popular press but also among serious critics like Vernon Young, Stanley Kauffmann, and John Simon. You can understand the dissent against Bresson when you consider some critics' comparison of Bresson's style to that of such modernist atonal composers as Arnold Schoenberg, Anton Weber, or Olivier Messiaen, at the same time as they point out that, unlike conventional filmmakers, Bresson was working in an intellectual, reflective manner rather than an unreflective, visceral one. Similarly, these critics sometimes pair Bresson and Mark Rothko, whose paintings, with their large canvases of strong color and a minimum of variation, are known for the spareness if not poverty of their expression – like Bresson's films. To fully understand the dissent against Bresson, however, you also have to remember that his Catholicism, nay, his religiosity itself, was out of step in the existentialist-dominated intellectual climate of 1950s France, even as it was unfashionable in the materialist-obsessed, know-nothing culture of 1980s America.

Still, to see Bresson's films – to see only *L'Argent*, in fact – is to marvel that other directors have had the ingenuity to evolve such elaborate styles and yet restrict them to superficial messages. It might even be said that watching a Bresson film is to risk conversion *away* from the cinema. His meaning is so clearly inspirational, and his treatment so remorselessly interior, that he shames the extrinsic glamour and extravagance of so many movies. Shame on them, and God bless him.

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