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Spiritual Style in the Films of Robert Bresson

SOME ART aims directly at arousing the feelings; some art appeals to the feelings through the route of the intelligence. There is art that involves, that creates empathy. There is art that detaches, that provokes reflection.

Great reflective art is not frigid. It can exalt the spectator, it can present images that appall, it can make him weep. But its emotional power is mediated. The pull toward emotional involvement is counterbalanced by elements in the work that promote distance, disinterestedness, impartiality. Emotional involvement is always, to a greater or lesser degree, postponed.

The contrast can be accounted for in terms of techniques or means even of ideas. No doubt, though, the sensibility of the artist is, in the end, decisive. It is a reflective art, a detached art that Brecht is advocating when he talks about the "Alienation Effect." The didactic aims which Brecht claimed for his theatre are really a vehicle for the cool temperament that conceived those plays.

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In the film, the master of the reflective mode is Robert Bresson.

Though Bresson was born in 1911, his extant work in the cinema has all been done in the last twenty years, and consists of six feature films. (He made a short film in 1934 called *Les Affaires publiques*, reportedly a comedy in the manner of René Clair, all copies of which have been lost;* did some work on the scripts of two obscure

*This article was originally published in 1964; a substantial fragment of *Les Affaires publiques* was discovered in 1987 at the Cinémathèque Française. *Ed.*

commercial films in the mid-thirties; and in 1940 was assistant director to Clair on a film that was never finished.) Bresson's first full-length film was begun when he returned to Paris in 1941 after spending eighteen months in a German prison camp. He met a Dominican priest and writer, Father Bruckberger, who suggested that they collaborate on a film about Bethany, the French Dominican order devoted to the care and rehabilitation of women ex-convicts. A scenario was written, Jean Giraudoux was enlisted to write the dialogue, and the film—at first called *Béthanie*, and finally, at the producers' insistence, *Les Anges du péché* (The Angels of Sin)—was released in 1943. It was enthusiastically acclaimed by the critics and had a success with the public as well.

The plot of his second film, begun in 1944 and released in 1945, was a modern version of one of the interpolated stories in Diderot's great anti-novel *Jacques le fataliste*; Bresson wrote the scenario and Jean Cocteau the dialogue. Bresson's first success was not repeated, however. *Les Dames du Bois de Boulogne* (sometimes called, here, *The Ladies of the Park*) was panned by the critics and failed at the box-office, too.

Bresson's third film, *Journal d'un curé de campagne* (*Diary of a Country Priest*), did not appear until 1951; his fourth film, *Un condamné à mort s'est échappé* (called, here, *A Man Escaped*), in 1956; his fifth film, *Pickpocket*, in 1959; and his sixth film, *Procès de Jeanne d'Arc* (*The Trial of Joan of Arc*), in 1962. All have had a certain success with critics but scarcely any with the public—with the exception of the last film, which most critics disliked, too. Once hailed as the new hope of the French cinema, Bresson is now firmly labelled as an esoteric director. He 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; even Antonioni has almost a mass audience compared with Bresson's. And, except among a small coterie, he has had only the scantest critical attention.

The reason that Bresson is not generally ranked according to his merits is that the tradition to which his art belongs, the reflective or contemplative, is not well understood. Particularly in England and America, Bresson's films are often described as cold, remote, overintellectualized, geometrical. But to call a work of art "cold" means nothing more or less than to compare it (often unconsciously) to a work that is "hot." And not all art is—or could be—hot, any more than all persons have the same temperament. The generally accepted notions of the range of temperament in art are provincial. Certainly, Bresson is cold next to Pabst or Fellini. (So is Vivaldi cold next to Brahms, and Keaton cold next to Chaplin.) One has to understand the aesthetics—that is, find the beauty—of such coldness. And Bresson offers a particularly good case for sketching such an aesthetic, because of his range. Exploring the possibilities of a reflective, as opposed to an emotionally immediate, art, Bresson moves from the diagrammatic perfection of *Les Dames du Bois de Boulogne* to the almost lyrical, almost "humanistic" warmth of *Un condamné à mort s'est échappé*. He also shows—and this is instructive, too—how such art can become too rarefied, in his last film, *Procès de Jeanne d'Arc*.

In reflective art, the *form* of the work of art is present in an emphatic way.

The effect of the spectator's being aware of the form is to elongate or to retard the emotions. For, to the extent that we are conscious of form in a work of art, we become somewhat detached; our emotions do not respond in the same way as they do in real life. Awareness of form does two things simultaneously: it gives a sensuous pleasure independent of the "content," and it invites the use of intelligence. It may be a very low order of reflection which is invited, as, for instance, by the narrative form (the interweaving of the four separate stories) of Griffith's *Intolerance*. But it is reflection, nonetheless.

The typical way in which "form" shapes "content" in art is by doubling, duplicating. Symmetry and the repetition of motifs in painting, the double plot in Elizabethan drama, and rhyme schemes in poetry are a few obvious examples.

The evolution of forms in art is partly independent of the evolution of subject-matters. (The history of forms is dialectical. As types of sensibility become banal, boring, and are overthrown by their opposites, so forms in art are, periodically, exhausted. They become banal, unstimulating, and are replaced by new forms which are at the same time anti-forms.) Sometimes the most beautiful effects are gained when the material and the form are at cross purposes. Brecht does this often: placing a hot subject in a cold frame. Other times, what satisfies is that the form is perfectly appropriate to the theme. This is the case with Bresson.

Why Bresson is not only a much greater, but also a more interesting director than, say, Buñuel is that he has worked out a form that perfectly expresses and accompanies what he wants to say. In fact, it is what he wants to say.

Here, one must carefully distinguish between form and manner. Welles, the early René Clair, Sternberg, Ophüls are examples of directors with unmistakable stylistic inventions. But they never created a rigorous narrative form. Bresson, like Ozu, has. And the form of Bresson's films is designed (like Ozu's) to discipline the emotions at the same time that it arouses them: to induce a certain tranquillity in the spectator, a state of spiritual balance that is itself the subject of the film.

Reflective art is art which, in effect, imposes a certain discipline on the audience—postponing easy gratification. Even boredom can be a permissible means of such discipline. Giving prominence to what is artifice in the work of art is another means. One thinks here of Brecht's idea of theatre. Brecht advocated strategies of staging—like having a narrator, putting musicians on stage, interposing filmed scenes—and a technique of acting so that the audience could distance itself, and not become uncritically "involved" in the plot and the fate of the characters. Bresson wishes distance, too. But his aim, I would imagine, is not to keep hot emotions cool so that intelligence can prevail. The emotional distance typical of Bresson's

films seems to exist for a different reason altogether: because all identification with characters, deeply conceived, is an impertinence—an affront to the mystery that is human action and the human heart.

But—all claims for intellectual coolness or respect for the mystery of action laid aside—surely Brecht knew, as must Bresson, that such distancing is a source of great emotional power. It is precisely the defect of the naturalistic theatre and cinema that, giving itself too readily, it easily consumes and exhausts its effects. Ultimately, the greatest source of emotional power in art lies not in any particular subject-matter, however passionate, however universal. It lies in form. The detachment and retarding of the emotions, through the consciousness of form, makes them far stronger and more intense in the end.

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Despite the venerable critical slogan that film is primarily a visual medium, and despite the fact that Bresson was a painter before he turned to making films, form for Bresson is not mainly visual. It is, above all, a distinctive form of narration. For Bresson film is not a plastic but a narrative experience.

Bresson's form fulfills beautifully the prescription of Alexandre Astruc, in his famous essay "Le Caméra-Stylo," written in the late forties. According to Astruc, the cinema will, ideally, become a language.

By a language I mean the form in which and through which an artist can express his thoughts, however abstract they may be, or translate his obsessions, just as in an essay or a novel . . . The film will gradually free itself from the tyranny of the visual, of the image for its own sake, of the immediate and concrete anecdote, to become a means of writing as supple and subtle as the written word . . . What interests us in the cinema today is the creation of this language.

Cinema-as-language means a break with the traditional dramatic and visual way of telling a story in film. In Bresson's work, this creation of a language for films entails a heavy emphasis on the word. In the first two films, where the action is still relatively dramatic, and the plot employs a group of characters,* language (in

* Even here, though, there is a development. In *Les Anges du péché*, there are five main characters—the young novice Anne-Marie, another novice Madeleine, the prioress, the prioress's assistant Mother Saint-Jean, and the murderess Thérèse—as well as a great deal of background: the daily life of the convent, and so forth. In *Les Dames du Bois de Boulogne*, there is already a simplification, less background. Four characters are clearly outlined—Hélène, her former lover Jean, Agnès, and Agnès's mother. Everyone else is virtually invisible. We never see the servants' faces, for instance.

the literal sense) appears in the form of dialogue. This dialogue definitely calls attention to itself. It is very theatrical dialogue, concise, aphoristic, deliberate, literary. It is the opposite of the improvised-sounding dialogue favored by the new French directors—including Godard in *Vivre sa vie* and *Une femme mariée*, the most Bressonian of the New Wave films.

But in the last four films, in which the action has contracted from that which befalls a group to the fortunes of the lonely self, dialogue is often displaced by first-person narration. Sometimes the narration can be justified as providing links between scenes. But, more interestingly, it often doesn't tell us anything we don't know or are about to learn. It "doubles" the action. In this case, we usually get the word first, then the scene. For example, in *Pickpocket*: we see the hero writing (and hear his voice reading) his memoirs. Then we see the event which he has already curtly described.

But sometimes we get the scene first, then the explanation, the description of what has just happened. For example, in *Journal d'un curé de campagne*, there is a scene in which the priest calls anxiously on the vicar of Torcy. We see the priest wheeling his bicycle up to the vicar's door, then the housekeeper answering (the vicar is obviously not at home, but we don't hear the housekeeper's voice), then the door shutting, and the priest leaning against it. Then, we hear: "I was so disappointed, I had to lean against the door." Another example: in *Un condamné à mort s'est échappé*, we see Fontaine tearing up the cloth of his pillow, then twisting the cloth around wire which he has stripped off the bed frame. Then, the voice: "I twisted it strongly."

The effect of this "superfluous" narration is to punctuate the scene with intervals. It puts a brake on the spectator's direct imaginative participation in the action. Whether the order is from comment to scene or from scene to comment, the effect is the same: such doublings of the action both arrest and intensify the ordinary emotional sequence.

Notice, too, that in the first type of doubling—where we hear what's going to happen before we see it—there is a deliberate flouting of one of the traditional modes of narrative involvement: suspense. Again, one thinks of Brecht. To eliminate suspense, at the beginning of a scene Brecht announces, by means of placards or a narrator, what is to happen. (Godard adopts this technique in *Vivre sa vie*.) Bresson does the same thing, by jumping the gun with narration. In many ways, the perfect story for Bresson is that of his last film, *Procès de Jeanne d'Arc*—in that the plot is wholly known, foreordained; the words of the actors are not invented but those of the actual trial record. Ideally, there is no suspense in a Bresson film. Thus, in the one film where suspense should normally play a large role, *Un condamné à mort s'est échappé*, the title deliberately—even awkwardly—gives the outcome away: we know Fontaine is going to make it.* In this respect, of

* The film has a co-title, which expresses the theme of inexorability: *Le Vent souffle où il veut*.

course, Bresson's escape film differs from Jacques Becker's last work, *Le Trou* (called, here, *Nightwatch*), though in other ways Becker's excellent film owes a great deal to *Un condamné à mort s'est échappé*. (It is to Becker's credit that he was the only prominent person in the French film world who defended *Les Dames du Bois de Boulogne* when it came out.)

Thus, form in Bresson's films is anti-dramatic, though strongly linear. Scenes are cut short, and set end to end without obvious emphasis. In *Journal d'un curé de campagne*, there must be thirty such short scenes. This method of constructing the story is most rigorously observed in *Procès de Jeanne d'Arc*. The film is composed of static, medium shots of people talking; the scenes are the inexorable sequence of Jeanne's interrogations. The principle of eliding anecdotal material—in *Un condamné à mort s'est échappé*, for instance, one knows little about why Fontaine is in prison in the first place—is here carried to its extreme. There are no interludes of any sort. An interrogation ends; the door slams behind Jeanne; the scene fades out. The key clatters in the lock; another interrogation; again the door clangs shut; fade-out. It is a very dead-pan construction, which puts a sharp brake on emotional involvement.

Bresson also came to reject the species of involvement created in films by the expressiveness of the acting. Again, one is reminded of Brecht by Bresson's particular way of handling actors, in the exercise of which he has found it preferable to use non-professionals in major roles. Brecht wanted the actor to "report" a role rather than "be" it. He sought to divorce the actor from identifying with the role, as he wanted to divorce the spectator from identifying with the events that he saw being "reported" on the stage. "The actor," Brecht insists, "must remain a demonstrator; he must present the person demonstrated as a stranger, he must not suppress the 'he did that, he said that' element in his performance." Bresson, working with non-professional actors in his last four films (he used professionals in *Les Anges du péché* and *Les Dames du Bois de Boulogne*), also seems to be striving for the same effect of strangeness. His idea is for the actors not to act out their lines, but simply to say them with as little expression as possible. (To get this effect, Bresson rehearses his actors for several months before shooting begins.) Emotional climaxes are rendered very elliptically.

But the reason is really quite different in the two cases. The reason that Brecht rejected acting reflects his idea of the relation of dramatic art to critical intelligence. He thought that the emotional force of the acting would get in the way of the ideas represented in plays. (From what I saw of the work of the Berliner Ensemble six years ago, though, it didn't seem to me that the somewhat low-keyed acting really diminished emotional involvement; it was the highly stylized staging which did that.) The reason that Bresson rejects acting reflects his notion of the purity of the art itself. "Acting is for the theatre, which is a bastard art," he has said. "The film can be a true art because in it the author takes fragments of

reality and arranges them in such a way that their juxtaposition transforms them.” Cinema, for Bresson, is a total art, in which acting corrodes. In a film,

each shot is like a word, which means nothing by itself, or rather means so many things that in effect it is meaningless. But a word in a poem is transformed, its meaning made precise and unique, by its placing in relation to the words around it: in the same way a shot in a film is given its meaning by its context, and each shot modifies the meaning of the previous one until with the last shot a total, unparaphrasable meaning has been arrived at. Acting has nothing to do with that, it can only get in the way. Films can only be made by bypassing the will of those who appear in them; using not what they do, but what they are.

In sum: there are spiritual resources beyond effort, which appear only when effort is stilled. One imagines that Bresson never treats his actors to an “interpretation” of their roles: Claude Laydu, who plays the priest in *Journal d'un curé de campagne*, has said that while he was making the film he was never told to try to represent sanctity, though that is what it appears, when viewing the film, that he does. In the end, everything depends on the actor, who either has this luminous presence or doesn't. Laydu has it. So does François Leterrier, who is Fontaine in *Un condamné à mort s'est échappé*. But Martin Lassalle as Michel in *Pickpocket* conveys something wooden, at times evasive. With Florence Carrez in *Procès de Jeanne d'Arc*, Bresson has experimented with the limit of the unexpressive. There is no acting at all; she simply reads the lines. It could have worked. But it doesn't—because she is the least luminous of all the presences Bresson has “used” in his later films. The thinness of Bresson's last film is, partly, a failure of communicated intensity on the part of the actress who plays Jeanne, upon whom the film depends.

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All of Bresson's films have a common theme: the meaning of confinement and liberty. The imagery of the religious vocation and of crime are used jointly. Both lead to “the cell.”

The plots all have to do with incarceration and its sequel. *Les Anges du péché* takes place mostly inside a convent. Thérèse, an ex-convict who (unknown to the police) has just murdered the lover who betrayed her, is delivered into the hands of the Bethany nuns. One young novice, who tries to create a special relationship with Thérèse and, learning her secret, to get her to surrender herself voluntarily to the police, is expelled from the convent for insubordination. One morning, she is

found dying in the convent garden. Thérèse is finally moved, and the last shot is of her extending her hands to the policeman's manacles. . . . In *Les Dames du Bois de Boulogne*, the metaphor of confinement is repeated several times. Hélène and Jean have been confined in their love; he urges her to return to the world now that she is "free." But she doesn't, and instead devotes herself to setting a trap for him—a trap which requires that she find two pawns (Agnès and her mother), whom she virtually confines in an apartment while they await her orders. Like *Les Anges du péché*, this is the story of the redemption of a lost girl. In *Les Anges du péché*, Thérèse is liberated by accepting imprisonment; in *Les Dames du Bois de Boulogne*, Agnès is imprisoned, and then, arbitrarily, as by a miracle, is forgiven, set free. . . . In *Journal d'un curé de campagne*, the emphasis has shifted. The bad girl, Chantal, is kept in the background. The drama of confinement is in the priest's confinement in himself, his despair, his weakness, his mortal body. ("I was a prisoner of the Holy Agony.") He is liberated by accepting his senseless and agonizing death from stomach cancer. . . . In *Un condamné à mort s'est échappé*, which is set in a German-run prison in occupied France, confinement is most literally represented. So is liberation: the hero triumphs over himself (his despair, the temptation of inertia) and escapes. The obstacles are embodied both in material things and in the incalculability of the human beings in the vicinity of the solitary hero. But Fontaine risks trusting the two strangers in the courtyard at the beginning of his imprisonment, and his trust is not betrayed. And because he risks trusting the youthful collaborationist who is thrown into his cell with him on the eve of his escape (the alternative is to kill the boy), he is able to get out. . . . In *Pickpocket*, the hero is a young recluse who lives in a closet of a room, a petty criminal who, in Dostoevskian fashion, appears to crave punishment. Only at the end, when he has been caught and is in jail, talking through the bars with the girl who has loved him, is he depicted as being, possibly, able to love. . . . In *Procès de Jeanne d'Arc*, again the entire film is set in prison. As in *Journal d'un curé de campagne*, Jeanne's liberation comes through a hideous death; but Jeanne's martyrdom is much less affecting than the priest's, because she is so depersonalized (unlike Falconetti's Jeanne in Dreyer's great film) that she does not seem to mind dying.

The nature of drama being conflict, the real drama of Bresson's stories is interior conflict: the fight against oneself. And all the static and formal qualities of his films work to that end. Bresson has said, of his choice of the highly stylized and artificial plot of *Les Dames du Bois de Boulogne*, that it allowed him to "eliminate anything which might distract from the interior drama." Still, in that film and the one before it, interior drama is represented in an exterior form, however fastidious and stripped down. *Les Anges du péché* and *Les Dames du Bois de Boulogne* depict conflicts of wills among the various characters as much or more than they concern a conflict within the self.

It is only in the films following *Les Dames du Bois de Boulogne* that Bresson's drama has been really interiorized. The theme of *Journal d'un curé de campagne* is the

young priest's conflict with himself: only secondarily is this acted out in his relation with the vicar of Torcy, with Chantal, and with the countess, Chantal's mother. This is even clearer in *Un condamné à mort s'est échappé*—where the principal character is literally isolated in a cell, struggling against despair. Solitude and interior conflict pair off in another way in *Pickpocket*, where the solitary hero refuses despair only at the price of refusing love, and gives himself over to masturbatory acts of theft. But in the last film, where we know the drama should be taking place, there is scarcely any evidence of it. Conflict has been virtually suppressed; it must be inferred. Bresson's Jeanne is an automaton of grace. But, however interior the drama, there must be drama. This is what *Procès de Jeanne d'Arc* withholds.

Notice, though, that the “interior drama” which Bresson seeks to depict does not mean *psychology*. In realistic terms, the motives of Bresson's characters are often hidden, sometimes downright incredible. In *Pickpocket*, for instance, when Michel sums up his two years in London with “I lost all my money on gambling and women,” one simply does not believe it. Nor is it any more convincing that during this time the good Jacques, Michel's friend, has made Jeanne pregnant and then deserted her and their child.

Psychological implausibility is scarcely a virtue; and the narrative passages I have just cited are flaws in *Pickpocket*. But what is central to Bresson and, I think, not to be caviled at, is his evident belief that psychological analysis is superficial. (Reason: it assigns to action a paraphrasable meaning that true art transcends.) He does not intend his characters to be implausible, I'm sure; but he does, I think, intend them to be opaque. Bresson is interested in the forms of spiritual action—in the physics, as it were, rather than in the psychology of souls. Why persons behave as they do is, ultimately, not to be understood. (Psychology, precisely, *does* claim to understand.) Above all, persuasion is inexplicable, unpredictable. That the priest *does* reach the proud and unyielding countess (in *Journal d'un curé de campagne*), that Jeanne *doesn't* persuade Michel (in *Pickpocket*) are just facts—or mysteries, if you like.

Such a physics of the soul was the subject of Simone Weil's most remarkable book, *Gravity and Grace*. And the following sentences of Simone Weil's—

All the natural movements of the soul are controlled by laws analogous to those of physical gravity. Grace is the only exception.

Grace fills empty spaces, but it can only enter where there is a void to receive it, and it is grace itself which makes this void.

The imagination is continually at work filling up all the fissures through which grace might pass.

supply the three basic theorems of Bresson's “anthropology.” Some souls are heavy, others light; some are liberated or capable of being liberated, others not.

All one can do is be patient, and as empty as possible. In such a regimen there is no place for the imagination, much less for ideas and opinions. The ideal is neutrality, transparency. This is what is meant when the vicar of Torcy tells the young priest in *Journal d'un curé de campagne*, "A priest has no opinions."

Except in an ultimate unrepresentable sense, a priest has no attachments either. In the quest for spiritual lightness ("grace"), attachments are a spiritual encumbrance. Thus, the priest, in the climactic scene of *Journal d'un curé de campagne*, forces the countess to relinquish her passionate mourning for her dead son. True contact between persons is possible, of course; but it comes not through will but unasked for, through grace. Hence in Bresson's films human solidarity is represented only at a distance—as it is between the priest and the vicar of Torcy in *Journal d'un curé de campagne*, or between Fontaine and the other prisoners in *Un condamné à mort s'est échappé*. The actual coming together of two people in a relation of love can be stated, ushered in, as it were, before our eyes: Jean crying out "Stay! I love you!" to the nearly dead Agnès in *Les Dames du Bois de Boulogne*; Fontaine putting his arm around Jost in *Un condamné à mort s'est échappé*; Michel in *Pickpocket* saying to Jeanne through prison bars, "How long it has taken me to come to you." But we do not see love lived. The moment in which it is declared terminates the film.

In *Un condamné à mort s'est échappé*, the elderly man in the adjoining cell asks the hero, querulously, "Why do you fight?" Fontaine answers, "To fight. To fight against myself." The true fight against oneself is against one's heaviness, one's gravity. And the instrument of this fight is the idea of work, a project, a task. In *Les Anges du péché*, it is Anne-Marie's project of "saving" Thérèse. In *Les Dames du Bois de Boulogne*, it is the revenge plot of Hélène. These tasks are cast in traditional form—constantly referring back to the intention of the character who performs them, rather than decomposed into separately engrossing acts of behaviour. In *Journal d'un curé de campagne* (which is transitional in this respect) the most affecting images are not those of the priest in his role, struggling for the souls of his parishioners, but of the priest in his homely moments: riding his bicycle, removing his vestments, eating bread, walking. In Bresson's next two films, work has dissolved into the idea of the-infinite-taking-of-pains. The project has become totally concrete, incarnate, and at the same time more impersonal. In *Un condamné à mort s'est échappé*, the most powerful scenes are those which show the hero absorbed in his labours: Fontaine scraping at his door with the spoon, Fontaine sweeping the wood shavings which have fallen on the floor into a tiny pile with a single straw pulled from his broom. ("One month of patient work—my door opened.") In *Pickpocket*, the emotional centre of the film is where Michel is wordlessly, disinterestedly, taken in hand by a professional pickpocket and initiated into the real art of what he has only practised desultorily: difficult gestures are demonstrated, the necessity of repetition and routine is made clear. Large sections of *Un condamné à mort s'est échappé* and *Pickpocket* are wordless; they are about the

beauties of personality effaced by a project. The face is very quiet, while other parts of the body, represented as humble servants of projects, become expressive, transfigured. One remembers Thérèse kissing the white feet of the dead Anne-Marie at the end of *Les Anges du péché*, the bare feet of the monks filing down the stone corridor in the opening sequence of *Procès de Jeanne d'Arc*. One remembers Fontaine's large graceful hands at their endless labours in *Un condamné à mort s'est échappé*, the ballet of agile thieving hands in *Pickpocket*.

Through the "project"—exactly contrary to "imagination"—one overcomes the gravity that weighs down the spirit. Even *Les Dames du Bois de Boulogne*, whose story seems most un-Bressonian, rests on this contrast between a project and gravity (or, immobility). Hélène has a project—revenging herself on Jean. But she is immobile, too—from suffering and vengefulness. Only in *Procès de Jeanne d'Arc*, the most Bressonian of stories, is this contrast (to the detriment of the film) not exploited. Jeanne has no project. Or if she may be said to have a project, her martyrdom, we only know about it; we are not privy to its development and consummation. She *appears* to be passive. If only because Jeanne is not portrayed for us in her solitude, alone in her cell, Bresson's last film seems, next to the others, so undialectical.

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Jean Cocteau has said (*Cocteau on the Film*, A Conversation Recorded by André Fraigneau, 1951) that minds and souls today "live without a syntax, that is to say, without a moral system. This moral system has nothing to do with morality proper, and should be built up by each one of us as an inner style, without which no outer style is possible." Cocteau's films may be understood as portraying this inwardness which is the true morality; so may Bresson's. Both are concerned, in their films, with depicting spiritual style. This similarity is less than obvious because Cocteau conceives of spiritual style aesthetically, while in at least three of his films (*Les Anges du péché*, *Journal d'un curé de campagne*, and *Procès de Jeanne d'Arc*) Bresson seems committed to an explicit religious point of view. But the difference is not as great as it appears. Bresson's Catholicism is a language for rendering a certain vision of human action, rather than a "position" that is stated. (For contrast, compare the direct piety of Rossellini's *The Flowers of Saint Francis* and the complex debate on faith expounded in Melville's *Léon Morin, prêtre*.) The proof of this is that Bresson is able to say the same thing without Catholicism—in his three other films. In fact, the most entirely successful of all Bresson's films—*Un condamné à mort s'est échappé*—is one which, while it has a sensitive and intelligent priest in the background (one of the prisoners), bypasses the religious way of

posing the problem. The religious vocation supplies one setting for ideas about gravity, lucidity, and martyrdom. But the drastically secular subjects of crime, the revenge of betrayed love, and solitary imprisonment also yield the same themes.

Bresson is really more like Cocteau than appears—an ascetic Cocteau, Cocteau divesting himself of sensuousness, Cocteau without poetry. The aim is the same: to build up an image of spiritual style. But the sensibility, needless to say, is altogether different. Cocteau's is a clear example of the homosexual sensibility that is one of the principal traditions of modern art: both romantic and witty, languorously drawn to physical beauty and yet always decorating itself with stylishness and artifice. Bresson's sensibility is antiromantic and solemn, pledged to ward off the easy pleasures of physical beauty and artifice for a pleasure which is more permanent, more edifying, more sincere.

In the evolution of this sensibility, Bresson's cinematic means become more and more chaste. His first two films, which were photographed by Philippe Agostini, stress visual effects in a way that the other four do not. Bresson's very first film, *Les Anges du péché*, is more conventionally beautiful than any which have followed. And in *Les Dames du Bois de Boulogne*, whose beauty is more muted, there are lyrical camera movements, like the shot which follows Hélène running down the stairs to arrive at the same time as Jean, who is descending in an elevator, and stunning cuts, like the one which moves from Hélène alone in her bedroom, stretched out on the bed, saying, "I will be revenged," to the first shot of Agnès, in a crowded nightclub, wearing tights and net stockings and top hat, in the throes of a sexy dance. Extremes of black-and-white succeed one another with great deliberateness. In *Les Anges du péché*, the darkness of the prison scene is set off by the whiteness of the convent wall and of the nuns' robes. In *Les Dames du Bois de Boulogne*, the contrasts are set by clothes even more than by interiors. Hélène always wears long black velvet dresses, whatever the occasion. Agnès has three costumes: the scant black dancing outfit in which she appears the first time, the light-coloured trench-coat she wears during most of the film, and the white wedding dress at the end. . . . The last four films, which were photographed by L. H. Burel, are much less striking visually, less chic. The photography is almost self-effacing. Sharp contrasts, as between black-and-white, are avoided. (It is almost impossible to imagine a Bresson film in colour.) In *Journal d'un curé de campagne*, for instance, one is not particularly aware of the blackness of the priest's habit. One barely notices the bloodstained shirt and dirty pants which Fontaine has on throughout *Un condamné à mort s'est échappé*, or the drab suits which Michel wears in *Pickpocket*. Clothes and interiors are as neutral, inconspicuous, functional as possible.

Besides refusing the visual, Bresson's later films also renounce "the beautiful." None of his non-professional actors are handsome in an outward sense. One's first feeling, when seeing Claude Laydu (the priest in *Journal d'un curé de campagne*),

François Leterrier (Fontaine in *Un condamné à mort s'est échappé*), Martin Lassalle (Michel in *Pickpocket*), and Florence Carrez (Jeanne in *Procès de Jeanne d'Arc*), is how plain they are. Then, at some point or other, one begins to see the face as strikingly beautiful. The transformation is most profound, and satisfying, with François Leterrier as Fontaine. Here lies an important difference between the films of Cocteau and Bresson, a difference which indicates the special place of *Les Dames du Bois de Boulogne* in Bresson's work; for this film (for which Cocteau wrote the dialogue) is in this respect very Cocteauish. Maria Casarès's blackgarbed demonic Hélène is, visually and emotionally, of a piece with her brilliant performance in Cocteau's *Orphée* (1950). Such a hard-edge character, a character with a "motive" that remains constant throughout the story, is very different from the treatment of character, typical of Bresson, in *Journal d'un curé de campagne*, *Un condamné à mort s'est échappé*, and *Pickpocket*. In the course of each of these three films, there is a subliminal revelation: a face which at first seems plain reveals itself to be beautiful; a character which at first seems opaque becomes oddly and inexplicably transparent. But in Cocteau's films—and in *Les Dames du Bois de Boulogne*—neither character nor beauty is revealed. They are there to be assumed, to be transposed into drama.

While the spiritual style of Cocteau's heroes (who are played, usually, by Jean Marais) tends toward narcissism, the spiritual style of Bresson's heroes is one variety or other of unself-consciousness. (Hence the role of the project in Bresson's films: it absorbs the energies that would otherwise be spent on the self. It effaces personality, in the sense of personality as what is idiosyncratic in each human being, the limit inside which we are locked.) Consciousness of self is the "gravity" that burdens the spirit; the surpassing of the consciousness of self is "grace," or spiritual lightness. The climax of Cocteau's films is a voluptuous movement: a falling down, either in love (*Orphée*) or death (*L'Aigle à deux têtes*, *L'Éternel retour*); or a soaring up (*La Belle et la bête*). With the exception of *Les Dames du Bois de Boulogne* (with its final glamorous image, shot from above, of Jean bending over Agnès, who lies on the floor like a great white bird), the end of Bresson's films is counter-voluptuous, reserved.

While Cocteau's art is irresistibly drawn to the logic of dreams, and to the truth of invention over the truth of "real life," Bresson's art moves increasingly away from the story and toward documentary. *Journal d'un curé de campagne* is a fiction, drawn from the superb novel of the same name by Georges Bernanos. But the journal device allows Bresson to relate the fiction in a quasi-documentary fashion. The film opens with a shot of a notebook and a hand writing in it, followed by a voice on the soundtrack reading what has been written. Many scenes start with the priest writing in his journal. The film ends with a letter from a friend to the vicar of Torcy relating the priest's death—we hear the words while the whole screen is occupied with the silhouette of a cross. Before *Un condamné à mort s'est échappé* begins

we read the words on the screen: "This story actually happened. I have set it down without embellishment," and then: "Lyons, 1943." (Bresson had the original of Fontaine constantly present while the film was being made, to check on its accuracy.) *Pickpocket*, again a fiction, is told—partly—through journal form. Bresson returned to documentary in *Procès de Jeanne d'Arc*, this time with the greatest severity. Even music, which aided in setting tone in the earlier films, has been discarded. The use of the Mozart Mass in C Minor in *Un condamné à mort s'est échappé*, of Lully in *Pickpocket*, is particularly brilliant; but all that survives of music in *Procès de Jeanne d'Arc* is the drum beat at the opening of the film.

Bresson's attempt is to insist on the irrefutability of what he is presenting. Nothing happens by chance; there are no alternatives, no fantasy; everything is inexorable. Whatever is not necessary, whatever is merely anecdotal or decorative, must be left out. Unlike Cocteau, Bresson wishes to pare down—rather than to enlarge—the dramatic and visual resources of the cinema. (In this, Bresson again reminds one of Ozu, who in the course of his thirty years of filmmaking renounced the moving camera, the dissolve, the fade.) True, in the last, most ascetic of all his films, Bresson seems to have left out too much, to have over-refined his conception. But a conception as ambitious as this cannot help but have its extremism, and Bresson's "failures" are worth more than most directors' successes. For Bresson, art is the discovery of what is necessary—of that, and nothing more. The power of Bresson's six films lies in the fact that his purity and fastidiousness are not just an assertion about the resources of the cinema, as much of modern painting is mainly a comment in paint about painting. They are at the same time an idea about life, about what Cocteau called "inner style," about the most serious way of being human.