



ROBERT BRESSION

A PASSION
FOR FILM
TONY PIPOLO



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Tony Pipolo



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To Carole Pipolo and Isabel Pipolo

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The artist's essential task is not simply to make the most effective work possible, as viewed *in* its kind. It is rather to achieve a view of the world superior to all other views.

—Wayne C. Booth, introduction to Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, characterizing Bakhtin's position

Introduction

Perhaps the most highly regarded French filmmaker after Jean Renoir, Robert Bresson sustained a reputation as an uncompromising artist throughout his career. In 1957 the director Jacques Rivette remarked, "There is only one [French] film-maker left who has not sold out, and that's Bresson."¹ At the time Bresson had made only four films, but the claim proved prophetic. Few filmmakers have clung so tenaciously to the same thematic concerns, exerted such obsessive control over every aspect of their work, and adhered to as harsh a vision of the world. Like Carl-Theodor Dreyer, another idiosyncratic filmmaker sometimes drawn to religious subjects and whose career also spanned nearly half a century, Bresson's rigorous standards limited his production. In forty years he made only thirteen films.

This book is a highly personal response to these films and to the artistry of their maker. It presumes that Bresson was an extraordinary and unique figure and that the products of his creative imagination, devotion to craft, and lifelong commitment to filmmaking are expressions and extensions of his beliefs, his convictions, and his perceptions of the world. As with Pier Paolo Pasolini or Jean Cocteau, the latter of whom once collaborated with

Bresson, or any other idiosyncratic film artist, to study his films is to study the person. It is as true of Bresson as it is of these others to say that “a film, whatever it might be, is always its director’s portrait.”² Because of this I have found it useful to adopt the tenets and tools of psychoanalytic investigation in an effort to understand this connection in a richer, more productive way. It is neither my desire nor my intent to apply this approach indiscriminately. At all times it is the aesthetic and thematic values of the work with which I am concerned and how these values reflect the person and philosophy of Bresson. As there is not yet a biography of Bresson, even in French, one must look to the films themselves for insights along these lines. Having admired them for more than half of my life, studied them closely over the past twenty years, and taught them to graduate and undergraduate students, it is my conviction that they are as close to providing an aesthetic biography of the filmmaker as is the work of any great artist.

Bresson occupied a singular position in international cinema. His pursuit of a “pure” film aesthetic not only placed him outside the mainstream, but led him to renounce even those pleasures afforded by the art cinema of his contemporaries. No star personalities grace his work as they do those of Roberto Rossellini (Ingrid Bergman), Michelangelo Antonioni (Monica Vitti), or Federico Fellini (Marcello Mastroianni). Determined to free the cinema of any residue of the theater, Bresson rejected professional actors, minimized dialogue, and eschewed the angst-ridden psychology typical of Ingmar Bergman and Bernardo Bertolucci. His films display neither the self-conscious malaise of Antonioni nor the Brechtian/Marxist reflexivity of Godard. And in his mission to purge the cinema of visual excess, he avoided the elaborate *mise-en-scène* and extended camera movements so beloved of Claude Chabrol, Kenji Mizoguchi, Max Ophuls, and Luchino Visconti.

Bresson’s films once divided audiences and critics alike, even those who patronized film festivals. Susan Sontag, an early American admirer, declared that he had been “firmly labeled as an esoteric director [who] has never had the attention of the art-house audience that flocks to Buñuel, Bergman, Fellini—though he is a far greater director than these.”³ This was before *Au hasard Balthazar* (1966), perhaps his strangest film. Judging from the success of an international retrospective in 1998, the situation has changed. Yet the bleakness of Bresson’s vision did not abate, as his last films, *Lancelot of the Lake* (1974), *The Devil Probably* (1977), and *L’Argent* (1983), confirm. The continued resistance to his work still seems tied to a moral rigor completely averse to the permissive relativism of contemporary life.

Bresson’s concern with ethical behavior and how to conduct a moral life was consistent with the climate in the aftermath of the Second World War,

when traditional value systems were challenged by philosophies such as Sartrean existentialism. But he was not the only filmmaker who witnessed the crises brought on by that war and whose works have a religious cast. Rossellini's *Flowers of St. Francis*, released around the time of *Diary of a Country Priest* (1951), was preceded and followed by a series of films, in which the director explored existential conditions from a deeply spiritual point of view.⁴ It was perhaps in response to this atmosphere that Bresson's protagonists of the 1940s and 1950s—in *Les Anges du péché* (1943), *Diary*, and *A Man Escaped* (1956)—are moved to alter the inner lives of others. Although this theme seems to disappear in his later films, a crucial component of it remains: Bresson's attraction to young people is as indisputable as their iconographic importance to his work. If, amid his darkest conjurations, there is a glimpse of light and hope, it is carried by the radiant faces and indelible presences of the young, even those, such as the wife in *Une femme douce* (1969) and Charles in *The Devil Probably*, haunted by death.

As this might suggest, from *Les Anges du péché* to *L'Argent*, Bresson explored the theme of innocence and corruption, the dividing line of which is frequently sexual initiation. Although sex is not in the foreground of the films, its presence is often cause for distress. It torments Chantal's adolescence in *Diary of a Country Priest*, thrusts Marie into shame and humiliation in *Au hasard Balthazar*, and leads to the young protagonist's suicide in *Mouchette* (1967). But though sex may be the bridge between a state of relative innocence and the fallen world, Bresson did not, like Georges Bernanos, one of his literary sources, harbor an idealized view of early childhood. As his unfulfilled project to film the Book of Genesis attests, he appeared to acknowledge the concept of original sin.

It should not be surprising, then, that several of his characters are virgins, most notably the protagonist of *The Trial of Joan of Arc* (1962), the fifteenth-century heroine who, from all reports, convinced a horde of military figures, politicians, court royalty, and theologians that she could lead an army and drive the English out of France. No small part of the political considerations that both Church and State figures exploited was Joan's confirmed virginity, a state believed by ecclesiastics and common people alike to permit privileged access to God. Later, in order for the Church and its English allies to condemn her as a witch so as to tarnish the legitimacy of the king she crowned, they needed to falsify her claim or deprive her of her virginity.

The virginal was also a quality that Bresson sought in those who impersonate his characters. Not only should they lack sufficient life experience to preclude an embittered demeanor, but they had to be equally inexperienced in front of the camera. So adamant was he about this that he virtually never

used the same people twice. Having taken something precious from them, he once said, he could no longer see them as “unspoiled.” How this bears directly on his aesthetic and his approach to actors and acting will be discussed later.

Never wholly innocent, however, Bresson’s characters manifest that hubris identified by Aristotle as the tragic flaw of the protagonists of Sophoclean drama, and in Catholic theology as the most serious of the seven deadly sins. Even, in fact especially those bent on saving the spiritual lives of others must wrestle with the prideful aspect of religious fervor. The novice Anne-Marie, the country priest, and Joan are stubbornly devoted to their missions, thorns in the side of everyone around them. This speaks to a primary tension in Bresson’s narratives between the relationship of individual will and destiny. The idea that human history follows a prescribed course, fairly explicit in the films up to 1962, remains discernible, I believe, in all subsequent films. The struggle is between the apparent course of this plan and each character’s acceptance of or resistance to it, played out in terms of how he or she comes to recognize and renounce pride. Perhaps because of this, some of Bresson’s narratives have been described as tracing a “negative route to God.”

Just as Sophocles’ characters defy the gods until they accept their destiny, Bresson’s move through scenarios, the ends of which have already been written. From first film to last the relationship between free will and determinism is dynamic, even when it is not always immediately evident. Bresson does not so much pose the question of whether lives are ruled by independent will or design as he assumes the paradoxical fusion of the two, echoing the contradiction at the heart of Sophoclean tragedy. When the chorus asks the protagonist at the end of *Oedipus the King* who is responsible for his blindness, he exclaims that it was Apollo who ordained his agonies but “my hand . . . and mine alone” that dealt the blow.

In both his first film, *Les Anges du péché*, and his last, *L’Argent*, there is a reversal of character behavior in the final moments, something also true of *Les Dames du bois de Boulogne* (1945) and *Pickpocket* (1959). In each film the sense of design is both reinforced *and* contradicted by the inflexible trajectory of Bresson’s narrative structures and the compression of his filmic style. That is to say, the driven quality of the narrative and the style appears to personify a character’s independent will while, *at the same time*, each film moves inexorably to a foregone conclusion. This seeming contradiction, I would argue, is at the heart of Bresson’s cinema: the driven nature of his narratives is mirrored in the driven nature of his style.

Related to this is the role of coincidence, or seeming coincidence, in Bresson’s work. Peter Brooks notes an interesting contrast between Balzac and Flaubert and the role of coincidence in their plot structures. Whereas

Balzac turns a coincidental meeting into an “essential confrontation, where the actors play out everything that they represent, bringing a crisis and a change of position,” Flaubert’s coincidences in *Sentimental Education* are “non-essentialized, as they are de-dramatized: they are not confrontations, but simple encounters, unfolding the narrative as something close to pure metonymy without metaphoric arrest.”⁵

The precision of Bresson’s work is closer to Flaubert’s, yet coincidence in his films is tinged with destiny, the consequences, no doubt, of living in a world stained by original sin. His films may be “de-dramatized” and close to “pure metonymy,” but they are hardly “non-essentialized.” Chance encounters in Bresson are saturated with the taint of human cruelty and indifference, evidence of the flawed human condition and the fall from grace.

The Question of God

The question of Bresson’s personal convictions about God and the Catholic faith in which he was raised is difficult to answer, since, without a biography, one can only conjecture from the work and from remarks he made in interviews over the years. The more immediate question concerns the relationship of Bresson’s art to belief in God, and more specifically to the tenets of Catholic doctrine. Many critics and admirers of Bresson would prefer that such questions just go away. But as the words *design*, *destiny*, *inevitable course*, and *prescribed plan*—all of which have been used by critics of every stripe—suggest, Bresson’s cinema has always evoked the question of God. Whether convenient or not, politically correct or not, fashionable or not, or simply awkward for those who write about him, the question is unavoidable. God is not a side issue that surfaces in some films and not others in terms of its relevance to plot or a specific character. My argument in this book is that the question of God’s existence and everything that ensues from it bears directly and pervasively on Bresson’s thematic preoccupations, on his overall philosophy of human life and behavior, on the stylistic rigor of his films, and even on his use of *models* rather than professional actors.

Consider the moral severity of the films mentioned earlier. Although such a stance has been attributed to his Catholicism, there is no hard evidence that Bresson practiced the faith in his adult life. Nevertheless it would be difficult to deny that both Catholicism and faith left their marks on his thinking and his art, along with a perhaps heretical belief in predestination, as the implacable nature of his narratives strongly supports. Even his late films suggest an inability or an unwillingness to relinquish the idea of design

inflected by the Christian theory of history. This is something Bresson shared with Georges Bernanos, Feodor Dostoevsky, and Leo Tolstoy, whose works inspired more than half of his films. Like them, he was preoccupied with questions of good and evil, the existence of God, the relationship between body and soul, and that between personal and social morality. For him, as for Bernanos and Dostoevsky, the world is fallen and evil is intrinsic to the human condition, as present in the provinces as it is in the city, in the old as well as the young, the rich as well as the poor, the powerful as well as the weak. It was this obstinate posture that infuriated Leftist critics in such journals as *Positif* who declared Bresson out of touch with social and political reality.

The relation between God's will and human willfulness, and whether the latter is merely the unwitting instrument of the former, is central to Bresson's cinema. It is as true of his first film, *Les Anges du péché*, in which the protagonist hears "the word" that directs her actions and the course of the narrative, as it is of *L'Argent*, his last and most cynical film, in which there are subtle hints, as a minor character puts it, that "someone is looking out for [the protagonist] from afar." That the former is an original screenplay and the latter based on a novella by Tolstoy suggests that Bresson's interest in this theme predated and no doubt determined his choices of literary sources. Indeed, it would appear that he is merely echoing Christ when the latter prays to avoid the inevitable passion and death for which, according to Christian teaching, he came into the world.⁶

In Bresson's first six films the rigid stance was mitigated by a final moral or spiritual victory, which implied that the evils of the world could be "transcended," as Paul Schrader, another of Bresson's American admirers, expressed it. Beginning with *Au hasard Balthazar*, the possibility of such redemption seemed precluded; indeed, among the seven films in the later group, three, possibly four, end in the suicide of the protagonist. Though one might conclude that Bresson's vision had darkened considerably, the darkness, in fact, was always there. The images of French provincial life in *Balthazar* and *Mouchette* are no harsher than that of the village in *Diary of a Country Priest*, made sixteen years earlier. It is in *Diary* that we find the first apparent suicide, the character of the doctor, and enough evidence to wonder if the priest's spare diet and consumption of bad alcohol is also a form of slow suicide.

When Bresson was questioned upon the release of *Balthazar* about an alleged change in his thinking, whereby God was now absent from his work, he denied it: "Pronouncing the name of God isn't what makes him present. If he [Marie's father in that film] rejects God, then God exists, and therefore God is present."⁷ Perhaps he shared Bernanos's sense that "the feeling of God's absence was the only sign left of his existence."⁸ Indeed, Bresson's films,

thematically and formally, have always been about *apparent* absences, silences, and the invisible. The only “evidence” of God’s existence in *Diary* is the intense look on the face of Claude Laydu as he stares into a powerfully charged off screen space. The idea takes a different form in *Balthazar*, for what could be more indicative of the remoteness of God and redemption from contemporary life than making an animal a Christ figure, a fictional construct that, presumably, could no longer be convincingly embodied by a human being? In his incommunicability, no less than his saintliness, Balthazar embodies this remote, invisible, unknowable God.

Bresson’s work therefore bears the signs of one raised Catholic as well as the doubts of a deeply engaged modern thinker. Pivoting on the line between the two, his cinema reflects an authentic mind-set of mid-twentieth-century thought. Wondering how committed he was to a religious point of view seems an inescapable aspect of watching his films. One might say that the psychological tension in which the viewer is held is a result of the sense one has of Bresson’s ambivalence toward Catholicism along with his attraction to the vision it embodies. More strikingly and ambiguously than Ingmar Bergman’s, his films mirror the crisis of faith, moving relentlessly toward catharsis without relieving existential doubt.

The Catholic aspect of this vision is evident not only in the many allusions to specific rites of the Church, but in the way suffering is deemed an inevitable part of the fallen world and necessary for salvation, and death, far from a state to be feared, provides passage to the other world where the soul is freed from the prison house of the body and can achieve eternal life. This ruling idea in Christianity, from St. Paul to John Calvin, is implied even as late as *The Devil Probably* in which Charles, though contemplating suicide, admits a belief in eternal life. Those too quick to declare the cynicism in Bresson’s later films as proof of his renunciation of the faith they take for granted in the earlier ones underestimate the force of both tendencies in his work.

I would argue that the perceived shift in Bresson’s perspective is more a matter of emphasis and style than an alteration of fundamental convictions, and that the religious dimension is no more unmitigated up to *The Trial of Joan of Arc* than it is entirely absent from those films that defy or question the existence or relevance of God.⁹ It is my view that from *Mouchette* on, Bresson found a way to insinuate religious or spiritual motifs in his films through aspects of the narrative or cinematographic strategies without making their meaning explicit. Although such allusions might escape us initially, on closer examination they are discernible enough to warrant acknowledgment. In the analyses of the later films, I refer to these tendencies and the associations they evoke as Bresson’s *sacred indirections*, a term that allows such phenomena to

be understood as part rhetorical and part cinematographic and does not presume that they are conscious and deliberate in every case.

This does not preclude the paradox of his films, the grimness of which would *almost* not be out of place in the world of Maldoror, whose gaze encompasses the most hideous workings of nature, human and otherwise, and whose image of the Creator is that of a cruel and perverse torturer who revels in the sufferings of his creatures.¹⁰ So unredeemable does the world seem that “Maldoror will want to kill a child so that it may never reach the complete repulsiveness of the adult.”¹¹ Bresson’s view of the unavoidable corruption of childhood, similar to that of Bernanos, could be reconciled with this sentiment were it not for his presumed faith in a different Creator.

Indeed, in *Lancelot of the Lake* and *L’Argent* the idea of design is no less difficult to dismiss, as if both were enactments of that “theo-rhetoric” in which “primary religious dramas emerge *through the texture* of literary texts—they appear fleetingly but continually, in fragmentary and degraded forms but with constant urgency.”¹² Though God and faith are still at issue in *Lancelot*, it is less easy to see *L’Argent* in this vein. Yet it can be argued, contrary to what seems final evidence of Bresson’s doubt, that faith can counter the evils of the world, that the tendency toward sacred indirection affects the trajectory of this narrative as well. Perhaps more than any other film, *L’Argent* challenges the tension between a spiritual perspective and an aesthetics that remained a constant force of Bresson’s work. Anne-Marie’s unwavering determination to alter the life of the recalcitrant Thérèse in *Les Anges du péché* metamorphoses in *L’Argent* into the relentless drive of the film’s form and editing structure to reach its apotheosis, in which another last-minute surrender to the Law is the external sign of internal spiritual rupture. That Bresson said while shooting *L’Argent*, “I felt I was doing things more intuitively,” suggests how persistent and deeply embedded his moral and aesthetic convictions were.¹³

What compels the viewer, then, in Bresson’s work? Is it an example, as Nietzsche said of higher culture, of the “spiritualization of cruelty”? Or is it closer to the severest of Athenian and Shakespearean tragedies, in which the light and ritual of art transform the suffering of the world into a contemplative spectacle? In the *Poetics* Aristotle tells us that although the sight of certain things gives us pain, we enjoy looking at imitations of them. Films are capable of mimesis beyond what Aristotle could have imagined, yet Bresson’s work, though committed to the inherent realism of the medium, places the concept of imitation in question. It is therefore, as with any great artist, to his style that we must look for the key to his unparalleled achievement.

The Question of Style

Significant form is a matter, above all, of reduction—of saying complex things in the fewest syllables, with nuance and implication doing most of the work. Economy is the guarantor not simply of aesthetic force—the lapidary, the aphoristic—but of truth.... Why should one brush mark be necessary when twenty would do.

—T. J. Clark, *The Sight of Death: An Experiment in Art Writing*

What should we call the style of a filmmaker who was sometimes drawn to religious subjects, determined to rid his work of dramatic and narrative excess, and bent on perfecting filmic form through the refinement of cinematographic properties? Can one word or concept embrace all of these aims and the entire body of work? The filmmaker Eric Rohmer said he “didn’t know what category to put Bresson in. You could very well say that he is above categories.”¹⁴ Thus while Bresson was bent on distilling and stripping down filmic form and purging it of dependence on the theatrical, he was nevertheless deeply committed to literature.

In addition to Diderot, Bernanos, Dostoevsky, and Tolstoy, he adapted a prison memoir for *A Man Escaped* and used historical documents for *The Trial of Joan of Arc* and various medieval legends for *Lancelot of the Lake*. Of the films credited with original screenplays, only *Les Anges du péché*, with a screenplay by the playwright Jean Giradoux, and *The Devil Probably*, written by Bresson, are virtually free of preexisting sources. *Au hasard Balthazar* draws much of its plot, theme, and cast of characters from Dostoevsky’s *The Idiot* and Apuleius’ *The Golden Ass*; *Pickpocket* barely disguises its debt to *Crime and Punishment*. In every case Bresson cut to the essence of the work, casting away everything that distracted from the fundamental questions with which all of his films are concerned.

Writing about the first half of Bresson’s career, Susan Sontag distinguished the “spiritual” quality that she believed resulted from his stripping down to essentials, from the “explicit religious point of view” to which she believed he was committed.¹⁵ In light of subsequent film history, this must be qualified. Over the past thirty years the work of many filmmakers, mostly European, has assimilated key elements of Bresson’s films: tightness of narrative and editing structure, paucity of dialogue, intensity of focus, minimal acting, and overall sparseness.¹⁶ This late twentieth-century European film style is convincing

evidence of Bresson's influence, a testament to his ambition to chasten the art of the cinema or, as he put it, to distinguish the *cinema* as it was generally practiced from *cinematography*, his word for the art he practiced.

Not surprisingly, what is not prevalent in the work of those he influenced but is all over the place in Bresson is God. One must wonder, then, whether describing his style as "spiritual," however abstrusely we use the word, would have occurred to anyone had there not also been an implicit religious dimension. The Catholic André Bazin, writing eloquently on *Diary of a Country Priest*, was more struck by Bresson's marriage of literature and cinema, using words like abstraction and stylization and reserving spiritual to describe three specific moments in that film.¹⁷

Before becoming a filmmaker, Paul Schrader wrote a study of what he called "transcendental style" in film, which included Bresson.¹⁸ Describing the films as pursuing a certain stasis linked to sacred art, this style seems more connected to the religious in that the films climax in a transcending of the everyday that bestows spiritual meaning retroactively. Like Sontag, Schrader does not examine Bresson's films after *Joan of Arc* and implies that they might not qualify as "transcendental," which suggests that the category is not comprehensive enough to account for all of Bresson's art. I would argue that the endings of Bresson's films do achieve a transformative *effect*, which, through the coalescence of moral, emotional, and psychological tensions that pervade the narrative, leads the viewer to a higher plane of comprehension. The last words of the priest, read over the soundtrack as a cross fills the screen in *Diary of a Country Priest*; the triumphant walk of Fontaine and Jost into the night paced to the "Kyrie" of Mozart's *Mass in C-minor* in *A Man Escaped*; the disappearance of Joan's body from the stake accompanied by a drum roll in *The Trial of Joan of Arc*; the gentle movement of the water over Mouchette's drowned body to the strains of Monteverdi's *Magnificat*; the sheep and their clanging bells surrounding the dying Balthazar: these are memorable crystallizations of thematic and aesthetic resonance, although none of them involves a character reversal. The effect differs from the idea of "transcendence" in that it does not preclude psychological credibility and, particularly in the later films, may coexist with a certain cynicism.

Recent studies indicate that terms such as spiritual and transcendental have not been abandoned, although the more ambiguous nature of the later films has made it even more difficult to define the terms clearly.¹⁹ As a result, a cloud of unknowing has enshrouded the Bresson persona and filmography, making it difficult to see, much less write about, the roles played by psychology and sexuality in the films. An investigation of these sheds light not only on the subject matter and moral tenor of Bresson's work, but on the asceticism of his style, his insistent use of nonprofessionals, his "models," and on the filmmaker himself.

From *Diary* on, in fact, we might say that Bresson did not simply discover the means by which he would impose his vision of the world; he became a God-like author of that vision, whose compulsive control over every facet of each film—a stance by definition antithetical to the egoistic personalities of actors—effectively *re-created* the world in the image and manner in which he believed it *was* created. That nothing is left to chance in the construction of his films echoes the idea that human lives are predetermined. In light of this, it is not an exaggeration to suggest that Bresson, like Bernanos, may have felt “called” to his vocation and that, regardless of what he believed, he behaved as if he were one of God’s chosen messengers.

The only way to justify such a claim is to examine in depth the narrative, thematic, psychological, stylistic, and cinematographic richness of Bresson’s work. My approach in this book is to consider every film a chapter in the unfolding of Bresson’s convictions and in the refinement of his craft, even the early films often characterized as not yet “Bressonian.” Though they might be seen within the grand tradition of classic French cinema, *Les Anges du péché* and *Les Dames du bois de Boulogne* are underrated gems that reveal Bresson’s efforts to infuse the conventions of the cinema with a quality that elevates both above the confines of melodrama. As a result, they already embody, thematically and structurally, the theme of spiritual regeneration.

As Bresson moved on, the drive to hone those conventions became inseparable from the moral convictions underlying the work. The rigorous results of the former allow us to view him in the context of modernism, as it was defined by Clement Greenberg, one of its foremost witnesses: “The essence of modernism lies, as I see it, in the use of the characteristic methods of a discipline to criticize the discipline itself, not in order to subvert it, but in order to entrench it more firmly in its area of competence.”²⁰ Consider this in light of a declaration in Bresson’s own small bible of film aesthetics: “A sigh, a silence, a word, a sentence, a din, a hand, the whole of your model, his face, in repose, in movement, in profile, full face, an immense view, a restricted space, each thing exactly in its place: your only resources.”²¹

Although Bresson’s style increasingly distilled or eliminated much of what comprised conventional narrative cinema, few narrative filmmakers have so persistently worked toward the “entrenchment” Greenberg notes. His aim was neither to subvert the illusionism of film nor to create an aesthetic of deficits. As his statement conveys, he wanted to clarify and intensify what we see and hear, to sharpen our appreciation of film’s powers of articulation. The list just cited evidences not only the discipline Bresson brought to his craft but *the sense of equality* he ascribed to each and every element of a film. This cannot be overstated. Bresson never formally theorized his ideas about the

cinema, but if his approach can be said to have an affinity with anyone's theory, it might be Pasolini's idea that "cinema expresses reality with reality.... It is nothing more than the 'written' manifestation of a natural, total language, which is the acting of reality."²²

In regard to the second point, that the urge to discipline the medium was inseparable from his underlying moral convictions, consider the words often used to characterize Bresson's efforts: *chastening, cleansing, purging, purifying, renunciation*. They might easily apply to the labors of a novice entering the religious life, fired by the belief that to reach spiritual perfection one must renounce the world and its pleasures. It is the theme and guiding principle of great mystics such as John of the Cross and Teresa of Avila. Such words remind us that Bresson was on a mission to create a form of cinema that would be the perfect instrument of his view of the world. In order to create it, he had to give up familiar pleasures. In the process he merged two missions: first, by ridding the cinema of what he believed did not belong to it, he created an object more suited to the interior core of his stories and the moral imperative that motivated them; second, in the process he provided a model of how to narrate a film in purely cinematographic terms. Although, like Pasolini, he founded his approach on the "natural" language of the world—the language of action, behavior, corporeality, and written and spoken words—he strove to concentrate the means of the cinema toward a more forceful enunciation of that *given* language to which we are generally indifferent.

Bresson's artistic method was not only about de-theatricalizing and refining the filmic object, but also about focusing the material world into a pristine embodiment of a singular idea: the progress of an individual, or "soul" as he might say, *through* the world. To this end, every image, every action, every word, every sound is in service. The paradox is that the more he disciplined the methods of his craft, the closer he came to creating a genuinely materialist cinema, and the more materialist it became, the closer it approached that condition some have labeled "spiritual" because it was sparer than the style of anyone else. As we will see, this strategy characterized his approach to acting as well; character is revealed not through the actor's expansive methods of internalizing and projecting feelings, but through the external, material signs of action and gesture. These are the idiosyncratic means of a truly unique modernist.

Cinematography in Action

Rapports, Bresson asserts in an early interview, is the essence of cinema. Although the word in French has a variety of connotations, he was referring

to the way everything in a film relates to everything else, that *rappports* were at the heart of the art of film. This may sound commonplace, but the fact that the average narrative movie includes actors, sets, and props, is lit in various ways, shot from specific camera angles, and edited in a particular order does not guarantee that all of these things relate meaningfully to each other. During their dominant years, Hollywood movies, with notable exceptions, shared the same look and moved at the same pace because studio films were designed, dressed, shot, and cut by art directors, set designers, cameramen, and editors under contract. These conditions did not always doom a film to predictability. In the hands of strong directors, those we call *auteurs*, the system could produce a more personal, high-quality product. A similar distinction was true of the European cinema.

When Bresson stressed the importance of the relationships of a film's concept to its images, its edits, its sounds, and its structure, he was drawing attention to what a work of film art *should* be, and so, though he used the same conventions that other filmmakers did, he concentrated their individual strengths, controlled their specific roles, and held them accountable to the aesthetic of necessity. To this end, his reduction of the material before the camera and his tailoring of every element to a specific purpose were ways to diminish the impact of those out-of-bound features to which most narrative films are prone. Cinematography and sound are thus also diluted in order to bring visual and audio elements to a condition purified of extraneous "chemicals."

Unlike most classic narrative cinema, Bresson's films after *Diary of a Country Priest* do not lay out settings and lead us from the general to the particular. They often begin with a detail in close-up, for example a hand engaged or about to be engaged in an action. The approach favors metonymy over the metaphorical resonance we see in the earlier films. In *Les Dames*, for example, the lovers meet for the first time by a waterfall, the site of a later, critical rendezvous that transforms their relationship; Hélène, the woman who engineers the plot, is seen ascending in the elevator while her victims are seen descending.

The great stylists of the medium use strong visual compositions to accumulate emotional and thematic impact. To recall the "Rembrandt" lighting and mise-en-scène of Dreyer's *Day of Wrath* (1943) or the deep focus shots in Welles's *Citizen Kane* (1941) is to confirm how brilliantly photographed compositional design, charged with symbolic significance, imprints an indelible picture on the eye and mind of the spectator. An entire sequence can be summoned by gazing at a still from such films. Though it would be presumptuous to insist that this is never true of Bresson, even after *Diary* it is much

less common; more important, it would not be a result of elaborate mise-en-scène, as is the case with Welles, Dreyer, and any number of filmmakers, in which a totalizing picture can be formed from a still that captures a moment. The very juxtaposition of these terms is instructive: *picture* connotes stasis, whereas *moment* connotes a temporal fragment. Bresson's films, moving unwaveringly in time, resist the seductive forces of inertia.

Mobile framing can be similarly distinguished. Tracking shots in *Day of Wrath* or in Mizoguchi's films deepen the connotations of the mise-en-scène, metaphorically linking the moving camera to such themes as fate, desire, or the transience of life, providing authorial commentary on the action. An example of this in early Bresson is the somberly paced tracking shot preceding the lovers who have ended their affair in *Les Dames*. In accord with the scaling down of stylistic flourish, Bresson eliminated such gestures by the mid-1950s, moving the camera only in brief runs to reframe a shot, and always in conjunction with a character's movements or perspective, creating what one scholar has called "the two-part shot."²³

Yet certain moments in later films suggest that his work was not *exclusively* metonymic. In the spirit of Peter Brooks's subtle distinction—namely, "narrative as something *close to* pure metonymy without metaphoric arrest" (italics mine)—some elements and objects in the films, though belonging to the world of the fiction, nevertheless assume metaphoric or symbolic value. The woods in *Mouchette* are a primal image of the harshness of provincial life, where animals are trapped and killed and Mouchette loses her virginity. Balthazar is a real animal, but also the repository of virtues of which the film's characters are bereft. But in those films with a documentary-like aspect—*A Man Escaped*, *Pickpocket*, *Joan of Arc*—the metonymic dominates, linked to the increased economy and precision Bresson pursued in the late 1950s and early 1960s.

Editing and Framing

Of all the elements of film that Bresson sought to refine, editing is perhaps the most critical, a category of *rappports* important not only to the rhythm of his films but to their underlying ethos. Bresson employed continuity editing, shot-countershot, and crosscutting, but they all take on an urgency that is anything but standard. Here lies the critical importance of *looks* in his films. With fierce clarity, their effect, figuratively speaking, is to empty the frame of any static pictorial tendency and direct us to the ongoing energies of the work, to each moment's *rapport* with the next. Gathering impetus befitting the surge of the narrative and its interstitial connection to form, looks are

not just the eyes but also the pulse of each film, “bind[ing] persons to each other and to objects.”²⁴ It is through Fontaine’s looks in *A Man Escaped*, including those not actually directed at an object but registering an alertness to a distant sound, that we experience the environment of the prison, attuned to every move and anticipating every cut that leads to his freedom. Looks are not the only generators of the cut, but they carry enough intensity even to penetrate and linger past a fade-out between shots. Along with hands and doors, looks achieve an iconographic status in Bresson’s work well beyond the norm.

An equally important, no less elevated convention is the elliptical cut. As early as *Les Anges* we see that this technique is used not only to collapse space and time in the interest of narrative economy, but as an instrument of each film’s thematic trajectory. In *Les Anges* key developments are elided, as if the film’s structure were ruled by the same urgency that seizes the protagonist, Anne-Marie. The moral force underlying this welding of narrative and filmic form is an important aspect of Bresson’s cinema.

Not least of the forces behind the effectiveness of editing in Bresson is the way each shot is framed to isolate an action that by its very thrust anticipates a cut. This becomes more prominent after *Diary*, when the style, drained of atmospheric and ornamental potential, concentrates on the primary action of a shot. Its centrality is enforced by a more exacting concern for the rightness of a camera angle and of the moment to cut, both dictated by the essence of an action and its connection to an adjacent action. The action, as implied above, may be simply the look of a protagonist so forcefully projected off screen by what Bresson called “the ejaculatory force of the eye” that it anticipates the cut. This efficient use of filmic elements creates the *impression* of the unrepeatability of each shot, a remarkable feature of Bresson’s work and no small contribution to its realistic dimension. Rather than depict, describe, or elaborate on action, the films are synonymous with action. A description of thirty or forty sequential shots from virtually any section of his films from the mid-1950s on would require one, two, or three transitive verbs per shot.

A Man Escaped and *Pickpocket* are exemplary in this respect, but even *Balthazar*, a more leisurely narrative with the most passive of protagonists, follows suit. The prologue, consisting of twenty-eight shots, contains twice as many actions and includes dialogue in only six shots. By this point (1966), the midriff of the body was as important as the face, since it privileges the pivotal section of the anatomy that governs movement and often displays what hands are doing. The action of the prologue is not primarily conveyed through expositional dialogue, but through each gesture, look, and action in succession.

The leanness of Bresson's style is bound to his use of sound, which he made especially acute in order to avoid visual redundancy and further condense the style: "When a sound can replace an image, cut the image or neutralize it."²⁵ In the last twenty minutes of *A Man Escaped* sound measures the spatial distances between the two prisoners and the guards and between the prisoners and the world beyond the prison. It marks the intervals between movements of the escapees as it does the duration of the entire operation. It materializes the dangers of the environment—the gravel crunched on the roof surface, the wires stretched across the walls. It both displaces and conceals action, such as the murder of a guard.

Beginning with his first color film, *Une femme douce*, sound assumes, more emphatically than it had previously, the critical role of bridging shots, replacing fades and dissolves, which color made it impossible to control. Overlapping sounds affect how we perceive the past and present of that narrative. In the tournament sequence of *Lancelot of the Lake*, the sound sometimes collapses the distinction between cause and effect, reinforcing the sense of the inevitable. In his late work sound is often the most pronounced of Bresson's strategies, the primary carrier of design, an instrument so intimately linked with editing as to further intensify the propulsion of the action. At several junctures in *L'Argent* the juxtaposition of sound and image or sound and sound carries the greater implications of the action.

Apart from their importance to narrative and theme, sounds have a startling eloquence. In *Lancelot* and *L'Argent* the tonic physicality of sounds bestows tactility to objects. Their resistance to being swallowed up in an illusory, nebulous flow renders them preternatural. From the first image of *L'Argent*, a close-up of an outdoor ATM machine, over which we hear street traffic, sounds are as calculated and isolated as images, their registration and textural effects precisely controlled. We cannot tune them out as we do the sounds of the world around us or in conventional movies. In some instances a sound beginning at the end of one shot belongs to and overlaps into the next. At other times the sound in a shot is faded out before the cut, leaving a second or two of silence as if to prepare us inwardly for the next shot. This too is apparent in the first shot of *L'Argent*, as the sounds of traffic diminish before the end of the credits. These moments, though brief, provide caesurae within the architecture of the soundtrack. Silent only in relation to what we hear before and after, they function as stressed intervals in a musical composition and assail the idea of an illusionary continuum in which the viewer is indifferently immersed.

It should not be surprising that spoken dialogue is subject to the same control. Bresson felt that voices were of paramount importance. He told more than one interviewer that he often telephoned a potential model even after seeing him or her to be sure that the voice suited the character he had in mind. One way to perceive the distinct quality of speech of Bresson's models is to listen to the dialogue without watching the film. The contrast between *Les Anges du péché* or *Diary of a Country Priest*, for example, and *Balthazar* or *Lancelot of the Lake* is the most obvious indicator of how this element changed. One senses in the first two an integration of speech and action; there is little or no disparity between the expression, tone, and projection of an utterance and its immediate effect on listeners. As a staple of classical cinema, speech, fusing the skills of acting and locution that we expect from highly trained professionals, belongs quite naturally to the world depicted. In the latter two films, however, dialogue has an estranged quality, not only because it is spoken by nonprofessionals, but as a result of the director's insistence that it be emptied of familiar expressivity. The meaning is clear, but the delivery tends to be directed past its target, "as if it were reported by someone else...where the character speaks as if he were listening to his own words...hence achieving a *literalness* of the voice, cutting it off from any direct resonance."²⁶ This is often compounded by the nature of the dialogue itself, composed of broken or unfinished phrases, sentences that seem to emerge from or go nowhere, and sudden, blunt exclamations. Here, as he has in every facet of his art, Bresson refuses to concede the ground to the naturalistic norm, making the sounds of the world, human and otherwise, as important as shots and editing, potent instruments of artistic signification.

Color

An important element of Bresson's last five films is color. As any film scholar concerned with style and aesthetics knows, trying to describe the role of color can be a doomed exercise since one must contend with the sad fact of film's mortality. Without access to mint-condition prints, or as close to that as possible, one is forced to watch prints with faded or distorted color. Even excellent quality DVDs are a mixed blessing, since they too are based on prints of varying quality, and, because DVDs are a different technology, they cannot duplicate the accuracy, density, subtlety, or temperature of a color as these are registered on celluloid. Often one must rely on memory and notes of the original to identify colors as accurately as possible. I have seen the rarest of Bresson's color films (*Four Nights of a Dreamer* [1971], *The Devil Probably*)

several times in original, pristine, or near pristine prints and have seen each film many times since in less than perfect prints, or on VHS or DVD. I have seen the others (*Une femme douce*, *Lancelot of the Lake*, and *L'Argent*) many more times in excellent quality prints as well as in other conditions and formats. No less than sound, color is carefully articulated, whether it establishes a pattern of thematic association, infuses a scene with an emotion suppressed in the dialogue and acting, or simply lends a vibrant sensuality to the world of the narrative. Although I make observations along these lines throughout the book where relevant, there is no gainsaying the difficulty of making confident assertions about this dimension of Bresson's last five films. If nothing else, I hope that this book plays a small part in encouraging producers and distributors to make new prints of all of Bresson's films and make them widely available.

The Model and Characterization

Commercial narrative films are often evaluated in terms of whether or not characters are realistically conceived and behave credibly, even though we know that actors have ready-made personas, including publicized private lives, that unavoidably bear upon their fictive incarnations and on the way audiences perceive characters and performances. This strange, unquestioned situation would not do for Bresson, whose initial experiences convinced him that the professional "actor in cinematography might as well be in a foreign country. He does not speak its language."²⁷

Certain films of the 1940s—*Brief Encounter* (1945), *Bicycle Thieves* (1947), and *Louisiana Story* (1948), all three of which once made Bresson's list of "the ten best movies" of all time and all released between *Les Dames* and *Diary*—must have influenced his thoughts about actors.²⁸ The first, with professionals, brought a new realism to the British cinema; the other two used nonactors as part of the neorealist and documentary movements, as did Rossellini in *Open City* (1945) and *Paisa* (1946). Rossellini used real monks to play the saint and his followers in *Flowers of St. Francis*. More than likely, Bresson was affected by such developments, although his idea of the actor differs from these examples since he also discouraged the "natural" expressivity endemic to the amateur and typical of Italian neorealist cinema. Bresson almost never used the same actors twice and avoided those familiar through other filmmakers' works.²⁹ This was contrary to the practice not only of classical Hollywood filmmakers such as John Ford and Howard Hawks, but also of independents such as John Cassavetes, who made the interactions of the private lives and cinematic personas of his friends and relatives the subject of his films.

In short, Bresson opposed not just professional actors, but *acting* itself. He thought it generated a false effect at odds with the medium. Acting interfered with the execution of the filmic text—an ensemble of image, sound, and the relation between shots—by disrupting the rhythm and tone that made it work. If cinema was a matter of *rappports*, nothing should stand out at the expense of anything else. In traditional movies, the actor unavoidably disrupts this *rapport*; he or she does not just occupy the image, but dominates it, often rendering other features irrelevant or invisible. By definition, the professional actor draws attention to personality and invites the viewer, according to Bresson, “to search for talent on his or her face” rather than look at the film as a whole.

It was critical, therefore, to find the right “soul,” as Gregory Markopoulos said,³⁰ especially the right face. As Bresson put it: “Model: all face.”³¹ The long takes of Claude Laydu in *Diary of a Country Priest* suggest that Bresson had found not only his ideal priest but the model of the male protagonists in subsequent films. Having to work with the wrong face and personality in *Les Dames*, the actor Paul Bernard, convinced him of what he did not want. His feelings on the subject were apparent from the first, but it was only in the 1950s, with *Diary*, *A Man Escaped*, and *Pickpocket*, that they became a component of his aesthetic.

The three principal “models” in *Pickpocket* were amateurs with no ambitions to become otherwise. To hear them describe years later how they were directed to speak their lines, move their heads or arrange their bodies, and cast their looks off screen is to understand that Bresson thought of “performance” as something the *entire* film was doing, not just the “actors” in it.³² The actor is one instrument, along with framing, lighting, editing, and sound, and it is usually these elements that displace the most dramatic “actorly” scenes. In place of facial expressions of tension and rage, for example, we see falling objects, toppling tables, a skimmer clattering across the floor, impeccably shot and cut, and piercing the sonic composure of the moment. We “hear” and “see” the emotion reverberating through space, often without the agent that sparked it.

It was not unusual for Bresson to shoot fifty takes of a single action to obtain the quality he sought. Martin La Salle recalls climbing the stairs to Michel’s flat in *Pickpocket* dozens of times until, out of boredom and exhaustion, he did it with the requisite indifference. Marika Green describes how Bresson determined precisely how and when she should turn her head in a certain direction after delivering a line, itself rehearsed until it possessed a flatness of tone. She was discouraged from focusing on anything of relevance to her character; no advice was given about how she should feel; in short, no

adopted or learned psychology, such as of the method school type, played a role in what she said or how she said it, how she tilted her head or glanced off screen.³³

It is hard to imagine a professional actor tolerating such direction. And since only professionals could deliver dialogue convincingly, that feature would have to be minimized as well. Even a willing professional, in Bresson's judgment, could not suppress well-honed talents or resist internalizing and projecting a role without recourse to a repertoire of familiar facial, bodily, or vocal expressions. This ran counter to his conviction that we cannot know what goes on inside anyone except through inference. In the case of a film character, this is even more true since there is no inside, only what is inferred from externals. Bresson's aesthetic forbids actors to supply this "inside" through learned signs and mimesis, a limited range that converts the interior into a ready-made projection of overused codes, the falsity of which, in his eyes, is betrayed by the unerring, scrutinizing camera.

He insisted that each shot should resist the kind of closure that a professionally calculated expression or line delivery might produce: "If an image, looked at by itself, expresses something sharply, if it involves an interpretation, it will not be transformed on contact with other images."³⁴ As we have seen, the edict applies to Bresson's overall aesthetic. If an actor renders a vivid expression or interpretation, especially via a well-delivered line of dialogue, he or she insulates the shot in which this occurs from those before and after it. Keeping the shot open to the "response" of others precludes such insulation. The rhythm and movement of the film depends on how each shot anticipates and infects the next. Even, in fact *especially* brilliant acting halts, prolongs, or otherwise determines the rhythm of a film. This is deadly for Bresson's aesthetic, where what is important is how the *character*, not the performer, *acts*.

One remembers a Bresson film not for a performance but for the accumulated effect of the world created. This is beyond a theory of acting. He holds the cinema accountable to the same rigorous principle as he does the actor, cleansing it of rehearsed artifices and drawing from its "soul" whatever truth it is capable of revealing. No less than the body, face, and personality of the actor, the body, image, and personality of each film must serve this end. Bresson's answer, then, to the question How does one create a character in a film? is from the outside in, from the accumulation of actions and gestures that reveal the self.

Thus was born the idea of the "model," a word, no doubt, carried over from Bresson's early, abandoned interest in being a painter. The model is not just an eccentric by-product of Bresson's difficulty with temperamental stars.

Nor was it a perverse invention designed to punish his audience in the cause of spiritual severity. It is essential to the thematic and philosophic meaning of Bresson's work and speaks directly to his preoccupation with the relationship between free will and determinism. Given the predetermined logic of his narratives, the elliptical nature of his style, and his control over every frame, every cut, and every sound in a system in which the human figure is only one element among others, is it any wonder that Bresson required inexperienced and pliable individuals? Models, whom he often referred to as automatons, were critical to his project. They were forbidden to see daily rushes lest they form a premature concept of their characters. Only by living with the unknown, he claimed, could they maintain innocent, curious, virginal demeanors in front of the camera, eager to take the next step but ignorant of the overall design. Open to but unaware of the stratagems of their creator, the models are central to Bresson's scheme, at once automatons but, as Gilles Deleuze put it, "endowed with autonomy,"³⁵ which is to say that they believe they act freely, and to an extent, so do we.

As his directives to Marika Green suggest, Bresson rejected psychology as a constitutive component of how character is produced. Yet in preventing the closure that a performance might create and repudiating acting in order to leave open the image's capacity to be transformed by subsequent images, another, perhaps unanticipated opening seems unavoidable. The spectator's tendency is to fill in this void, to project motive and human need onto the character's mask-like demeanor, to apply a psychological reading to what we see. It is unlikely that this habit can be entirely vanquished. In fact, Bresson's intentions notwithstanding, I would argue that it plays an important, if subliminal, role in our comprehension, especially in those films that imply a last-minute transformation of the protagonist. Even a cynical viewer can unconsciously fantasize a *wished for* transformation, a desire to believe that some force *can* alter human behavior and effect change. If such projections were not inevitable habits of the human condition, for Bresson as well as viewers, what purpose would be served by seeking the "right" face, the "right" soul and "model"? Indeed, what could these terms mean? For this reason, I argue that Bresson's treatment of character provides more psychological credibility than is generally allowed, and more than once it plays a critical role in preparing us for the final transformations undergone by characters.

Bresson's Style as a Paradigm of Narrative Cinema

Bresson's practice goes beyond honing an individual style. His importance to film history lies in his efforts to create a paradigm of narrative cinema.

I believe this to be the real point of the distinction he made between cinema and cinematography. The former is “photographed theater,” requiring acting and performance; the latter is “writing with images in movement and with sounds,” an ambition akin to that of *la caméra stylo* (“writing with the camera”), the rallying cry of the auteurist polemic of the 1950s and 1960s.

Bresson’s phrase, however, was not merely in sync with a contemporary polemic; it was borne out in his work as it moved further away from the dramatic accouterments of commercial cinema. Few, if any, narrative filmmakers connected with *la Politique des Auteurs* were as interested in, much less steadfastly devoted to purging their work of extraneous narrative, bravura performances, and stylistic flourish. Bresson’s declaration recalls the theoretical arguments of Rudolf Arnheim and Jean Epstein in the 1920s, which challenged filmmakers to sever connections with theater and literature and to exploit only those features considered inherent to the medium.

To examine Bresson’s work closely is to confront the essence of what narrative cinema might be: a seizing of the phenomenologically visible and audible world of bodies and faces, actions and spaces, sounds and words, edited in an articulate order to suggest relationships and develop meaning. Moment by moment his narratives are driven by actions, gestures, sounds, and words that lead inexorably to successive actions, gestures, sounds, and words, the sum of which defines character and situation. We sense, in the art of this telling, the irrefutable logic of a life working itself through. That Bresson’s style fuses that logic with the art and the character is a measure of his greatness. But he also crafted a cinema that represents a threshold in the advance of narrative filmmaking, arguably as critical as Griffith’s or Eisenstein’s. It is this dimension of his art that justifies a chronological focus on his work. In pursuing that approach, we encounter not simply the accumulation of themes and their resonances in style, the hallmarks of auteur studies, but the core and structural dynamics of narrative film itself.

Scene and Sequence

One way to differentiate Bresson’s first three films from the later style, and traditional cinema from the paradigm of filmic narrative he strove to create, is to consider the distinction between scene and sequence, both commonly used in discussions of movies. In respect to Bresson, they should be as carefully segregated as cinema and cinematography.

The word *scene*, tied to the narrative film tradition since Griffith, the one Bresson labels “cinema,” is a component of dramatic structure of the rising

and falling action type. Scenes crystallize tensions in the story, bring emotions to the surface, and move toward a climax. They excel in expressive and expository dialogue and the clashing of conflicting wills. Acting is the primary vehicle of scenes, the motor of traditional theater and movies, which allows actors to do what they do best: to demonstrate an emotional depth appropriate to a situation and to reinforce the credibility of the scenario and the character's place within it. Such scenes proliferate throughout the history of narrative cinema. Most, if not all, famous performances in film history can be encapsulated by recalling key scenes, those moments often rewarded with prizes.

Considering how much rides on the impact of an individual scene, it is surprisingly difficult to pinpoint what is meant by the word and to support a definition of it by reference to the 2,500-year-old tradition of theater. A commendable scholarly source tells us:

The division of the act of a drama into scenes is less logical or scientifically systematic even than the division of the play itself into acts. This is partly due to the lack of agreement as to what should constitute a scene. Sometimes the entrances and exits of important personages determine the beginning and ending of scenes, as in French drama. In some plays a scene is a logical unit in the development of the action. Many English dramatists consider the clearing of the stage as the sign of a change of scene....Sir Edmond Chambers [Elizabethan stage] uses scene as a "continuous section of action in an unchanged locality." Theoretically, a well-managed scene should have a structure comparable with that of a play itself, with the five logical parts [i.e., exposition, rising action, climax, falling action, and catastrophe]....The most important principle in scene construction, perhaps, is that of climactic arrangement.³⁶

If there is no unanimously endorsed definition of the term in theatrical history, the question is compounded by movies. Countless films not based on theatrical works are structured like well-made plays, and others have passages that resemble Thrall and Hibbard's catalogue of scene types: "transitional, expository, developmental, climactic," and so on. Movies have so multiplied the possibilities that any setting or spatial context for an action or a performance, however limited or extensive, might qualify as a scene. The longer the list, the less likely we are to determine whether all scenes have any features in common. Is a shot of an alleyway between houses in an Ozu film, without people or dialogue, a "scene" of the "transitional" type? Does an establishing

shot in a film simply set the scene to follow, or is it a scene in itself? In many films objects and spaces lack a discernible function or outlive their function, although they might add connotative significance to the narrative. Such possibilities, according to André Bazin and Siegfried Kracauer, constitute film's unique provenance, its ability to restore a sense of mystery and presence to the world, to turn objects and spaces into protagonists on equal footing with characters.

How can we distinguish a scene in a movie from a sequence? Is a sequence, as some purists would have it, more cinematic? Bazin argues that some film versions of plays achieve an intensity not possible on the stage.³⁷ Furthermore, although a sequence may be filmically different from a stage-like scene, it too can increase tension and develop conflicts. But whereas a scene has a certain settling-in quality in which actors move about and speak freely as if the camera did not exist and the word *cut* were not an imminent threat, a sequence in almost any Bresson film after 1950 minimizes or dispenses with acting and expansive dialogue, neutralizes features essential to the dramatic thrust of a scene, and shifts the burden of carrying tensions, conflicts, and emotions to the cinematographic register: to framing, editing, and, even more tellingly, to off screen space and sound. The laws of theater and traditional narrative cinema are thus inverted: instead of using filmic means to serve the actor and the drama, acting and dialogue are made subservient to the precision and rhythm of framing and editing. A description of a "scene" from *Les Dames du bois de Boulogne* would stress different elements than a description of a "sequence" from *A Man Escaped* or *Pickpocket*. In *Les Dames* virtually everything critical to understanding the action is present before us; the narrative can be divided into self-contained scenes that achieve dramatic closure. In *A Man Escaped* or *Pickpocket* the connective fiber of the entire work is more prominent than its division into parts. The sequences that compose them are often so dependent on sound and off screen space that they sustain the link to the larger fabric of the film, precluding the impressions induced by self-enclosed units.

This distinction has critical consequence for Bresson's work. The less a film is broken down into scenes, the more momentum it is capable of building and the more inexorable seems its trajectory. Each film becomes an engine driven by a formal and moral imperative, the force of which is channeled through the rigor of its style. In this sense Bresson's determination to rid his films of digressions, distractions, and embellishments can be understood as clearing the way for seeing, in the fullest and most exacting sense, the line-through of the narrative's focus on the steady, inflexible progression of a character toward the ultimate goal.

The Artist in and through the Work, or The Question of Psychology

The greatest effort is to make films which have some meaning in one's personal life without straying into the confessional.

—Michelangelo Antonioni, quoted in Fabio Rinaudo, "Foyer Antonioni,"

Croniche del Cinema e della Televisione, no. 7 (December 1955)

As indicated earlier, in this book I assign an important role to psychology in understanding character behavior in Bresson's films. This may seem incompatible with my assertion that the films affirm predisposition in human affairs. But even Freud recognized the paradoxical relationship between destiny and idiosyncrasy in human behavior, although he had a very different sense of destiny in mind. As a born Catholic, Bresson was undoubtedly exposed to the Church's doctrine that although God knows and sees everything in advance, sin is still a matter of individual responsibility. The one character trait shared by all his protagonists is pride, the deadliest of sins because it defies or denies the workings of divine will. Bresson's apparent ambivalence in respect to this paradox is reflected in the "splits" that I believe characterize his late work, along with that tendency toward what I call *sacred indirection*, which implies that he did not, and probably could not, wholly abandon the powerful appeal of the Christian perspective that drove his earlier work. *Lancelot of the Lake* is a strong reflection of the split, and *Mouchette*, *The Devil Probably*, and *L'Argent* manifest the operations of sacred indirection.

The transformations of character in Bresson's early films are not incompatible with the change that ensues in persons undergoing psychoanalysis when they discover aspects of themselves of which they had only a dim sense. To allow formerly blocked feelings to surface and become integrated with the rest of one's personality is a liberating experience. The sudden embrace of a different view of reality by several of Bresson's characters would hardly convince us if we had not internalized the human phenomenon of potential change that can follow a loosening of inhibitions and a conquering of fear, both of which are equally essential to the work of psychoanalysis.

Given Bresson's strict control over characters and the models who play them, it might be alleged that there is insufficient ground to analyze character. On the contrary, in stripping characters to essentials and isolating actions and gestures as central manifestations of the inner self, Bresson gives us an *objective* basis on which to understand character, reinforcing the idea

that action *is* character. Any psychoanalyst could expostulate at length about how long it takes patients to acknowledge the gulf between what they do and what they say and to recognize that every action they perform, however involuntary, is an indication of who they are and what rules their lives. Not leaving this task entirely to the actor, Bresson's films, in their concentration on action and the revelatory powers of material reality, come closer to *embodying* the inner psychology of character than any narrative filmmaker I know.

In concentrating on the films and their cinematographic, imagistic, narrative, and thematic structures, I concede to Bresson's insistence that *they* are what matter. But, as I said earlier, the relationship between Bresson's themes and his style cannot be separated from Bresson himself. An underlying conviction in this book is that there is an autobiographical strain in the work that permits us to read Bresson's films, in part, as reflections of his ethos and character. I defer to an opinion on this matter that is hard to surpass: "All the things I have to say about the artist's nature, so strangely and mysteriously dazzling, have been more or less accurately suggested by the works in question; pure poetic hypothesis, conjecture, or imaginative reconstructions."³⁸ For one thing, there is the similarity of Bresson's protagonists: the inner force of their personalities, their spiritual struggles, and the balance they strike between pride and passionate conviction. These similarities are stressed not only by the situations of the films, but also by Bresson's concept of the model. By restricting the model to gestures directly tied to the core actions of each film, Bresson gives greater salience to the common ground his characters share and minimizes those idiosyncrasies that distinguish them from each other.

Then there is the look of the models: their youth, the angularity of their faces, the leanness of their bodies, the earnestness of their demeanors, as well as the innocence they project despite the range of experience their roles imply. Several of the men bear a striking physical resemblance to Bresson. Finally, all his protagonists struggle with the demands of the material world and an inner hunger for spiritual release, a constant preoccupation of the films, and therefore of the artist who made them. None of this implies that there is a literal identification between every character and situation and the filmmaker; it would clearly be a fallacy to suppose that because several of Bresson's characters committed suicide, we should have expected the filmmaker to do the same.³⁹

Certain biographical details are useful in analyzing, possibly even in comprehending the work. Bresson can be seen in all three of his male protagonists of the 1950s. He shares with the country priest a missionary zeal to enhance both the life of the soul and the medium through which he worked.

His experience as a prisoner of the Germans for a year during the Second World War, which, according to his widow, scarred him for the rest of his life,⁴⁰ ties him to Fontaine and was undoubtedly essential to the authenticity and conviction that suffuse every frame of *A Man Escaped*. Bresson was as consumed with the precise design and details of his art as Fontaine is with his plans of escape. As for Michel's addiction, Bresson was guilty, as one critic cleverly put it, of "picking Dostoevsky's pocket" and borrowing from other sources without acknowledgment.⁴¹ Perhaps most tellingly, when he was asked whether, like the prisoner in *A Man Escaped* and the thief in *Pickpocket*, he often felt alone, he responded without hesitation, "I feel very alone. But I receive no pleasure from this."⁴²

That Bresson once aspired to be a painter who never exhibited his work and who gave it up, allegedly, because after Cézanne there was nothing more to do, is almost certainly the inspiration behind *Four Nights of a Dreamer*. His decision to abandon painting and pursue the cinema revealed his need to carve a unique place in the history of the arts. Following the artistic credo expressed by a secondary character in *Four Nights*, Bresson strove to expunge extraneous elements and forge the narrative cinema into an audio/visual engine of drive and precision—"an action painting," to appropriate a remark of a passing character in *Au hasard Balthazar*, or a "movement image," in Gilles Deleuze's terms.⁴³ In doing so, he brought the cinema, in the view of many, to a threshold after which one might wonder, as Bresson did of Cézanne, what there was left to do. There have been many good and great filmmakers before and after Bresson, but few have held the cinema to such exacting standards.

Despite their clarity and rigor, Bresson's films are not free of ambiguity, a quality that parallels his evasiveness in interviews concerning both his private life and aspects of the films. Blinded by the brilliance of the work and its often spiritual quality, as well as by Bresson's resistance to psychology, critics often avoid questions of a sexual or autobiographical nature as either beside the point or disrespectful. Yet it seems clear, for example, that Bresson's preoccupation with the virginity of several characters, male and female, as well as with what he called the "unspoiled quality" of his models, is rooted in personal obsessions that no doubt are deeply tied to his view of the world as fallen, but also, perhaps, reveal a yearning to be young again, to start life afresh. Up to the time of his death he was still interested in filming the Book of Genesis.⁴⁴ Yet innocence is a short-lived period for Bresson's characters and does not survive romantic or sexual attachment or marriage. *Four Nights of a Dreamer* is a cynical parody of romance, and *Une femme douce*, the only film to deal directly with marriage, is a bitter indictment of that state. However these

preoccupations played out in his life, their omnipresence in the films is indisputable, coloring his views of humanity and the world. They are therefore no less germane to an understanding of his work than such elements would be to the study of any artist in any discipline.

A great work of art outlives any interpretive method, and psychoanalysis is no more reductive or threatening than any other approach. My hope is that there are sufficient rewards in the chapters that follow to interest readers without their having to fully endorse my interpretations. Bresson transposed his own feelings and experiences, as well as his unique take on literary works, into highly individual art. My aim is to trace how this was done in each case, creating a kind of aesthetic profile wherein a close examination of the films—their narratives and themes, the way they were conceived and executed, and the way they increasingly clarify a view of the world through a chastening and crystallizing of the medium—reveals the mind and personality of an artist of enormous seriousness, complexity, and self-discipline. If I fail to convince by a less than perfect argument, I remind the reader that what follows is an entirely personal reading of Bresson's art that no doubt reflects more contradictions in the author than it perceives in the works discussed.

Although I am a practicing psychoanalyst, I was a teacher of film and literature long before, and have been an admirer of Bresson's films for more than half of my life. No less than many people whose primary response to the work of great artists in any medium is one of unadulterated love, I often cringe when I detect the meddling hand and overanxious mind of those who apply psychoanalysis—or any other theoretical method—with a broad brush, particularly when they claim to speak for every viewer. As the reader goes through this book, I hope it becomes clear that I have tried to limit applying psychoanalytic principles to those instances and films that I believe benefit from such a reading. My intention is to deepen the implications of the films' aesthetic dimensions, not to diminish or displace them, and to enhance appreciation of how much they reveal about the artist who made them.

The Book

In light of the above, the chapter titles of the book were determined in the spirit of what I have called an *aesthetic biography*. With two exceptions, they draw attention not only to a specific aspect of each film, but to its place in Bresson's chronology and to the nature of his engagement with cinema. The title of chapter 1, "Rules of the Game," refers both to the conflict faced by

the protagonist in *Les Anges du péché* and to the fact that Bresson's first two features—the second being *Les Dames du bois de Boulogne*—reflect the dominant cinema of the time, epitomized by Jean Renoir's great film of the same title, while they show signs of an emerging difference. “Author, Author,” the title of chapter 2, announces his mastery over the medium, as well as the way the notion of the auteur, the director as God, has a special relevance to Bresson's concept of the model and how he educated the leading performance in *Diary of a Country Priest*. “Triumphs of the Will” (chapter 3) refers both to each protagonist's overcoming of great odds in the films *A Man Escaped* and *Pickpocket* and to Bresson's realization of his aesthetic aims in their quintessential forms, a realization that goes beyond mastery of what preexisted him and toward an original conception of the cinema.

Chapters 4 and 6 share the title “The Young Virgins of the Provinces” and are separated only to retain chronological order. The former is on *The Trial of Joan of Arc*, the latter, *Mouchette*. In both, the virginity of the protagonist is central; in *Joan* it is linked to glory and sanctity, in *Mouchette* to ignominy and despair. Both attest to the importance of virginity in Bresson's work as a sign of problematic innocence, marking an invisible line between the material and spiritual worlds. Chapter 5, “The Middle of the Road,” is on *Au hasard Balthazar*, which has its own virgin and is the film between *Joan* and *Mouchette*. Also set in the provinces, the title alludes to a biblical tale about the spiritual vision of a donkey, but the discussion also links the animal's proverbial stubbornness to Bresson's adherence to a highly eccentric approach to his art. The chapter's title also marks the film's position in Bresson's career as parallel to that of *The Idiot*, one of its sources, in Dostoevsky's career. Bresson's absorption with this writer is further explored in chapter 7, “Dostoevsky in Paris,” through his transposition of two novellas to post-1968 Paris in the films *Une femme douce* and *Four Nights of a Dreamer*.

Chapter 8, “The Ultimate Geste,” is on *Lancelot of the Lake*, Bresson's parable of the collapse of values in the medieval world and its effects on the meaning of individual action. The chivalric code, compromised when torn from its founding faith, leads not to triumph but to death bordering on the absurd. That Bresson wanted to adapt the legend twenty-five years earlier makes the film an especially resonant barometer of his shifting convictions. Chapter 9, “Angels and Demons,” links Bresson's two final, bitter meditations on the state of the contemporary world. In *The Devil Probably* a Parisian student arranges his suicide as a protest against society and the failure of its institutions. *L'Argent* is named after the value, money, called the “visible God” by one character, that seems, literally and figuratively, to rule the world. Set in Paris, both films reach beyond the insular worlds of the provinces, but