



'Les Dames du Bois de Boulogne': 'One recognises the truth by its efficacy, by its power.'\*

# "On Two Deaths and Three Births"

## The Cinematography of Robert Bresson

*'My movie is born first in my head, dies on paper, is resuscitated by the living persons and real objects I use, which are killed on film but, placed in a certain order and projected onto a screen, come to life again like flowers in water.'*\*

**A**LTHOUGH Robert Bresson has made only twelve films since 1943, these have been sufficient to establish him as one of the cinema's most important and obsessive artists. Bresson's output has been extraordinarily limited, and yet his career has been of central importance to the post-war cinema. Bresson has, for instance, been recognised as a major influence upon directors as geographically, economically, and artistically diverse as Martin Scorsese, Andrei Tarkovsky, and Jean-Marie Straub. Despite his considerable critical status,

Bresson's films are only rarely shown. Also, very little is known of Bresson's conception of 'Cinematography', which comprises his distinctive and thoroughly personal style. Instead, critical commentary concentrates almost exclusively upon Bresson's narrative structure and the supposed 'meaning' of his films.

*"They want to find the solution where all is enigma only." (Pascal)\**

The richness of Bresson's narratives has invariably been attributed either to his Catholic background or to his experience as a prisoner of war. Clearly such factors are likely to be profoundly influential, and both have suggested themes to which Bresson, under their largely sub-conscious influence, has constantly returned — themes of the transcendence of love and grace, and the attainment of grace, salvation, and redemption through humiliation and suffering.

However, Bresson himself prefers to concentrate upon his carefully developed aesthetic principles, and these comprise the predominant conscious influence upon his construction of a film: 'To forge for oneself iron laws, if only in order to obey or disobey them *with difficulty*.'\*

Although rigorous, Bresson's aesthetic and creative principles, collectively 'Cinematography', are nevertheless underpinned by a tendency towards denying intellectualism in art. Bresson's conception of 'Cinematography' is explicitly designed to explore and reveal the expression of emotion within a film. Bresson radically contrasts 'Cinematography' with 'Cinema', the latter characterised as being burdened with the traditions of the theatre and the limitations of the rational intellect. Bresson has also carefully and consistently outlined the means by which 'Cinematography' can achieve, almost paradoxically, a refined



and poetic form of cinematic realism, expressed as a curiously ascetic minimalism. 'Cinematography' seeks to realise the perfect interpenetration of style and content: Documentary of emotion, not documentary of events.

*'Respect man's nature without wishing it more palpable than it is.'*\*

'Cinematography films: emotional, not representational.\* The interpenetration of the two central themes of 'Cinematography' — the revelation of emotion and the pursuit of a particular form of cinematic realism — has ensured that Bresson consistently seeks to avoid conventional psychological characterisation. He suppresses dramatic intentions and imposes the rigours of automatism upon his 'models' (Bresson contrasts 'model' and 'actor', just as he contrasts 'Cinematography' and 'Cinema').

Bresson's conception of conventional psychological characterisation is invariably suggested by the expressionistic style of acting typical of the theatre, which, to be effective, requires 'a flesh and blood presence' (which the 'Cinema' can necessarily only photographically record, and dilute, upon film). Theatrical expressionism is

determined by an antecedent conception of character, which is imposed upon the actor. By contrast, 'Cinematography' seeks to reveal only the actual emotions and reactions of a 'model', placed within the fictional narrative of a film and stripped of the expressionism of the theatre: the 'model' is wholly dependent upon his own resources for the suggestion and revelation of emotion and expression: 'Your imagination will aim less at events than at feelings while wanting these latter to be as *documentary* as possible.\*

An actor simulates emotion by attempting to assume the character of another. A 'model' reveals emotion by simply remaining himself, even when fully immersed within the fictional narrative of the film. So, although Bresson develops a carefully constructed and detailed shooting-script, he does not predetermine the psychological characterisation of his 'models': 'You must have no preconceived idea of how someone is to be.' However, the negation of conventional characterisation alone is insufficient to ensure the achievement of the aims of 'Cinematography'. Bresson seeks to suppress not only dramatic intentions, but also intentions of any kind. Bresson attempts to impose upon his 'models'

the automatism and regulation of habit which generally governs human movements, suppressing the subordination of movement to the determinations of the conscious will: 'It is being constrained to a mechanical regularity, it is from a mechanism that emotion will be born. To understand this, think of certain great pianists.\*

'... *Without lacking naturalness, they lack nature.* — Chateaubriand. Nature: what the dramatic art suppresses in favour of a naturalness that is learned and maintained by exercises.\* To achieve automatism, Bresson insists upon the use of certain exercises for his 'models'. Speech exercises are utilised — the mechanical repetition of lines, independent of the interposition of conscious thought, designed to ensure the equalisation of tone when speaking and the suppression of intentional expression. When those words are finally recorded, and having been mechanically learned, they assume the natural and unconscious inflection and lilt of the voice of the 'model', perfectly and accurately expressing him, without the subordination of his speech processes to the determinations of the will.

*'Production of emotion produced by a resistance to emotion.'*\*



'Le Journal d'un Curé de Campagne': 'The ejaculatory force of the eye.'\*

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his 'model'. While only simplicity is required, it is the simplicity of complete openness and honesty, which demands complete mutual trust between the director and his 'models': 'Model. His pure essence.'\*

*'To think it more natural for a movement to be made or a phrase said like this than like that is absurd, is meaningless in cinematography.'*\*

In *Notes on Cinematography*, Bresson explicitly states that the 'Cinematographic' film must avoid paroxysms, such as rage, anger, or extreme fear, since the presentation of such emotions would require the negation of 'Cinematography', that is, conscious intention and expressionistic acting. Consequently, the potential narrative and the nature of the performance of the 'models' is limited to a particular range; narrative must avoid paroxysms, so typical of the theatrical 'Cinema', and performances must reveal only the unintentional reactions and emotions of the 'models'. 'Dramatic art is just too strong for film' — the expressionism of the theatre ridiculously magnified by the lens of the camera into the exaggerated proportions of the kabuki. For 'Cinematography' to be successful, therefore, director and 'models' must understand one another: 'Choose your models well, so they lead you where you want to go.'\*

*'One single mystery of persons and objects.'*\*

In 'Cinematography', the choice of 'model' is of paramount importance. The 'model' must be at least willing to accept the external constraints imposed by 'Cinematography' (Bresson recognises the possible success of a 'Cinematographic' film in which the 'model' successfully avoids the subordination of intentions to the conscious will and the expressionistic methods of acting used in the theatrical 'Cinema', and yet still resists the expression of unintentional emotion): 'To your models: "One must not act either somebody else or oneself. One must not act *anybody*."'\* Consequently, Bresson has invariably worked with non-professionals, chosen for their physical attributes rather than because of any capacity to act. (Bresson admits that the ridiculous excesses of both the Hamlet scene in *Une Femme Douce* and the clip of gangster film in *Quatre Nuits d'un Rêveur* are deliberate assaults upon conventional forms of cinematic (theatrical) acting.) For *Une Femme Douce*, Bresson chose Dominique Sanda

'Quatre Nuits d'un Rêveur': 'Let it be the feelings that bring about the events. Not the other way.'\*

Bresson pursues the revelation of emotion expressed by his 'models' through an intense concentration upon their words, actions, and appearance: 'Montaigne: *The movements of the soul were born with the same progression as those of the body.*'\* Bresson's direction of the physical movements of his 'models' closely parallels his approach to the direction of their speech: 'All that I say to them is to walk from here to here, maybe slowly, maybe quickly and then, to turn around and just to speak their words.' Bresson only demands complete simplicity — the absolute minimum required to convey narrative and meaning, the spare presentation of carefully chosen, meticulously controlled and delicately poised words, acts, and gestures.

The concentration of 'Cinematography' upon the exterior forms of its 'models' — the words and actions which they deliver and perform, and the environment within which they exist is derivatively dependent upon Bresson's qualification of Montaigne: '*Every movement reveals us* (Montaigne). But it only reveals us if it is automatic (not commanded, not willed).'\* Stripped of all intentions and forced to reveal themselves through the rigorous imposition of automatism, their performance reveals the inner motivations of their every word, action, and gesture.

The criticism that Bresson's 'Cinematography' is purely a director's cinema, that it immorally suppresses and abuses its 'models', is misguided. For Bresson, the immersion of his 'models' within the pre-existing narrative of his film introduces a reciprocal relationship between director and

'model', rather than a simply directorial relationship. However, in establishing the narrative structure of the film and selecting the aspects of the 'model's' existence which are recorded by the camera and the tape recorder, Bresson controls the limitations within which the relationship between the director and 'model' can develop. The refusal to indulge in conventional psychological characterisation, the suppression of dramatic intentions, and the imposition of automatism paradoxically release Bresson's 'models' and allow them a greater involvement within, and influence upon, the film than has the actor within the 'Cinema'. 'Cinematography' explores and reveals the expression of emotion, and it is the emotions of the 'models', or indeed their unconscious resistance to the expression of emotions, which are recorded by the camera and the tape recorder, and these comprise the substance of a 'Cinematographic' film.

Although these emotions are precipitated and refined by the director, the relationship between director and 'model' remains a creative, dynamic, and reciprocal relationship: 'Model. You illumine him and he illumines you. The light you receive from him is added to the light he receives from you.'\*

'Cinematography' cannot be criticised for its method of directing 'models', for immorally suppressing and abusing the nature of its 'models'. On the contrary, perhaps the major weakness of 'Cinematography' is the enormous responsibility which it affords its 'models' and the stress which it necessarily places upon the central relationship between the director and



because he had seen a photograph of her in *Vogue*, for which she had posed topless. Requiring someone prepared to appear topless for just one scene in *Une Femme Douce*, Bresson therefore contacted Dominique Sanda through her agent, and she agreed to work with him. Of her husband in the film Bresson has said: 'I went to a local painter's studio, because I know that painters are always out of work all year and I chose this man. . . . Actually, I don't like him much, but I know that I can always get another man if it doesn't work.'

Of Dominique Sanda, who played 'la femme douce', Bresson has commented: 'She never saw the script so she didn't know what she was meant to be doing.' With all dramatic intentions radically suppressed, Dominique Sanda simply reacted to the words she spoke and the actions she performed. Mechanically and automatically learned, delivered, and performed and devoid of any intentional expression, those words and actions became intimately related to her own, unconscious character, to which they became assimilated. Finally, in front of the camera and the tape recorder, she unconsciously revealed herself in her repetition of the words and acts she no longer needed to think about; within their mechanical performance she revealed herself with complete honesty. In *Une Femme Douce* the couple go to the theatre and at the end of the performance the audience applauds. 'La femme douce' alone is silent, sitting impassively, staring at the stage: 'Dominique Sanda didn't know what she was to do, and the 'femme douce' was just the sort of person who does not know what to do in this situation.'

*'Models automatically inspired, inventive.'*\*

Even when thrust into the narrative complexity of a film, the essence of being a 'model' is to be completely incapable of imitation and conscious intention: 'BEING (models) instead of SEEMING (actors).'\* To further reinforce the incapacity of the 'model' for either imitation or dramatic intention, and to ensure the predominance of simple automatism as the major determinant of speech and movement, revealing unconscious expression, Bresson insists that a 'model' can only appear in a single film. First, to appear in more than one film would require that the audience accept the 'model' as capable of being two different persons, which would reduce their capacity and willingness to believe in the performance and the unconscious expression

revealed (a criticism of the 'Cinema' and its star-system, with the same faces falsely assuming numerous roles). 'Cinematography' demands that the 'model' remain himself and only ever unconsciously express himself. Secondly, before appearing in a second film, the 'model' might examine himself in the earlier film, as in a mirror. He might abstract aspects of his character from his original performance that he particularly wished to stress in the second film. He could then consciously and intentionally explore and reveal those aspects of his character within the latter film, to that film's profound detriment. 'Cinematography' can only succeed where its rigours are upheld and adhered to, where the realism of the unconscious expression of emotion predominates: 'YOUR MODELS MUST NOT FEEL THEY ARE DRAMATIC.'\*

*'Corot: "One must not seek, one must wait."'\**

**'CINEMATOGRAPHY':** The perfect and harmonious interpenetration of (i). Content; the presentation of the actual expression of unintentionally motivated 'models' and (ii). Style; the rigorous pursuit of a refined and poetic form of cinematic realism.

**'CINEMATOGRAPHY':** Documentary of emotion, not documentary of events.

*'To communicate impressions, sensations.'*\*

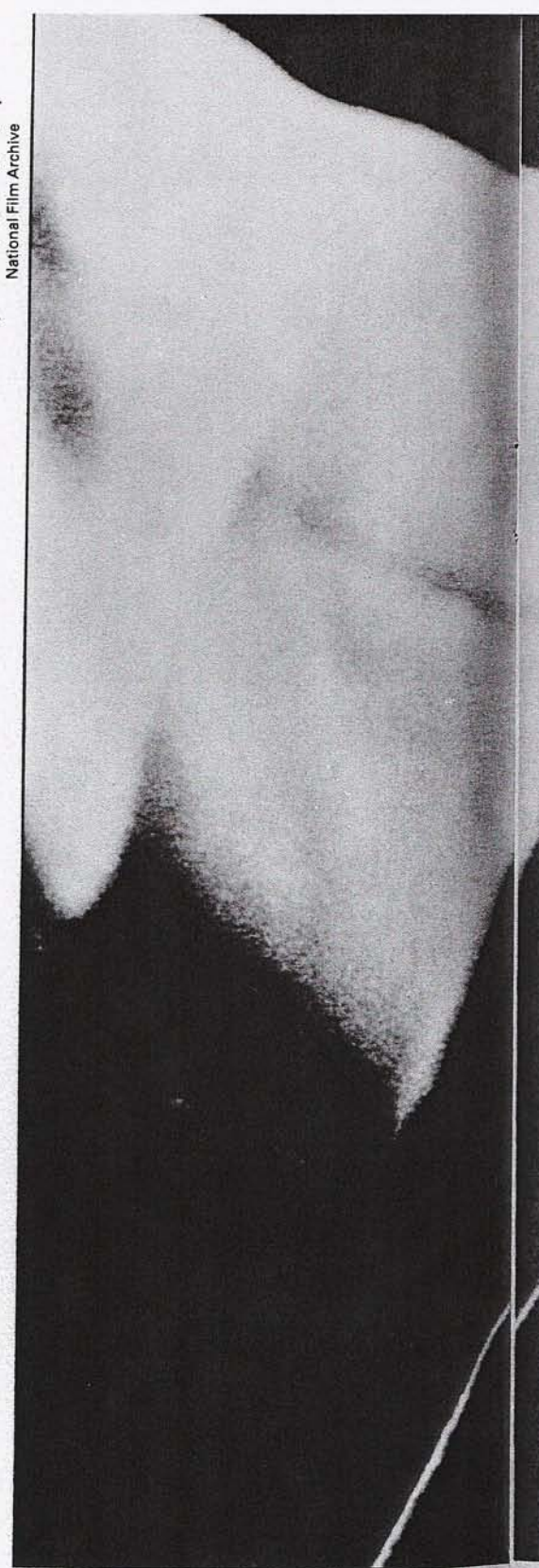
**I**N order to realise verisimilitude within 'Cinematographic' films, Bresson has sought to render all their aspects as realistically as possible. Pre-existing texts and novels have often provided the basis for Bresson's films, and his various means of handling such texts demonstrate his enduring quest, the apprehension of a poetic form of cinematic realism, capable of perfectly revealing the unintentional expression and emotion of his 'models'.

The narrative for *Les Dames du Bois de Boulogne* was abstracted from the Diderot story, *Jacques le Fataliste*. Although Diderot's story was a realistic eighteenth century narrative, Bresson's abstraction for the scenario, Cocteau's stylised twentieth century dialogue, and the stylised costumes and décor represent a flight from realism. However, although in a completely inverted form (Bresson also used professional actors, but cast them in parts completely contrary to those that they were used to playing), Bresson had begun the

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development towards 'Cinematography'; in *Les Dames* he achieves a highly stylised, anti-realist, but nevertheless extraordinarily powerful interpenetration of style and content.

Bresson's next film, *Le Journal d'un Curé de Campagne*, was adapted from the George Bernanos novel. Bresson's direction of his 'models' (suppressing theatrical expressionistic methods of acting) represents a development towards 'Cinematography' from his direction of actors in *Les Dames du Bois de Boulogne*. Bresson retained the first-







'Le Procès de Jeanne d'Arc': 'Model. Soul, body, both inimitable.'\*

person narration of the novel, simultaneously presenting information through complementary images and the spoken narration. These, combined with the observation of the Curé writing his diary, suggest Bresson's development towards the 'documentary' methods of mature 'Cinematography'.

Bresson has condemned the conception of an art in another art's form, suggesting its inelegance, dilution, and its incapacity for precipitating emotion. Although both are adaptations from Bernanos, *Le Journal d'un Curé de*

*Campagne* is superior to *Mouchette*. *Mouchette* is perhaps a less engaging character than the Curé, being less complex and experienced and being, primarily, a victim, unable to influence her destiny. Of greater significance in *Le Journal* is Bresson's development of an implied documentary approach, suggesting the rigours and subtlety of a fully developed conception of 'Cinematography'. Although *Mouchette* was made far later, it was still not made under the rigorous creative constraints of Bresson's gradually developing

'Cinematographic' methods; for instance, Bresson uses Monteverdi's *Magnificat* to accompany Mouchette's suicide, introducing a falsely dramatic and non-documentary, intentionally produced emotional element into the film ('No music as accompaniment, support or reinforcement. *No music at all.*\*').

The significance of *Le Journal* is due to its discoveries — Bresson's suppression of dramatic intentions and methods; his initial association with a documentary approach to expression; and his



capacity to transform the literary text of the novel (to which he remained extraordinarily faithful) into a uniquely cinematic piece of work, the literary being radically subordinated to the cinematic, the former providing a vehicle for the development of the latter.

In *Le Procès de Jeanne d'Arc*, his sparsest film, Bresson adhered to the official text of the trial with absolute fidelity and reduced the narrative development to a series of virtually immobile frames, isolating the characters through a concentration upon one-shots. Bresson's adherence to the text almost verges upon the self-destructive: Joan *must* die, and both the film's style and content partially fail to create the necessary spiritual tension, or achieve the complete revelation of expression and emotion which Bresson sought. However, in its devastating rigour, *Le Procès* represents a further development towards 'Cinematography', the subordination of the text to the 'Cinematographic', continuing the exploration of the documentary presentation of expression and emotion.

*Une Femme Douce* and *Quatre Nuits d'un Rêveur* are adaptations of the Dostoevsky novels *A Gentle Creature* and *White Nights*. Both films were made within the creative constraints of a refined, mature, and fully developed conception of 'Cinematography'. In his *Notes On Cinematography*, Bresson comments: 'Proust says that Dostoevsky is original in composition above all. It is an extraordinarily complex and close-meshed whole, purely inward, with currents and counter-currents like those of the sea, a thing that is found also in Proust (in other ways so different) and whose equivalent would go well with film.'\* Bresson is drawn to Dostoevsky because of the latter's capacity for the revelation of spiritual complexity and depth and because of his ability to fully intertwine style and content in his presentation of that complexity and depth. In both *Une Femme Douce* and *Quatre Nuits d'un Rêveur* Bresson brings Dostoevsky's narrative forward into the twentieth century, but remains close to the original narrative of the novel. Bresson's distaste for conventional narrative conceptions of plot, condemned as a novelist's trick, and his willingness to adhere to the precise narrative of Dostoevsky's novels demonstrate his immense admiration for Dostoevsky, whose narrative Bresson sees as the external revelation of the internal states of his characters. *Une Femme Douce* and *Quatre Nuits d'un Rêveur* are fully 'Cinematographic' films, documentaries of emotions. Therefore, adaptation was only really required in

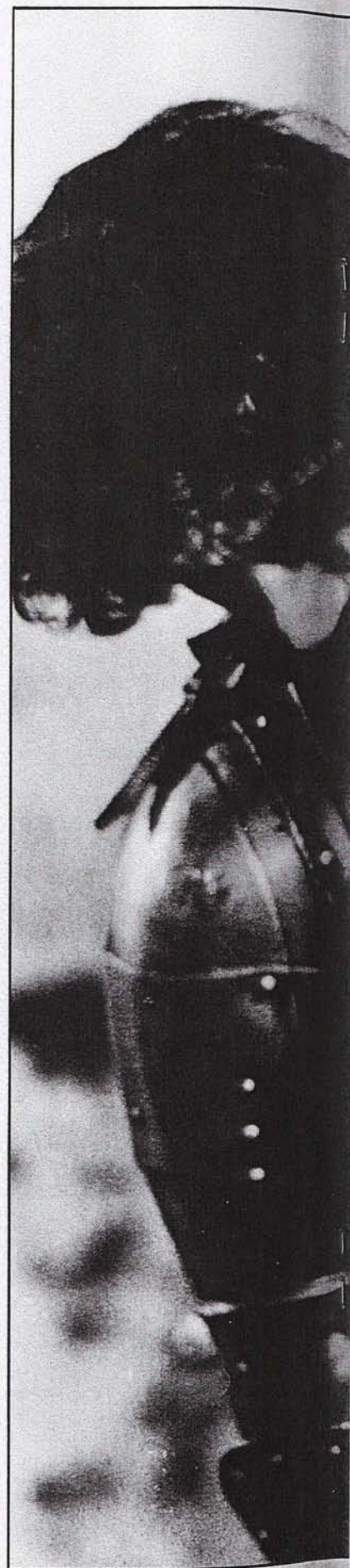
order to visualise the twentieth-century realisation of Dostoevsky's nineteenth-century narrative structure. Bresson could retain all the elements of Dostoevsky's novels, realistically presented within a twentieth-century narrative, since the novelist had provided Bresson with the materials with which to realise and extend his method, the documentary approach to expression and emotion, already suggested by Dostoevsky.

*'From the beings and things of nature, washed clean of all art and especially of the art of drama, you will make an art.'*\*

Bresson's faithfulness to pre-existing texts and novels and his 'Cinematographic' realisation of their narratives — despite his aversion to the conception of an art within another art's form — is explicable by reference to the subtle complexities of 'Cinematography'. However, the insistence upon the use of realistic locations and settings is less complex: 'In a mixture of true and false, the true brings out the false, the false hinders belief in the true. An actor simulating fear of shipwreck on the deck of a real ship battered by a real storm — we believe neither in the actor, nor in the ship, nor in the storm.'\* The use of realistic locations and settings ensures an audience's tendency to accept the 'models' expression and also strengthens the 'Cinematographic' rigours, through which the 'models' unintentional expression is produced.

*Les Anges du Péché* was shot almost entirely in the studio, and much of its resonance is derived from the juxtaposition of the dazzling whiteness of the convent and the darkness of the prison in which Thérèse is incarcerated. A similar, symbolic use of black and white is utilised in *Les Dames du Bois de Boulogne*; the enclosed darkness of Hélène's room is contrasted with the bright openness of Agnes's room. Bresson has subsequently avoided the expressionistic use of location and décor. *Le Journal d'un Curé de Campagne* was shot at Equilles, in the Pas-de-Calais, in the countryside described by Bernanos in his novel. Bresson has also preferred to develop the subtle and compressed suggestiveness of sound in his subsequent films (the scratching of the rake upon the earth, audible in the pauses during the conversation between the Curé d'Ambricourt and the Countess, in *Le Journal*; the sound of the flames as Jeanne d'Arc burns; and the braying of the ass in *Au Hasard, Balthazar*).

*Un Condamné à Mort s'est Echappé* was



Lancelot and Guinevere

STILLS





Who said: "A single look lets loose a passion, a murder, a war"?\*

based upon a newspaper story concerning the 1943 escape of André Devigny from the Gestapo only hours before he was to have been executed. Bresson shot much of the film at Fort Montluc, where Devigny had actually been held. When, in order to complete the film, Fontaine's cell had to be recreated in the studio, Bresson insisted upon the use of realistic materials in the faithful reconstruction of the cell, attempting to physically recreate the details of Fontaine's environment. (Bresson's insistence parallels his acceptance of Montaigne's assertion: '*The movements of the soul were born with the same progression as those of the body*'.\*) The documentary approach of 'Cinematography' towards expression of emotion requires appropriate settings and locations within which the 'model' can be freed from the constraints of the 'Cinema' (theatre) and of intentions.

After *Un Condamné à Mort s'est Echappé*, Bresson's approach to locations and settings and to the realistic requirements of 'Cinematography' has been more rigorous. Even in the 'historical' films, *Le Procès de Jeanne d'Arc* and *Lancelot du Lac*, Bresson avoided methods typical of the genre, minimising the number and complexity of locations required and presenting them as sparsely as possible. Completely realistic settings and locations have predominated within the later films: *Au Hasard*, *Balthazar* and *Mouchette* were both set in the provinces, and *Pickpocket*, *Une Femme Douce*, *Quatre Nuits d'un Réveur* and *Le Diable Probablement* were all set in Paris.

'Counter the high relief of the theatre with the smoothness of cinematography.'\*

In the pursuit of realism, Bresson asserts the incompatibility of 'Cinematography' and music, with the exception of that which is played by visible instruments. Emotionally, music is extremely affective, but it therefore detracts from the documentary approach to expression, around which 'Cinematography' revolves: 'Music. It isolates your film from the life of your film (musical delectation). It is a powerful modifier and even destroyer of the real, like alcohol or dope.'\* Consequently, Bresson has criticised his own early films as 'just like all the rest, using music where there should be no music' (Mozart, Lully, Schubert, and Monteverdi in *Un Condamné à Mort s'est Echappé*, *Pickpocket*, *Au Hasard*, *Balthazar* and *Mouchette*, respectively). And yet, Bresson has continued to use music within his 'Cinematographic' films, both realistically and effectively.





Fontaine and Jost escape. 'Un Condamné à Mort s'est Echappé': 'Model. The spark caught in his eye's pupil gives significance to his whole person.'\*

During her husband's absence, 'la femme douce' plays records, and her disruptive removal of the needle from the records is emotionally suggestive. Music is used in *Quatre Nuits d'un Rêveur*: the singing of the hippies and the music from the tourist boat, gliding down the Seine, gradually fade into the distance. Finally, in *Lancelot du Lac*, the playing of medieval pipes punctuates Lancelot's jousting successes.

In pursuit of the aims of 'Cinematography', and therefore consistent with his refusal to use unrealistic music in films, Bresson demands the faithfulness of direct sound, recognising that discrepancies will inevitably occur if post-synchronised sound is utilised. Sound is enormously important within 'Cinematographic' films, and Bresson has consistently used sound to considerable effect — the overlapping sound of Hélène's voice and the sound of tap-dancing; the sounds of the rain and of the fountain in *Les Dames du Bois de Boulogne*; the squeaking wagon wheel in *Le Journal d'un Curé de Campagne*; Fontaine's only contact with the external world, in *Un Condamné à Mort s'est Echappé*, the sounds of trams, trains, cars, and bicycles; and the clanking of armour in *Lancelot du Lac*.

Bresson suggests that: 'The eye leads always to the exterior, the ear leads more to the interior.' Both in content and in the manner of delivery, spoken words often more profoundly reveal human emotion and expression than any visible manifestation might, and the disembodied sounds of inanimate objects often more smoothly and suggestively imply their existence, heightening the sense of isolation which permeates all of Bresson's films.

Illustrating his belief that sound may

achieve greater 'Cinematographic' compression and effectiveness than images, Bresson tells the almost perverse story of a man, cured of blindness, who married a blind woman. The couple had five children, all of whom were born blind and all of whom led extraordinarily full and happy lives. Unfortunately, unable to fully communicate with his wife and children and having lost his previous acute sensitivity of hearing, the father alone was unhappy. Recognising the expressiveness of sound, Bresson suggests that he now relies heavily upon the sound and tone of voice as the major determinant in his choice of 'models', rather than upon purely external, physical attributes.

### 'THE SOUNDTRACK INVENTED SILENCE.'\*

'The noises must become music.'\*

Bresson's first and enduring passion was for painting, and the quality of his austere, controlled visual style has been attributed to his association with graphic art: 'Have a painter's eye. The painter creates by looking.'\* The predominant conscious influence upon Bresson's visual style is, however, his desire to remain faithful to the principles of 'Cinematography' in his attempt to achieve a poetic cinematic realism of human expression. Preferring to refine the methods of 'Cinematography', Bresson has rigorously eschewed the attractions of producing films of gratuitous visual distinction ('postcardism'\*). The purpose of lighting, for example, can never be the production of expressionistic visual effects. Lighting is only important to ensure that sufficient illumination

exists to facilitate shooting: 'Of lighting. Things made more visible not by more light, but by the fresh angle at which I see them.'\*

Bresson's use of lens, camera, and colour film stock also demonstrate his gradual development of 'Cinematography'. Bresson uses only a single, standard lens (50 mm.), because 'to change my lens is to change my eyes, it is to distort.' Aware of the visual and perspective distortions produced by lenses of different focal lengths, Bresson demands the use of just the one standard lens, which approximates the perspective of the human eye, ensuring the capacity for continued belief in the realistic images of 'Cinematography'. Similarly, Bresson used colour film stock as soon as it became financially viable (*Une Femme Douce*; 1969). Although Bresson's earlier films include numerous staggeringly beautiful and expressive monochrome frames (in particular, *Les Anges du Péché* and *Les Dames du Bois de Boulogne*, the cameraman for both of which was Philippe Agostini), Bresson has rejected them in favour of a 'Cinematographic' realism, associated with the realistic presentation of visual information and the use of colour film stock: 'Colour gives force to your images. It is a means of rendering the real more true.'\* Bresson has also attempted to ensure that the movements of the camera do not draw excessive attention to themselves, but, rather, assume the movements of the eye. He avoids obvious travelling or panning shots and attempts to associate the mechanical existence of the camera with the nature of the human eye. Bresson has always concentrated upon the faces of his 'models', which most engage human vision ('Model. All face.'), and upon their gestures and revealing movements, explored in close-up.

### 'Shuddering of images awakening.'\*

RECOGNISING the independent potentials of sound and image, Bresson's conception of 'Cinematography' establishes the way in which sound and image must be related and balanced within each frame. One or the other must always predominate, and neither must simply support the other. Because Bresson avoids the presentation of extraneous detail, sound and image must be capable of independent 'Cinematographic' existence. Influenced by his background in graphic art, Bresson



suggests of the relationship between sound and image: 'If equal, they damage or kill each other, as we say of colours.'\* Consequently, Bresson concentrates upon the element capable of ensuring the greatest narrative compression (ellipsis) and of being the most rhythmically satisfactory. Discarding that which limits complete concentration upon the 'Cinematographically' essential and significant within each frame, Bresson conceives of sound and image as 'working as in a relay, first one and then the other.'

*'From the clash and sequence of images and sounds, a harmony of relationships must be born.'*\*

The narrative method of 'Cinematography' is intense compression, a constant emphasis upon the significant. Bresson utilises both ellipsis and rhythms to create harmonies (dis-harmonies) and to ensure narrative compression. *Au Hasard, Balthazar* is Bresson's most elliptical film, no more than a series of brushstrokes. In *Balthazar*, Bresson has attempted to extend his elliptical methods of construction to an entire film, rather than simply utilising it as a means of distilling the narrative and revealing the significant within each scene. Perhaps *Balthazar* is, in some ways, less successful than Bresson's other films; its elliptical construction results in partial disunity, rather than compressed revelation within the film. However, Bresson has commented: 'A highly compressed film will not yield its best at the first go. People see in it at first what seems like something they have seen before.'

For Bresson, the elliptical distillation and compression of each scene, rather than (self-consciously, as in *Balthazar*) of the entire film, has proven 'Cinematographically' successful. Ellipsis has ensured the smooth passage through scenes and the presentation of the purely significant.

In attempting to create harmonies and associations between individuals, events, and objects and to bind their elliptical presentation and exploration closely together, Bresson has increasingly sought to suggest relation and emotion through the use of 'Cinematographic' rhythm. Bresson makes most use of rhythm in *Lancelot du Lac*. Frequently repeated images, particularly those of the knights mounting and dismounting their horses, create rhythm, and the incessant clanking of the knights' armour creates a rhythm which gradually affects the consciousness (and is significantly contrasted

with Lancelot's removal of his armour before Guinevere). The effect of the rhythms is perhaps initially frustrating and unrealised; only gradually are they revealed and felt as they create harmonious relations within the film. They must nevertheless be credited with substantially ensuring the film's extraordinary power and unity.

### Rhythms.

*The omnipotence of rhythms. Nothing is durable but what is caught up in rhythms. Bend context to form and sense to rhythms.'*\*

The sparse realism of refined 'Cinematography' produces individual shots which exhibit the quality of extraordinary 'flatness'. Individually, each of Bresson's shots — carefully composed and constructed combinations of sound and image — are devoid of expression and emotional significance: 'Apply myself to insignificant (non-significant) images.'\* However, the inexpressiveness which Bresson consciously achieves within each shot is not intended as an attenuation of that shot. Bresson avoids the use of individually expressive shots ('post-cardism'\*), since the essence of 'Cinematography' is the juxtaposition of shots within sequences and their consequential transformation. A shot which is capable of excessive independent expression will be incapable of being transformed, overpowering those shots with which it is brought into contact. Therefore, 'Shooting is

not making something definitive, it is making preparations.'

The 'flatness' of an individual shot ensures its capacity to be transformed: 'Cinematographic film, where the images, like the words in a dictionary, have no power and value except through their position and relation.'\* Drawing upon his knowledge of graphic art, Bresson likens the transformation of 'Cinematographic' shots to the transformation which affects colours when variously associated with one another: 'A blue is not the same blue beside a green, a yellow, a red.'\* Although Bresson is meticulous in his production of each sound and image and their balance within individual shots, it is only within sequences that sounds and images gain particular significance: 'No art without transformation.'\* Harmony, balance, and rhythm only become revealed within sequences, and the 'models' expression of emotion only becomes significant and affective as it becomes gradually and quietly revealed.

The suppression of intentions within the 'models' of 'Cinematography' ensures that the significant — the revelation of expression and emotion — is unintentionally produced and remains unrealised until presented within the transformed 'Cinematographic' whole, the completed film. Therefore, the juxtaposition of shots introduces an element of discovery into 'Cinematography'. The director is only gradually able to grasp the entire significance of the emotional expression of his 'models', explored within the pre-existing narrative and faithfully recorded and revealed by the camera and the tape recorder: 'Your



'Unusual approach to bodies. On the watch for the most imperceptible, the most inward movement.'\* 'Le Diable Probablement'.



camera catches not only physical movements that are inapprehensible by pencil, brush or pen, but also certain states of soul recognisable by indices which it alone can reveal.\* However, it is a discovery which must be partially expected by the director. In antecedently establishing the narrative structure of the film and in determining the limits within which the 'models' are freed to achieve unintentional expression, the director retains substantial control over the film: 'Mark out clearly the limits within which you seek to let yourself be surprised by your model. Infinite surprises within a finite frame.\*' Also, it is the director who effects the 'Cinematographic' transformation of his individually inexpressive, preparatory shots. He reveals the significant, as perceived by him, through the juxtaposition of the individual shots and the creation of transformed sequences: An art form, produced through the creative transformation of realistically and mechanically apprehended movements, sounds, and objects — the external revealing the internal.

"They think this simplicity is a sign of meagre invention."  
(*Racine, preface to Bérénice*).\*

'You shall call a fine film the one that makes you think highly of cinematography.\*' 'Cinematography' aims to achieve the perfect and harmonious interpenetration of style and content. Bresson's concentration upon style is derivatively dependent upon his desire to achieve the documentary revelation of emotion. Therefore, the 'historical' films, *Le Procès de Jeanne d'Arc* and *Lancelot du Lac*, avoid the masquerade of the theatre and the 'Cinema', which attempt to represent historical epochs, and concentrate upon the exploration of non-historical realism and expression, through the use of historical (historically accurate) words: 'Return the past to the present. Magic of the present.\*'

According to Bresson, within the theatre the homogeneity of falsity, the anti-realism of the stage, and the use of dramatic expressionism is able to yield something of artistic significance. However, the combination of theatrical falsity and its realistic apprehension by the camera and tape recorder is self-destructive: the 'Cinema' surrenders its creative independence to the theatre and is therefore rendered incapable of securing belief in its vociferations. 'Cinematography' completely rids itself of the anti-realistic falsity of the theatre (and of the partial anti-realism of the

'Cinema'). Bresson's attitude to his 'models', to pre-existing texts and novels, to locations and settings, and to the mechanical and automatic production and rendition of sound and image, emphasises the 'Cinematographic' requirement to handle, record, and present them within a completely realistic framework, constantly 'Retouching the real with the real.\*' However: 'The crude real will not by itself yield truth.\*' Only through the transformation of the real is truth apprehended, the complete and unadorned truth of 'Cinematography', the documentary revelation of human expression and emotion: 'The true is inimitable, the false, untransformable.\*'

Bresson has commented, 'I feel that there is something magical beyond the cinema' (ie., beyond 'Cinematography'). During shooting, both director and 'models' are in a state of ignorance, unaware of both the totality of that which they have combined to create and of its value. Only through transformation is the revelation of unintentional expression and emotion discovered and refined and an art form created. Although Bresson has exhorted the director of 'Cinematographic' films to 'Be precise in the form, not always in the substance (if you can).\*' the concentration upon the



'Au Hasard, Balthazar': 'To create is not to deform or invent persons and things. It is to tie new relationships between persons and things which are, and as they are.\*'





Bresson during the shooting of 'Lancelot du Lac': 'Master precision. Be a precision instrument myself.'\*

stylistic rigours of 'Cinematography' is only intended to ensure the adequate mechanical apprehension of realistic sounds and images, capable of being transformed. Ultimately, Bresson's conception of 'Cinematography' is underpinned by an intuitive attitude towards artistic creation. The methods of 'Cinematography' simply facilitate the documentary exploration of expression and emotion. However, Bresson is only willing to elucidate upon the nature of the means by which that exploration and subsequent, transformed refinement and revelation is realised, and not upon the nature of the art form itself, which can only be sensuously (non-intellectually) experienced.

*'Don't run after poetry. It penetrates unaided through the joins (ellipses).'\**

**A**LTHOUGH largely concentrating upon the formal rigours of 'Cinematography', Bresson constantly alludes to its capacity for creative revelation, revealing an intuitive conception of the power of 'Cinematography' to achieve the transformation of a crude,

mechanically apprehended realism into an inspired art form. Bresson's conception of 'Cinematography' is finally both intuitive and fervently anti-intellectual — 'Cinematography' fulfilling itself in the perfect interpenetration of style and content. Refusing to acknowledge the concept of 'meaning' within films produced under the creative constraints of 'Cinematography', Bresson will only elucidate upon the technical rigours demanded by the method: 'Cinematography, the art, with images, of representing nothing.\*' Bresson radically contrasts thought and creation, characterising the 'Cinema' as being restrictively burdened by the former and 'Cinematography' as being creatively released by the latter. Thought is the conscious process of the intellect, the cerebral pursuit of an imposed order; creation is the result of the largely intuitive and inspired, non-rational activity of the mind. Consequently, Bresson avoids film-criticism and the desperate pursuit of 'meaning' in art, attempting to dissolve the tension which results when conscious thought destroys an audience's capacity for the sensuous appreciation of 'Cinematographic' films, just as it destroys the capacity of the 'model' to

achieve the unintentional revelation of expression and emotion: 'Do you have professors of film at Oxford? ... No? ... Ah, that's good!'

Bresson radically suppresses intentions within his 'models', although the formal rigour of 'Cinematography' ensures the revelation of unintentionally expressed emotion. Similarly, although constantly faithful to the requirements of 'Cinematography', Bresson recognises the extraordinary capacity of intuition within the creative process: 'Sudden rise of my film when I improvise, fall when I execute.\*' To suppress improvisation is to subordinate the creative urge to conscious thought and to the determinations of the will. For Bresson, it is to negate the act of creation and to reduce 'Cinematography' to the mere uninspired and conscious execution and realisation of the pre-existing script and to taint it with the self-destructive tendencies of the theatrical 'Cinema': 'CINEMA films controlled by intelligence, going no further.\*'

Bresson's success must be attributed to his faith in his gradually developed conception of 'Cinematography' and his refusal, even incapacity, to compromise in his relentless pursuit of its realisation. However, Bresson has



become increasingly isolated in his solitary faithfulness to 'Cinematography' (Jean-Marie Straub and Danièle Huillet, perhaps the film-makers stylistically closest to 'Cinematography', have based their cinematic style upon a synthesis of Marxism and the aesthetics of Bresson and Brecht). 'It is useless and silly to work specially for a public. I cannot try what I am making, at the moment of making it, except on myself. Besides, all that matters is to make well.'\* Although isolated, Bresson remains undeterred by the critical suggestion that his later work lacks both the spiritual depth and intensity, and the stylistic rigour of his earlier work. For Bresson, each film has represented a development, away from the theatrical 'Cinema' and towards the refined realism of 'Cinematography'.

*'Build your film on white, on silence and on stillness.'*\*

Critical opinion has suggested that Bresson's output has been so extraordinarily limited because of the prolonged pre-production process of refining his conception and preparing it for 'Cinematographic' realisation. Yet, the script for *Quatre Nuits d'un Rêveur*, for instance, was developed within a week.

Nevertheless, Bresson's creative success has never been associated with an equivalent commercial success, and he has remained unashamedly at odds with the excessive commercialism of the film industry. Bresson acknowledges that he would like to have been able to finance more films. Between the original conception and the final realisation of *Lancelot du Lac*, a period of over twenty years elapsed.

Bresson has long sought to realise his cherished *Genesis* project, the 'Cinematographic' revelation of the Old Testament narrative, from The Creation and The Garden of Eden to The Tower of Babel. Bresson continues his attempt to raise the finance for *Genesis* although, in despair, he has written: '(1963) Left Rome abruptly, abandoned the preparatory work for *Genesis*, to cut short idiotic discussions and desecrating obstruction. How strange it is that people can ask you to do what they themselves would certainly be prevented from doing, because they do not know what it is!'

The most significant limitation upon Bresson's output has been that imposed by the financial and commercial constraints of the industry. In the *Notes on Cinematography*, the

aphorisms from the period since 1960 reveal Bresson's increasing frustration and his oscillation between acceptance, resentment, and exhaustion. However, his faith in the capacities of 'Cinematography' and the pleasure he derives from making films has sustained him, the frustrations simply necessitating and provoking their creative dissolution: 'These horrible days — when shooting film disgusts me, when I am exhausted, powerless in the face of so many obstacles — are part of my method of work.'

In addition to his continuing attempts to secure sufficient finance to bring the *Genesis* project to fruition and partially stimulated by his reaction to the abuses to which money is put in the film industry, Bresson has developed the script for a film entitled *L'Argent*, 'a very depressing film... It ends with five deaths.' Bresson has completely retained his sense of purpose and has consistently avoided compromise. Therefore, although Bresson hopes that *Genesis* may deal with a sufficiently accessible narrative to ensure the film's relative financial success, he only intends to utilise a budget which remains minute compared to those required by other directors: he has no intention of compromising the principles of 'Cinematography', merely to ensure the film's financial success.

*'Laugh at a bad reputation. Fear a good one that you could not sustain.'*\*

Consistently in opposition to the commercialism of the film industry, Bresson recognises that the future of 'Cinematography' must equally develop from such creative opposition: 'The future of cinematography belongs to a new race of young solitaries who will shoot films by putting their last cent into it and not let themselves be taken in by the material routines of the trade.'\* Clearly, although Bresson remains the original and single prominent proponent of 'Cinematography', the art can only survive through his successors. Recognising him as a major influence upon the post-war cinema, perhaps Bresson's admirers will eventually delve beneath the profoundly affective narrative structure of his films and explore the depths of 'Cinematography'.

And hence 'Cinematography': The realism of unintentionally motivated 'models', realistically recorded by the camera and the tape recorder ('the two sublime machines'), creates art

through transformation, facilitating the perfect interpenetration of style and content — the documentary of emotions: 'Of course the cinema (ie., 'Cinematography') can have poetry. Poetry is only realism.'

*'If, on the screen, the mechanism disappears and the phrases you have made them say, the gestures you have made them make, become one with your models, with your film, with you — then a miracle.'*\*

Jonathan Hourigan

\*Quotations from Robert Bresson's *Notes on Cinematography*, translated by Jonathan Griffin, are reproduced by permission of Urizen Books, New York.

<i>Les Anges du Péché:</i>	1943
<i>Les Dames du Bois de Boulogne:</i>	1945
<i>Le Journal d'un Curé de Campagne:</i>	1951
<i>Un Condamné à Mort s'est Echappé:</i>	1956
<i>Pickpocket:</i>	1959
<i>Le Procès de Jeanne d'Arc:</i>	1962
<i>Au Hasard, Balthazar:</i>	1966
<i>Mouchette:</i>	1967
<i>Une Femme Douce:</i>	1969
<i>Quatre Nuits d'un Rêveur:</i>	1971
<i>Lancelot du Lac:</i>	1974
<i>Le Diable Probablement:</i>	1977

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