

Un Condamné à Mort S'est Échappé

1.

The importance of this film will make it worth returning to more than once in the coming weeks. I do not expect to do justice

to this major work with these notes written hastily after a first viewing.

In my opinion, *Un Condamné à Mort s'est échappé* (*A Man Escaped*) is not only Robert Bresson's most beautiful film but also the most important French film of the past ten years. (Before I wrote that sentence, I listed on a piece of paper all the films that have been made by Renoir, Ophüls, Cocteau, Tati, Gance, Astruc, Becker, Clouzot, Clément, and Clair since 1946.)

Now I regret that I wrote a few months ago, "Bresson's theories are always fascinating but they are so personal that they fit only him. The future existence of a 'Bresson school' would shake even his most optimistic observers. A conception of cinema that is so theoretical, mathematical, musical, and above all ascetic could not give rise to a general insight." Today I must disavow those sentences. *Un Condamné à Mort* seems to me to reduce to nothing a certain number of accepted ideas that governed filmmaking, all the way from script writing to direction.

In many films nowadays we find what is commonly called "a touch of bravura." What that means is that the filmmaker was thought to be courageous, that he tried to surpass himself in one or two scenes. By this token, *Un Condamné*, which is a stubborn film about stubbornness, made by a stubborn native of the Auvergne, is the first movie of utter bravura. Let us try to see how it differs from all the others we've seen over the years.

Bresson's remark, "Cinema is interior movement," is frequently quoted. Did he make the statement, rather too hastily interpreted as his profession of faith, for the pleasure of leading the theoreticians down the garden path? The commentators have decided that it is his characters' interior lives, their very souls, that preoccupy Bresson, while in fact it may be something more subtle: the movement of the *film*, its rhythm. Jean Renoir often says that cinema is an art more secret than painting, and that a film is made for three people. I haven't the slightest doubt that there are not three people in the world who don't find Bresson's work mysterious. It took a complete lack of awareness on the part of the daily reviewers to talk about

* Bresson never made *La Princesse de Clèves*; it was directed in 1961 by Jean Delannoy, adapted and with dialogue by Cocteau.

the weaknesses of the actors in *Le Journal d'un Curé de Campagne*. However, the actors' work in a Bresson film is beyond notions of "correct" or "wrong." Their work essentially suggests a timelessness, a certain posture, a "difficulty with the fact of existing," a quality of suffering. Probably Bresson is an alchemist in reverse: he starts from movement in order to reach immobility, he screens out the gold to gather the sand.

For Bresson, films both past and present are only a skewed image of theater, and acting is exhibitionism. He thinks that in twenty years people will go to see movies to see how "the actors played in those days." We know that Bresson directs his actors by holding them back from acting "dramatically," from adding emphasis, forcing them to abstract from their "art." He achieves this by killing their will, exhausting them with an endless number of repetitions and takes, by almost hypnotizing them.

With his third film, *Le Journal d'un Curé de Campagne*, Bresson realized that he'd prefer to do without professional actors, even beginners, in favor of amateurs chosen for their appearance—and also their "spirit"—new creatures who don't bring any habits with them, or false spontaneity, bringing, in fact, no "art" at all. If all Bresson did was kill the life and the actor that's inside every person in order to bring before his camera individuals who recite deliberately neutral words, his work would be an interesting experiment. But he goes further. With amateur interpreters who know nothing about theater, he creates the ultimately real character, whose every gesture, look, attitude, reaction and word—not one of which is louder than the other—is essential. The whole takes on a form that *makes* the film.

Psychology and poetry have no part in his work. It's all about obtaining a certain harmony out of the various elements which act on each other, providing an infinity of relations: the acting and the sound, looks and noises, settings and lighting, commentary and music. It adds up to a Bresson film, a kind of miraculous success that defies analysis and, when it works perfectly, arouses a new and pure emotion.

It is clear that Bresson's films, because he takes a direction that is radically different from that of his colleagues, have a harder time making contact with the public than those films that arouse emotion by less noble and more facile, more theatrical means. For Bresson, as well as Renoir, Rossellini, Hitchcock, Orson Welles, cinema is spectacle, certainly, but the author of *Journal* wants his spectacle to be very particular, to have its own laws, not follow borrowed rules.

Un Condamné à Mort is a minute-by-minute account of a condemned man's getaway. Indeed, it is a fanatical reconstruction of an actual event, and Commander Devigny, the man who lived the adventure thirteen years ago, never left the set, since Bresson kept asking him to show the anonymous actor who portrayed him how you hold a spoon in a cell, how you write on the walls, how you fall asleep.

But it isn't actually a story, or even an account or a drama. It is

simply the minute description by scrupulous reconstruction of what went into the escape. The entire film consists of closeups of objects and closeups of the face of the man who moves the objects.

Bresson wanted to call it *Le Vent souffle où il veut* (The wind blows where it will), and it was a perilous experiment; but it became a successful and moving film, thanks to Bresson's stubborn genius. He figured out how to buck all existing forms of filmmaking and reach for a new truth with a new realism.

The suspense—there is a certain suspense in the film—is created naturally, not by stretching out the passage of time, but by letting it evaporate. Because the shots are brief and the scenes rapid, we never have the feeling that we have been offered ninety privileged moments of Fontaine's sentence. We live with him in his prison cell, not for ninety minutes but for two months, and it is a fascinating experience.

The laconic dialogue alternates with the hero's interior monologue; the passages from one scene to another are carried out with Mozart's assistance. The sounds have a hallucinatory quality: railroads, the bolting of doors, footsteps, etc.

In addition, *Un Condamné* is Bresson's first perfectly homogeneous film. There is not a single spoiled shot; it conforms to the author's intentions from beginning to end. The "Bresson acting style," a false truthfulness that becomes truer than true, is practiced here even by the most minor characters. With this film, Bresson is acclaimed today by those who hissed *Les Dames du Bois de Boulogne* eleven years ago.

—1956

2.*

To the degree that *Un Condamné à Mort s'est échappé* is radically opposed to all conventional directorial styles, it will, I believe, be better appreciated by audiences who go to the movies

* This second article was written three weeks after the preceding one.

only occasionally, say once a month, than by the nonmovie-loving but more assiduous public whose sensibilities are often confused by the rhythm of American films.

What is striking when one sees the film for the first time is the constant contrast between what the work is and what it would be, or would have been, if it had been made by another filmmaker. At first all one sees are its deficiencies, and for a while one is tempted to redo the cutting and indicate additional shots so that the film would resemble "what a film is supposed to be."

Indeed, everybody pointed out the lack of any establishing shots—one would never know what Fontaine saw through his tiny window or from the roof of the prison. Thus, at the end of a first viewing, surprise might win out over admiration. And André Bazin felt moved to explain that it was easier to describe what the film was *not* than what it was.

It really must be seen again to appreciate its beauty perfectly. On second viewing, nothing any longer gets in the way of our keeping up, second by second, with the film's movement—it's incredibly swift—and walking in Leterrier's or Bresson's still-fresh footprints, whichever of them left them.

Bresson's film is pure music; its essential richness is in its rhythm. A film starts at one point and arrives ultimately at another. Some films make detours, others linger calmly for the satisfaction of drawing out a pleasant scene, some have noticeable gaps, but this particular film, once set on its perfectly straight path, rushes into the night with the same rhythm as a windshield wiper; its dissolves regularly wipe the rain of images at the end of each scene off the screen. It's one of those films which can be said not to contain a single useless shot or a scene that could be cut or shortened. It's the very opposite of those films that seem like a "montage," a collection of images.

Un Condamné à Mort s'est échappé is as free-style and nonsystematic as it is rigorous. Bresson has imposed only unities of place and action; it's not only that he has not tried to make his public identify with Leterrier, he has made such identification impossible. We are *with* Leterrier, we are at his side; we do not see everything he sees (only what relates to his escape), but never do we see anything more than he does.

What this amounts to is that Bresson has pulverized classic cutting—where a shot of someone looking at something is valid only in relation to the next shot showing what he is looking at—a form

of cutting that made cinema a dramatic art, a kind of photographed theater. Bresson explodes all that and, if in *Un Condamné* the closeups of hands and objects nonetheless lead to closeups of the face, the succession is no longer ordered in terms of stage dramaturgy. It is in the service of a preestablished harmony of subtle relations among visual and aural elements. Each shot of hands or of a look is autonomous.

Between traditional directing and Bresson's there lies the same space as between dialogue and interior monologue.

Our admiration for Robert Bresson's film is not limited to his wager—to rest the entire enterprise on a single character in a cell for ninety minutes. The tour de force is not all. Many filmmakers—Clouzot, Dassin, Becker, and others—might have made a film that was ten times more thrilling and “human” than Bresson's. What is important is that the emotion, even if it is to be felt by only one viewer out of twenty, is rarer and purer and, as a result, far from altering the work's nobility, it confers a grandeur on it that was not hinted at at the outset.

The high points of the film rival Mozart for a few seconds. Here, the first chords of the Mass in C Minor, far from symbolizing liberty, as has often been written, give a liturgical aspect to the daily flushing of the toilet buckets.

I don't imagine that Fontaine is a very likable personality in Bresson's mind. It isn't courage that incites him to escape but simply boredom and idleness. A prison is made to escape from, besides which, our hero owes his success to luck. We are shown Lieutenant Fontaine, about whom we shall know nothing more, in a period of his life when he is particularly interesting and lucky. He talks about his act with a certain reserve, a bit like a lecturer telling us about his expedition as he comments on the silent movies he has brought back: “On the fourth, in the evening, we left the camp. . . .”

Bresson's great contribution clearly is the work of the actors. Certainly James Dean's acting, which moves us so much today, or Anna Magnani's, may risk our laughter in a few years, as Pierre-Richard Wilm's does today, while the acting of Laydu in *Le Journal d'un Curé de Campagne* and of Leterrier in *Un Condamné* will grow more forceful with time. Time always works for Bresson.

In *Un Condamné* the Bresson style of directing achieves its finest results. We are no longer offered the quiet voice of the little parish priest of Ambricourt, or the gentle look of the “prisoner of the holy

Agony," but the clear, dry diction of Lieutenant Fontaine. With his gaze as direct as that of a bird of prey, he hurls himself on the sacrificial sentinel like a vulture. Leterrier's acting owes nothing to Laydu's. "Speak as if you were talking to yourself," Bresson commanded him. He exerts all his effort to filming the face, or, more accurately, the seriousness of the human countenance.

"The artist owes a great debt to the countenance of man; if he cannot manage to evoke its natural dignity, he should at least attempt to conceal its superficiality and foolishness. Perhaps there's not a single foolish or superficial person on this earth, but simply some who give that impression because they are ill at ease, who have not found a corner of the universe in which they feel well." This marvelous reflection of Joseph von Sternberg's is, to my mind, the most apt comment on *Un Condamné*.

To think that Bresson will be an influence on French and foreign contemporary filmmakers seems highly unlikely. Nonetheless, we clearly see the limitations of the *other* cinema to the advantage of this film. The risk is that it may make us too demanding of the cruelty of Clouzot, the wit of René Clair, the carefulness of René Clément. Much remains to be discovered about film art, and some of it can be found in *Un Condamné*.

—1956