Directed by Robert Bresson
Written by Robert Bresson
Produced by Agnès Delahaie
Cinematography by Léonce-Henri Burel
Film Editing by Raymond Lamy
Production Design by Pierre Charbonnier
Production Management by Michel Choquet
Technical Advising by Kassagi

Martin LaSalle ... Michel
Marika Green ... Jeanne
Jean Pélégri ... L'inspecteur principal
Dolly Scal ... La mère
Pierre Leymarie ... Jacques
Kassagi ... 1er complice
Pierre Étaix ... 2ème complice
César Gattegno ... Un inspecteur


Entry by Brian Baxter

The French director and scenarist, was born in the mountainous Auvergne region. [September 25, 1907] He spent his formative years in the countryside until his family moved to Paris, when he was eight. Between thirteen and seventeen he studied classics and philosophy at the Lycée Lakanal in Sceaux, intending later to become a painter. Although Bresson abandoned painting around 1930 because it made him “too agitated,” he remains a “painter” to this day.

He rejects the term “director” and uses “cinematographer.” He believes that cinema is a fusion of music and painting, not the theatre and photography, and defines “cinematography” as “a new way of writing, therefore of feeling. His theories are precisely given in his book Notes on the Cinematographer. His films have resolutely followed these beliefs, and are dominated by his Catholicism.

When Bresson decided to abandon painting he moved towards cinema. During the following decade he was on the fringes of cinema and “saw everything.” Of this period nothing of importance exists. His work was mainly as a “script consultant,” first on C’était un musicien (1933), directed by Frédéric Zelnick and Maurice Gleize, then on Claude Heymann’s comedy Jumeaux de Brighton (1936) and Pierre Billon’s Courrier Sud (1937), and fleetingly with René Clair. His only significant work was a short film, financed by the art historian Roland Penrose, made in 1934. Called Les Affaires publiques, this comedy has long been lost and little is known of it….Bresson admits to liking the work of Charles Chaplin—especially The Circus and City Lights—and he was earlier linked with the surrealist movement in Paris.

In 1939 Bresson joined the French army and was a prisoner of war between June 1940 and April 1941. His imprisonment profoundly affected him, even though he was not confined like many of his protagonists (notably Fontaine, in A Man Escaped). “I was set to work in a forest, for local peasants who—luckily—fed us. After a year or so I simulated a fever and with other prisoners who were sick I was released. I returned to Paris.”

In occupied France, at the height of the war, Bresson began preparing his first feature, Les Anges du péché / The Angels of sin (1943), based on an idea by a friend, the Reverence Raymond Brückberger, and inspired by a novel. Bresson wanted to call the film “Bethanie”—the name of the convent where the action is centered. He wrote the screenplay and then asked the playwright Jean Giraudoux to supply the dialogue.

Although Bresson regards his debut film and the two works that followed as incomplete and spoiled by the intrusion of conventional music and actors, rather than the “models” (in the sense of artists’ models) he subsequently used, Les Anges du péché remains one of the most astonishing first features in world cinema. It not only displays complete mastery of the medium, but puts into practice many of the theories Bresson later refined and distilled. He says: “I knew at this stage what I wanted, but had to accept the actresses. I warned them immediately to stop what they were doing in front of the camera, or they—or I—would leave. Luckily they were in nun’s habits so they could not gesture.”

Les Anges du péché proved a great commercial success and won the Grand Prix du Cinéma Française. It tells a basically melodramatic story set in a convent devoted to the rehabilitation of young women….In Raymond Durgnat’s words, Bresson’s vision “is almost mature in his first feature.” It already shows his preference for a narrative composed of many short scenes, as well as his fascination with human skills and processes, observing in detail the nuns’ work and rituals. On the other hand, we also see his characteristic user of ellipsis, as when Thérèse, buying a gun, is simply shown receiving it over the counter.

Bresson resolutely proclaims himself a painter, not a writer, the task he finds most difficult of all. For his second film, Les Dames du Bois du Boulogne, he sought more literary inspiration, a novel by Diderot, Jacques le fataliste. Actually he used only one chapter and for the second and last time he sought help with the dialogue—from his friend Jacques Cocteau, who nonetheless stuck closely to the original. It was Cocteau who later said of Bresson, “He is one apart from this terrible world.”

Bresson’s films are unique. Most of them deal with the religious themes of predestination and redemption, but in terms of tightly constructed dramatic narratives. However, Bresson scorns the easy pleasures and illusions of the storyteller’s art, and is quite likely to leave out what others would regard as a dramatic high point. We may simply be told that the event has taken place, or shown only a part of it, while being treated to all the associated activities that mere storytellers take for granted—people coming in and out, opening and closing doors, going up and down stairs. Recognizing the great persuasive power of the film image, its ability to make us believe what we see and feel...
what the image suggests, Bresson deliberately subverts this power by directing our attention to a world beyond that of his narrative. What is left is not the illusion of “realism,” but what he calls the “crude real” of the cinematic image itself, which for Bresson carries us “far away from the intelligence that complicates everything”; that is why he calls the camera “divine.”

Bresson prefers to work on location and if possible in the actual settings prescribed by the script.

His third film, and the one that established his international reputation, came six years later and can be seen now as a transitional work. Based on the famous novel by the Catholic writer Georges Bernanos, Le Journal d’un curé de campagne (Diary of a Country Priest, 1951), this is a first-person account by a young priest (Claude Laydu) who is given a rural parish in the village of Ambricourt, in northern France. The young man—innocent, awkward and unworlly—is treated with scorn and ridicule. He is drawn into drama that is unfolding at the local chateau and takes upon himself the almost impossible task of reconciling the countess to her God. He succeeds, but the cost to him—as it was to Anne-Marie—is his life. The young priest, existing on a diet of bread and too much cheap wine, grows more and more ill and weak, and is finally diagnosed as having cancer of the stomach. He dies at the home of friends, and his last words are “What does it matter? All is grace.” The image on the screen fades into one of a dark gray cross. In a contemporary review, Gavin Lambert commented on the “inner exaltation” of the film, and in a famous essay André Bazin, describing it as a masterpiece, adds that it impresses “because of its power to stir the emotions, rather than the intelligence,” which is exactly Bresson’s avowed aim in all his films.

The film was praised by critics and awarded numerous international prizes, including the Prix Louis Dellue and the 1951 Grand Prize at the Venice Film Festival. It also achieved considerable success at the box office. In it, Bresson moved towards the use of nonprofessional actors and, although Grünenwald once again supplied the score, the soundtrack is infinitely more complex than in the earlier films and may be seen at the beginning of Bresson’s use of sound and image as complementary elements. Thus we see the priest writing in his journal and hear him reading his words in voice-over, then we see the remembered scene, with the voice-over commentary continuing until finally the dialogue takes over. Bresson later remarked in his notes, “An ice-cold commentary can warm, by contrast, tepid dialogues in a film. Phenomenon analogous to that of hot and cold in a painting.” Another characteristic use of sound occurs during a climactic conversion scene, whose drama is counterpointed by the mundane sound of the gardener raking the path outside.

Several years elapsed before the emergence of the first uncompromised and definitive Bresson masterpiece, a work that remains among his most highly regarded and best-known films. Un condamné à mort s’est échappé (A Man Escaped, 1956) was inspired by an article in Figaro Littéraire. It was written by a former prisoner of war, Commandant André Devigny, and describes his astonishing escape from Montluc Prison in Lyons while awaiting execution by the Germans. Bresson wrote the screenplay, the sparse dialogue, and the commentary that counterpoints and illuminates the action. He eschewed a conventional score and used—sparingly—excerpts from Mozart’s Mass in C Minor (K427). With this film Bresson achieved the complete control he sought by the use of “models”—nonprofessionals with no dramatic training who are taught to speak their lines and move their bodies without conscious interpretation or motivation, precisely as Bresson instructs them—in effect, as one critic wrote, Bresson plays all the parts. The hostility this often provokes in the hapless models creates a tension of its own, without destroying the director’s conception of a shot.

Bresson prefaces the film with two sentences. The first—an alternative title—is Christ’s admonition to Nicodemus: “The wind bloweth where it listeth.” Then comes the comment: “This is a true story. I have told it with no embellishments.” It is true that by shooting at the actual prison, by painstaking reconstruction of the methods and instruments of Devigny’s escape, Bresson brings an absorbing verisimilitude to the surface of a story whose outcome we already know. This surface, said Amedée Ayfre, stems from “the precise choice of details, objects and accessories, through gestures charged with an extreme solid reality”—what Eric Rohmer called “the miracle of objects.” Bresson himself said: “I was hoping to make a film about objects that would at the same time have a soul. That is to say, to reach the latter through the former.”... Bresson gives us an almost documentary portrait of a prison, its relationships, its routine: the clanging pails, the clinking keys. From these bare bones, he builds one of the most profound interior examinations of a human being ever shown. This work, which brought Bresson the award as best director at Cannes and several other honors, established him internationally and confirmed his stature as, in Jean-Luc Godard’s words, “to French cinema what Mozart is to German music and Dostoevsky is to Russian literature.” No higher accolade could be given to Bresson, who regards Dostoevsky as “the greatest novelist,” to whom he is indebted in no fewer than three of his thirteen films. This debt is expressed in Bresson’s next work, Pickpocket (1959), which derives from Crime and Punishment. Michel, a lonely and arrogant young man, is an expert pickpocket who feels himself above the law and normal human emotions. Eventually, thanks to the relentless pursuit of a detective, he is caught and sent to prison—something “predestined.” In the final moments of the film he is redeemed by the love of Jeanne, whose help he has previously refused. (Paul Schrader’s American Gigolo is not only indebted to the same source and to the work of the director he most admires, but the final minutes of his film are a direct “copy” of and homage to Bresson’s film.)
Like its predecessor, *Pickpocket* has a convincingly “documentary” feel to it and a delight in human skills (here those of a criminal), using locations and—importantly—a professional pickpocket to help achieve this verisimilitude and the moments of suspense that are so much part of the film. Inevitably there is a spiritual dimension to Bresson’s study of an isolated antisocial man almost willing himself to be caught. Amedée Ayfre suggests that Michel is freedom without grace, unconsciously seeking it. We witness a kind of miracle, as in the case of Fontaine and Jost’s escape or Thérèse’s redemption. In Schrader’s words, this is “the transference of…[Michel’s] passion from pickpocketing to Jeanne”; in prison he is “faced with an explicitly spiritual act within a cold environment….it is a ‘miracle’ which must be accepted or rejected.”

As usual, Bresson used nonprofessional “models” and collaborated only with trusted associates (his most frequent collaborators have been Pierre Charbonnier as art director, Raymond Lamy as editor, and until 1961, Léonce-Henry Burel as cameraman). Bresson believes that in cinematography “an image must be transformed by contact with other images,” that there is “no art without transformation.” He therefore favors a relatively inexpressive or “neutral” image, of maximum versatility in combination with other images. Hence his preference for the medium shot, with the camera straight on its subject to produce a “flattened image.” The music, used sparsely for its “spiritual” qualities, comes from the work of the seventeenth-century composer Jean-Baptiste Lully.

Characteristically, the film is short (under 75 minutes), reflecting Bresson’s compression of narrative and his desire to make one image “suffice where a novelist would take ten pages.” As Godard noted, he was now “the master of the ellipsis,” which he uses for a variety of purposes—for economy, to avoid the titillation of violence, often to unsettle the viewer by denying his narrative expectations. For some critics, however, Bresson had gone too far in this direction; Robert Vas even accused him of self-parody.

Unmoved, Bresson carried compression even further in *Procès de Jeanne d’Arc* (The Trial of Joan of Arc, 1962), the effect of which, as Derek Prouse simply but effectively noted, was “like being hit over the head by a sledgehammer.” In little over sixty minutes Bresson shows us the imprisonment, trial, and the execution of Joan, splendidly “modeled” by Florence Carré.

Importantly the film is not an historical “reconstruction” (Bresson deplores such films), but he uses the costumes (for the English), documents, and artifacts of the period to convey the sense of “another time.” We see Joan on the rack but Bresson characteristically spares (or denies) us any explicit scenes of torture. The use of models, the startling compression, the lack of ornamentation and the continued striking of exactly the “right note,” give the film a timeless strength. Again the images are “flattened,” a 50mm lens providing a constant physical perspective with few traveling shots. (Bresson has used a 50mm lens since his second film.) This rigorously seemed to demand a change. Bresson had gone as far in the direction of pure cinematography as he could. The linear quality of the prison films could be likened to the path of an arrow. For his next work, one of several Franco-Swedish coproductions undertaken on the initiative of the Swedish Film Institute, he moved to an altogether more complex form.

The result was described by Tom Milne as “perhaps his greatest film to date, certainly his most complex.” Bresson had been thinking about the film for years, deriving the initial inspiration from Dostoevsky’s *The Idiot, Au hasard, Balthazar* (Balthazar, 1966) is, says Bresson, “made up many lines that intersect one another.” The picaresque and episodic story links two souls—the girl Marie and the donkey Balthazar. Balthazar passes through a series of encounters, each one representing one of the deadly sins of humanity….Despite the use of a nonhuman protagonist, Bresson achieves his most complex and saintly portrait within a film without sentimentality or a false note….

*Mouchette* (1966) followed with unprecedented rapidity, thanks to money from French television—the first time that ORTF had collaborated with cinema….Bresson’s next film is noteworthy as his first in color—something of which he has always been wary. *Une Femme Douce* (A Gentle Creature, 1966) was his first direct (albeit updated) adaptation of Dostoevski….*Quatre Nuits d’un rêveur* (Four Nights of a Dreamer, 1971), was adapted from a more famous Dostoevsky story, *White Nights*, already filmed by Ivan Pyriev in Russia and by Visconti in Italy. Bresson moves the novella’s setting to Paris….Bresson was attracted to what Carlos Clarens describes as “the idea of love being stronger than the love story itself.” The result is an altogether more secular work than any which had preceded it….Even Bresson’s admirers worried about his preoccupation with young love and his use of “popular” music in the film, although no one could be other than ravished by the breathtaking scene of the bateau-mouche floating down the Seine (filmed near his Paris home) and the gentle, somber use of color throughout. By some standards a “minor” film, it was yet of a stature to receive the British Film Institute award as “the most original film” of its year.

In 1974 Bresson returned to grander things and—after twenty years planning—achieved his dream of filming “The Grail” or, as it came to be called *Lancelot du Lac* (Lancelot). This was his most elaborate and costly work and, although he could not film it in separate English and French versions as he had hoped, it was otherwise made without compromise.

The film opens in a dark forest with a close-up of two swords wielded in combat. There are glimpses of other scattered conflicts and of groups of riderless horses galloping through. Titles describe how the Knights of the Round Table had failed in their quest for the Holy Grail. Lancelot and the other survivors return, and he begs Queen Guinevere to release him from their adulterous bond so he may be reconciled with God. Mordred
lurks, fomenting dissension. There is a tournament and the victorious Lancelot is wounded and goes into hiding. He abducts Guinevere, who is under suspicion, but in the end restores her to King Arthur. Mordred stirs up rebellion and Lancelot fights on the King’s side. Arthur and all his knights, encumbered by their obsolete armor and idealism, fall before Mordred’s disciplined bowmen—a great junk heap of chivalry. Lancelot died last, whispering the name of Guinevere.

Some critics saw a moral triumph in Lancelot’s renunciation of Guinevere; others, like Jane Sloan, thought Guinevere “the only one who is grounded, willing to take life for what it is,” and Lancelot a prideful dreamer, foolish to dent her love. Most agreed that the film was deeply fatalistic and pessimistic, with none of the certainty of grace that inspired the earlier films, and “darker than any Bresson film to date, both morally and literally” (Tom Milne).

There are numerous deliberate anachronisms because Bresson maintains that “you must put the past into the present if you want to be believable.” For Jane Sloan, Lancelot de Lac “is a film about the end of things and the illusory heights of idealism....The reliance on individual series of repeated images as set-pieces also presents the clearest instance of the approximation of musical form in Bresson’s work. The riderless horses galloping through the dark woods are a particularly haunting melody in this respect, but there are many other instances: the opening and closing of visors that punctuate a conversation between the knights; Gawain’s repeated utterance of ‘Lancelot’ during the tournament; and the several series of multicolored horse trappings. The elegance and coldness of this aesthetic search for the ‘purely abstract’ has its parallel in the search for the Grail, the impossible search for the spiritual in the living world.”

“Think about the surface of the work,” Bresson says (with Leonardo da Vinci). “Above all think about the surface.” Various critics have fastened on various different aspects of the surface in Lancelot. Jonathan Rosenbaum found his “manner of infusing naturalistic detail with formal significance...particularly masterful in the marvellous use he makes of armour....It functions as an additional layer of non-expressiveness, increasing neutrality and uniformity in separate images and cloaking identities in many crucial scenes....The concentration on hands and feet that is a constant in Bresson’s work becomes all the more affecting here when it is set against the shiny metal in other shots. Or consider the overall effect of contrast achieved between the suits of armour and the image of Guinevere standing in her bath, which makes flesh seem at once more rarified and vulnerable, more soft and graceful, more palpable and precious. The on- and off-screen rattle of the armour throughout the film reinforces this impression.”

Bresson’s use of animals in this film (as elsewhere) was also much discussed. Tom Milne wrote that “the mysterious, poetic precision of the film springs from...images invested with Bresson’s belief that animals are more sensitive, more perceptive perhaps, than humans”—images like those of “the birds flying graceful and free above the knights, the horses toiling through the mud and dying with their riders.”

From the haunted medieval forests of Lancelot du Lac, Bresson returned to modern Paris for a story arguably even darker, Le Diable, probablement (The Devil, Probably, 1977), photographed like its predecessor by Pasqualino de Santis, was based on a newspaper story. It centers on four disaffected young intellectuals—two men and two women—completely disillusioned with the world created by their elders. The quartet pad through Paris, witnesses to a world that is insanely materialistic, inhuman, and exploitative of its natural resources. This is a work far more overtly political than anything that preceded it; Bresson called it “a film about money, a source of great evil in the world whether for unnecessary armaments or the senseless pollution of the environment.” These evils are shown in brilliantly orchestrated newsreel and other footage of despoliation and waste.

The film’s title is a reply to a question asked by one of the characters” “Who is responsible for this mockery of mankind?” If the possibility of grace seemed remote in Lancelot du Lac, it is almost inconceivable here. Jan Dawson called this “Bresson’s most daring and uncompromising film to date,” partly because “Charles appears to us, if not to his girlfriends, as the most antipathetic of Bresson’s protagonists to date.

L’Argent (Money, 1982; first drafted in 1977) is loosely based on Tolstoy’s story “The False Note.” Jean Sémolé points out the “brutality” of this title—the first time Bresson had used an object for this purpose—and the film shows a bleak, appalled rigor of content and means, proving an uncomfortable experience for many of those at the Cannes premiere and later.

Bresson himself describes L’Argent as the film “with which I am most satisfied—or at least it is the one where I found the most surprises when it was complete—things I had not expected.” For him, the making of a film comprises “three births and two deaths”; the birth of an idea is followed by its “death” in the agony of writing; it comes alive again in the period of preparation and improvisation, only to die again during the actual filming; and then there is rebirth in a new form during the editing, where the “surprises” come. At Cannes in 1983 it shared the “Grand Prize for Creation” with Andrei Tarkovsky’s Nostalghia.

For the time being, Bresson has abandoned his long-cherished plan to base a film, “Genesis,” on the first chapters of the Old Testament, finding the logistical problems insuperable. In 1987, almost eighty, he was planning a “lighter film” derived from a modern novel about two girls who leave their dreary jobs and head for Monte Carlo and then Italy, gambling and stealing as they go, and knowing their inevitable destiny is prison. The
director is also finishing a major book to supplement and amplify his Notes on the Cinematographer.

In his long career, Bresson has made just thirteen feature films and earned the right to two clichés. He is a genius of the cinema, and he remains unique. Since his 1943 debut, he has steadily refined and perfected a form of expression that places him apart from and above the world of commercial moviemaking. He has preferred to remain inactive rather than compromise and has chosen never to work in the theatre or on television (a medium he dislikes). He is the cinema’s true auteur in that his films are completely and immediately recognizable and he has controlled every aspect of their creation. He has built a pyramidal, densely interwoven body of work with great purity and austerity of expression, in which, as Jonathan Rosenbaum has written, “nothing is permitted to detract from the overall narrative complex, and everything present is used.” Bresson has often been called the Jansen of the cinema, because of his moral rigor and his concern with predestination; but his films often seem to embody a passionate struggle between that bleak creed and a Pascalian gamble on the possibility of redemption.

Too singular to lead a “school” of filmmakers, Bresson has nevertheless influenced many directors and has been intensely admired by Jacques Becker, Louis Malle, Paul Schrader, François Truffaut, and Jean-Luc Godard, among others. He remains resolutely attracted to the idea of youth, “its suppleness and potential,” and has become increasingly hardened in his dislike of the commercial cinema, maintaining that he has not seen a film through to the end for twenty-five years. Yet nothing could be further from the truth than the suggestion of a hermetic, cynical, or bitter man. Late in 1986, in a conversation with this writer he said simply: “I love life.”


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

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

Bresson’s concern with ethical behavior and how to conduct a moral life was consistent with the climate in the aftermath of the Second World War, when traditional value systems were challenged by philosophies such as Sartrean existentialism. …

The Question of God

The question of Bresson’s personal convictions about God and the Catholic faith in which he was raised is difficult to answer, since without a biography, one can only conjecture from the work and from remarks he made in interviews over the years. The more immediate question concerns the relationship of Bresson’s art to belief in God, and more specifically, to the tenets of Catholic doctrine. Many critics and admirers of Bresson would prefer that such questions just go away. But as the words design, destiny, inevitable course, and prescribed plan—all of which have been used by critics of every stripe, suggest, Bresson’s cinema has always evoked the question of God. …

Consider the moral severity of the films mentioned earlier. Although such a stance has been attributed to his Catholicism, there is no hard evidence that Bresson practiced the faith in his adult life. Nevertheless it would be difficult to deny that both Catholicism and faith left their marks on his thinking and his art, along with a perhaps heretical belief in predestination, as the implacable nature of his narratives strongly supports. Even his late works suggest an inability or unwillingness to relinquish the idea of design inflected by the Christian theory of history. This is something Bresson shared with George Bernanos, Fedor Dostoevsky, and Leo Tolstoy, whose works inspired more than half of his films. Like them he was preoccupied with questions of good and evil. The existence of God, the relationship between body and soul, and that between personal and social morality. For him, as for Bernanos and Dostoevsky, the world is fallen and evil is intrinsic to the human condition, as present in the provinces as it is in the cities, in the old as well as the young, the rich as well as the poor, the powerful as well as the weak. It was this obstinate posture that infuriated Leftist critics in such journals as Positif who declared Bresson out of touch with social and political reality. …
Bresson’s films, thematically and formally, have always been about apparent absences, silences, and the invisible. The only “evidence” of God’s existence in Diary is the intense look on the face of Claude Laydu as he stares into a powerfully charged off screen space…. Bresson’s work therefore bears the sign of one raised Catholic as well as the doubts of a deeply engaged modern thinker. Pivoting on the line between the two, his cinema reflects an authentic mind-set of mid-twentieth-century thought. Wondering how committed he was to a religious point of view seems an inescapable aspect of watching his films.

From Diary on, in fact, we might say that Bresson did not simply discover the means by which he would impose his vision on the world; he became a God-like author of that vision, whose compulsive control over every facet of each film—a stance by definition antithetical to the egoistic personalities of actors—effectively re-created the world in the image and manner in which he believed it was created.

from Robert Bresson A Spiritual Style in Film, Joseph Cuneen. Continuum NY 2003

Andrey Tarkovsky, the great Russian director who made Andrey Rublyov, Stalker, and The Sacrifice, rightly insisted that Bresson doesn’t have a genre:
He is a genre in himself…. Bresson is perhaps the only man in the cinema to have achieved the perfect fusion of the finished work with a project formulated beforehand…. His guiding principle was the elimination of what is known as ‘expressiveness,’ in the sense that he wanted to do away with the frontier between the image and actual life, to make life itself graphic and expressive…. The principle has something in common with Zen art where, in our perception, precise observation of life passes paradoxically into sublime artistic imagery.

But perhaps Bresson’s instinctive rebellion against the various forms of excess found in most commercial movies is adequately summarized in his wonderful bit of self-advice: “Not to use two violins when one is enough.”

Bresson’s “spiritual style in film” is no guarantee of edifying endings, but his austere, clear-eyed cinematography fosters a deep understanding of the grandeur and pain of our common humanity….

Rick Thompson: Pickpocket, Senses of Cinema 2000

Seeing Pickpocket again after a long absence, one is forcibly reminded that it was being shot on the streets of Paris at the same time Godard was shooting A Bout De Souffle (Breathless, 1959), and that Bresson’s film is an often overlooked watershed film of the New Wave. In the first instance, this shows in the film’s triangulation between old European culture, via its borrowing of Dostoevsky’s Crime and Punishment situation; new French culture, with its topical reverberation of Albert Camus existentialism, and the gratuitous act; and Hollywood culture through its invocation of Frank Borzage’s films of spiritual transcendence; but even more strategically specific to New Wave practice, the film twists each of these three loose from its context and re-places it in a new way.

Pickpocket was coolly received upon release as a difficult film (not an insinuating charmer like A Bout De Souffle), but it found champions along the way, including Paul Schrader, who saw the film as part of his favourite genre: two-character films, where one character is the man and the other is his room (and indeed, Pickpocket is one of Bresson’s films about imprisoned persons, metaphorically and finally literally). While the film’s crystal austerity moves toward minimalism, Bresson insists on the subjective, limiting viewers strictly to that which the loner hero, Michel (Martin Lassalle), sees, says, thinks, writes; this is reinforced by his voice-over narration and his on screen writing, and emphasised by a near-total absence of leading music. But Michel reveals little, feels little: he has largely withdrawn from individual engagement with people in his world—his dying mother; the friend and potential lover Jeanne, who nurses her; his male friend Jacques, to whom Michel ‘gives’ Jeanne. His one passion is the art and crime of picking pockets; here he finds fear, excitement, exultation, guilt a life of feeling. He studies with a master and works with a Pickpocket gang, using his expertise, sometimes barely escaping capture. It is in this underworld that he finds his interlocutor/therapist, a police detective intent on apprehending him. They have a series of Raskolnikov exchanges about superior human beings being above the law; these exchanges are not true dialogues, however, but Michel’s deadpan trying-on of postures.

Lives and events in Pickpocket are not explained or motivated; the film’s genius is in cutting such material away, leaving only direct presentation. The exhilarating virtuoso sequences of pickpocketing on the metro, in stations, and at the races are good examples of this: the actions themselves, as done and framed and cut, without comment, explanation, or dialogue, are sufficient for us to understand Michel’s experience. Here, Schrader’s favourite second character (the hero’s room, the material world) arises: if, as Ken Kelman writes, Bresson’s use of acting style and his refusal to supply psychological motivation thwarts our usual expectations of character explanation; and correspondingly, if his systematic use of ellipsis (separating events and sequences from one another rather than causally linking them) cuts off our dependence on the dominance of narrative, then the film has a large new latitude in which to operate—not the least effect of this is to concentrate our attention on the details of filmmaking. No longer practicing either to please or to explain, the film can now ask the viewer to take a meditative stance, to undertake an act of witnessing within frustrating limits, and so to have the time and opportunity to go
back to/to begin with what is given by the film – the material world and what may be made to arise from it. Many viewers involve themselves in larger and more abstract issues (which the film certainly makes available), but the poetry and the wonder of this film begin here.

Faces – most notably that of Michel – are at the extreme of impassivity, their materiality one of non-intervention, their sensuality undeniable and unchanging, frozen amid a quiet frenzy of signals and actions. Hands, most particularly, have an independent life and art; everything done with hands is part of or related to the central (and quite sexualized) metaphor of the film, picking pockets, and each gesture needs to be remembered by us for comparison and recognition at a later stage of the film. As if it were not enough to be a virtuoso of hands, throughout the film Michel sends tantalising signals with doors how he opens them, how he closes them, how he finds them and how he leaves them – because the film is about Michel’s movement being arrested finally, a closing stillness enforced by the prison cell door he cannot physically open, a material condition of the transformation he undergoes in this concluding scene.

Michel manages to transcend these iron bars as the film brings its material vs spiritual issues to a conclusion. In one reading, Michel has avoided emotional contact with those around him, substituting instead a very pure mania for the precise, beautiful skills of picking pockets and the cat-and-mouse game of avoiding capture; in another view, he has pursued a monastic, disciplined, driven, and in some ways otherworldly life as one of Bresson’s saint-like characters, and a good deal of commentary on Pickpocket is religious interpretation concerned with Michel’s capture as a necessary precondition of his repentance and achieving grace. Another tradition wraps up Michel’s inadequacies and identity problems, his thieving from his mother and her death, the provision of a father figure in the policeman, and the surrogate nuclear family Michel assembles near the end of the film, into a Freudian sexuality reading complete with homosexual digressions via his Pickpocket mentor. Certainly the film provides us with a love story, or rather a coming-to love story, as Michel exchanges obsession and deferral – his Pickpocket world – for a newfound ability to love Jeanne; and while this love story is not told through l’amourfou or l’acte gratuit, neither are its reasons made available to us through the material world of the film.

He lives in Paris in a small room under the eaves, a garret almost filled by his cot and his books. He is about to commit a crime. He wants to steal another man’s wallet, and he wants his face to appear blank, casual. Perhaps it would, to a casual observer. But we know him and what he is about, and in his eyes we see the trance like ecstasy of a man who is surrendering to his compulsion.

Or do we? Bresson, one of the most thoughtful and philosophical of directors, was fearful of “performances” by his actors. He famously forced the star of “A Man Escaped” (1956) to repeat the same scene some 50 times, until it was stripped of all emotion and inflection. All Bresson wanted was physical movement. No emotion, no style, no striving for effect. What we see in the pickpocket’s face is what we bring to it. Instead of asking his actors to “show fear,” Bresson asks them to show nothing, and depends on his story and images to supply the fear. Martin Lassalle, the star of “Pickpocket,” plays Michel as an unexceptional man with a commonplace face. He is not handsome or ugly or memorable. He usually wears a suit and tie, disappears in a crowd and has few friends. To one of them, in a cafe, he wonders aloud if it is all right for an “extraordinary man” to commit a crime--just to get himself started?

Michel is thinking of himself. He could probably get a job in a day if he wanted one. But he does not. He gathers his narcissism around himself like a blanket. He sits in his garret and reads his books, and treasures an image of himself as a man so special that he is privileged to steal from others. Also, of course, he gets an erotic charge out of stealing. On the Metro or at the racetrack, he stands as close as possible to his victims, sensing their breathing, their awareness of him. He waits for a moment of distraction, and then opens their purses or slips their wallets from their coats. That is his moment of release, of triumph over a lesser person--although of course his face never reflects joy.

In this story you may sense echoes of Dostoyevsky’s Crime and Punishment, another story about a lonely intellectual who lived in a garret and thought he had a license, denied to common men, to commit crimes. Bresson's Michel, like Dostoyevsky's hero Raskolnikov, needs money in order to realize his dreams, and sees no reason why some lackluster ordinary person should not be forced to supply it. The reasoning is immoral, but the characters claim special privileges above and beyond common morality.

Michel, like the hero of Crime and Punishment, has a good woman in his life, who trusts he will be able to redeem himself. The woman in “Pickpocket” is named Jeanne (Marika Green). She is a neighbor of Michel's mother, and the lover of Michel's friend Jacques (Pierre Leymarie). She comes to Michel with the news that his mother is dying. Michel does not want to see his mother, but gives Jeanne money for her. Why does he avoid her? Bresson never supplies motives. We can only guess. Perhaps she shames him with her simplicity. Perhaps she makes it impossible for him to think of himself as an extraordinary man, alone in the world. Does he avoid her because of arrogance, or fear?

Another character in the movie is a police inspector (Jean Pelegri) who has his eye on Michel. They play a delicate cat-and-mouse scene together in which the inspector implies that he knows Michel is a thief, and Michel more or less admits it. Together they examine an ingenious tool designed by a master...
pickpocket to slit open coat pockets. The inspector is on Michel's case, and Michel, we sense, wants to be caught.

Shoplifters and pickpockets operate in different emotional weather than more brazen thieves. They do not use strength, but stealth. Their thefts are intimate violations of the property of others; to succeed, they must either remain invisible or inspire trust. There is something sexual about it. It's no coincidence that when another pickpocket spots Michel at work and confronts him, it is in a men's room; their liaison involves money as a substitute for sex. And later, when a police decoy at the racetrack shows Michel a pocketful of cash, Michel suspects the man is a cop ("He didn't even bet on the winning horse!"). But he tries to pick his pocket anyway, and when the cop slaps on handcuffs, it's as if that's what Michel hoped for.

Bresson...made his last film, "L'Argent," in 1983, and it won a special prize at Cannes. He has been called the most Christian of filmmakers. Most of his films deal, in one way or another, with redemption. In "Diary of a Country Priest" (1950), a dying young priest confronts his death by focusing on the lives of others. In "A Man Escaped" (1956), based on a true story of the resistance, an imprisoned patriot acts as if his soul is free. In the great "Mouchette" (1966), a young girl—an outcast in her village and a victim of rape—finds a way to shame her enemies. In addition to "Pickpocket's" parallels to Crime and Punishment, Bresson has made two films directly based on Dostoyevsky: "Une Femme Douce" (1969) and "Four Nights of a Dreamer" (1973).

"Pickpocket" is about a man who deliberately and self-consciously tries to operate outside morality ("Will we be judged? By what law?"). Like many criminals, he does it for two conflicting reasons: because he thinks he is better than others, and because—fearing he is worse—he seeks punishment. He avoids Jeanne because she is wholly good, and therefore a threat to him. "These bars, these walls, I don't even see them," he tells her. But he does, and is healed by the touch of her hand. (The famous last line: "Oh, Jeanne, what a strange way I had to take to meet you!")

There is incredible buried passion in a Bresson film, but he doesn't find it necessary to express it. Also great tension and excitement, tightly reined in. Consider a sequence in which a gang of pickpockets, including Michel, works on a crowded train. The camera uses close-ups of hands, wallets, pockets and faces in a perfectly timed ballet of images that explain, like a documentary, how pickpockets work. How one distracts, how one moves away. The primary rule: The man who takes the money never holds it. The three men work the train back and forth, at one point even smoothly returning a victim's empty wallet to his pocket. Their work has the timing, grace and precision of a ballet. They work as one person, with one mind. And there is a kind of exhibitionism in the way they show their moves to the camera but hide them from their victims.

Bresson films with a certain gravity, a directness. He wants his actors to emote as little as possible. He likes to film them straight on, so that we are looking at them as they look at his camera. Oblique shots and over-the-shoulder shots would place characters in the middle of the action; head-on shots say, "Here is a man and here is his situation; what are we to think of him?"

Ed Gonzalez, "Pickpocket," Slant, 10 November 2005

I came to Pickpocket (or was it Pickpocket that came to me?) at a time, I think, I needed it most. The attraction was immediate. My mother—born in Cuba and raised on a ridiculous amount of Russian literature—turned me on to Dostoyevsky in high school. Crime and Punishment was my favorite book and the correspondence between the text and Bresson's film was exciting. Also enticing was Martin LaSalle. Tall, dark, lanky, and Latino, we could have been related (we even have a mole in the exact same spot on our right cheek), a confession that probably pegs me as a narcissist, but let's not pretend the movies we love most are not the ones that most forcibly hold a mirror to our faces. LaSalle was beautiful but it's his turmoil and haunted eyes I found most attractive and, finally, instructive. Lonely, just barely out of the closet, and recently divorced from God, I also used to steal, getting caught a number of times but always weaseling myself out of potential jail time. Godard famously said Au Hasard Balthazar was "life in 90 minutes"; for me, though, Pickpocket was "my life in 75 minutes." It was my life to live but one I didn't necessarily want to—except I knew no other.

Bresson profoundly understood this kind of torture, confusion, and crippling sense of spiritual and emotional emptiness, and every image in Pickpocket evokes the director's idea of the soul in transition. This is why Michel is always passing through doors and ascending and descending stairways: Like the characters in the director's equally fine L'Argent, Michel is a slave to his material world, and he spends his time looking for a passage into a realm that promises more meaningful, less transitory, rewards. But Bresson connects us to Michel's plight sexually as well as spiritually. Make no mistake: there's a psychosexual urgency to the film's thieving scenes that is perverse and thrilling. This is not an insult to Bresson, who understands that Michel steals in the same way a person does drugs (in Jeanne, he not only finds a healthy, albeit specious form of spiritual salvation but an inhibitor for his reckless self-
abuse). Though he pickpockets in order fill a spiritual void, to pretend that he doesn't derive some kind of pleasure, however fleeting, from stealing is to misunderstand the way we cheat and compromise our deepest and most meaningful desires.

What is it about Bresson's films that inspire such personal reactions and frank admissions from their admirers? The Village Voice's J. Hoberman understands that his favorite directors do not work on his heart and mind in quite the same way they do on the person sitting next to him in the theater, but he reaches the edge of his tolerance in the case of Bresson: "Bluntly put, to not get Bresson is to not get the idea of motion pictures—it's to have missed that train the Lumière brothers filmed arriving at Lyon station 110 years ago." And in his liner notes for The Criterion Collection's Pickpocket, Gary Indiana dares to tell us he was on LSD when he saw the film for the first time, the first of many revelations that surely raised the ire of Armond White, whose response to Indiana's article in The New York Press is one that may now overshadow the film's DVD premiere but is one that cannot be discounted. If I don't fully align myself with the arguments pitched by either White or Indiana it's because they're both right. Bresson so completely understood the full spectrum of our human condition that to ignore the sexual and spiritual elements that run concurrently through his films is to not get Bresson at all.

COMING UP IN THE FALL 2014 BUFFALO FILM SEMINARS

Sep 30 Luis Buñuel, VIRIDIANA, 1961
Oct 7 Agnès Varda, CLEO FROM 5 TO 7, 1962
Oct 14 Akira Kurosawa, REDBEARD, 1965
Oct 21 Nicolas Roeg, PERFORMANCE, 1970
Nov 4 Roman Polanski, TESS, 1979
Nov 11 Sydney Pollack, TOOTSIE, 1982
Nov 18 Joel and Ethan Coen, FARGO, 1996
Nov 25 Erik Skjoldbjærg, INSOMNIA, 1997
Dec 2 Mike Nichols, CHARLIE WILSON'S WAR, 2007

CONTACTS:
...email Diane Christian: engdc@buffalo.edu
...email Bruce Jackson bjackson@buffalo.edu
...for the series schedule, annotations, links and updates: http://buffalofilmseminars.com
...to subscribe to the weekly email informational notes, send an email to addto list@buffalofilmseminars.com
....for cast and crew info on any film: http://imdb.com/

The Buffalo Film Seminars are presented by the State University of New York at Buffalo And the Dipson Amherst Theatre with support from the Robert and Patricia Colby Foundation and the Buffalo News