

ROBERT BRESSON (25 September 1901, Bromont-Lamothe, Puy-de-Dôme, Auvergne, France—18 December 1999, Paris, natural causes) directed 14 films and wrote 17 screenplays. The other films he directed were *L'Argent/Money* (1983), *Le Diable probablement/The Devil Probably* (1977), *Lancelot du lac* (1974),



Quatre nuits d'un rêveur/Four Nights of a Dreamer (1971), *Une femme douce/A Gentle Woman* (1969), *Mouchette* (1967), *Au hasard Balthazar/Balthazar* (1966), *Procès de Jeanne d'Arc/Trial of Joan of Arc* (1962), *Pickpocket* (1959), *Journal d'un curé de campagne/Diary of a Country Priest* (1951), *Les Dames du Bois de Boulogne/Ladies of the Park* (1945), *Les Anges du péché/Angels of the Street* (1943) and *Les Affaires publiques/Public Affairs* (1934).

FRANÇOIS LETERRIER (26 May 1929, Margny-lès-Compiègne, Oise, Picardie, France) acted in only one other film (*Stavitsky*, 1974). He has directed several films and TV programs.

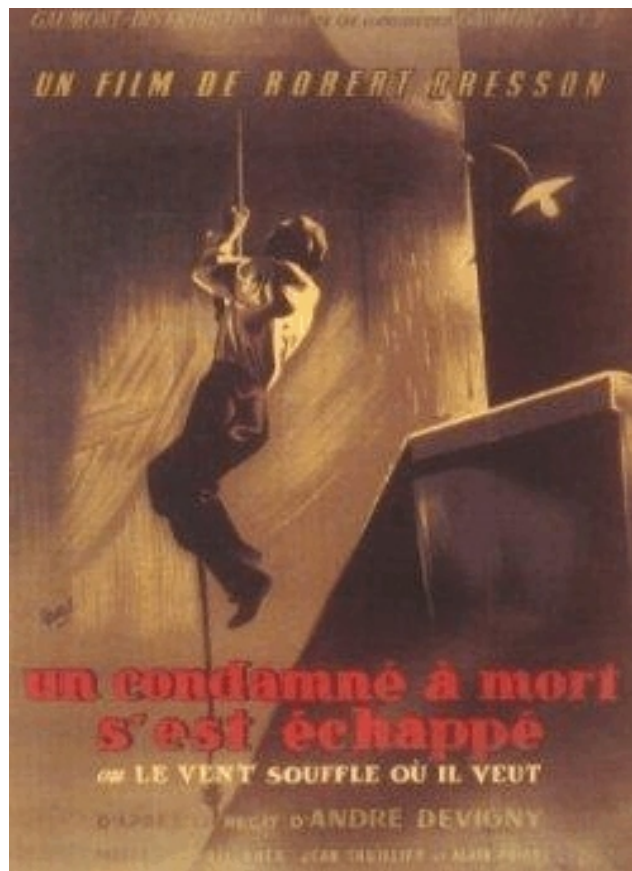
from *World Film Directors V. I.* Ed John Wildman.. The H. H. Wilson Company. NY 1987 Entry by Brian Baxter

The French director and scenarist, was born in the mountainous Auvergne region. [September 25, 1901] 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



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ROBERT BRESSON: A MAN ESCAPED/UN CONDAMNÉ À MORT S'EST ÉCHAPPÉ OU LE VENT SOUFFLE OÙ IL VEUT. 1956 (99 minutes)

François Leterrier...Lieutenant Fontaine
Charles Le Clainche...François Jost
Maurice Beerblock...Blanchet
Roland Monod...Le Pasteur
Jacques Ertaud...Orsini
Jean Paul Delhumeau...Hebrard
Roger Treherne...Terry
Jean Philippe Delamarre...Prisoner No, 110
César Gattegno...Le Prisonnier X
Jacques Oerlemans...Chief Warder
Klaus Detlef Grevenhorst...German Intelligence Officer
Leonhard Schmidt...Le Convoyeur

Directed by Robert Bresson
Written by Robert Bresson based on the memoir by André Devigny
Produced by Alain Poiré and Jean Thuillier
Non-Original Music by Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (Mass in C-minor)
Cinematography by Léonce-Henri Burel
Production Design by Pierre Charbonnier

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 Reverend 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 gesticulate.”

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 Durnat’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 de 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....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....

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 versimilitude 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*.... 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.

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 Carrez.”

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 rigorousness 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).

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 despoilation 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 Sémolué 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 *Nostalgia*.

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 movie-making. 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."

from Robert Bresson *A Spiritual Style in Film*. Joseph Cunneen. Continuum NY 2003

A Man Escaped (1956) demonstrates that the "spiritual aspect of his work is due more to style than subject matter. (Its more precise French title, *Un homme condamné à mort s'est échappé*, would translate as *A Man Condemned to Death Has Escaped*.) In *Diary*, the interior struggle of Bernanos' country priest made the employment of Christian symbols unavoidable; here, in making what Jonathan Rosenblum calls "the greatest of all prison-escape movies," Bresson manages to make use of that overworked genre in a way that induces reflection on all the complex issues of grace and predestination.

The story is based on the actual escape of André Devigny (renamed Fontaine in the movie) from the Nazi prison of Montluc in Lyons in 1943. But unlike the neo-realism of such fashionable directors as Rossellini and de Sica, who wanted their films to directly reflect the society around them, Bresson's realism had a different goal, to convey the reality of the transcendent. *A Man Escaped* has always been one of the most popular of Bresson's films, and it was chosen as one of the best foreign films by the National Board of Review for 1957.

The film provides no background information about the prisoner's activities in the French Resistance, but shots of his face immediately convey intelligence, determination, and self-control. The camera observes Fontaine's hands intently as they patiently scrape away the joints of his cell door, using an iron spoon he has bent into a chisel. The movie's title would seem to eliminate the possibility of suspense, but by concentrating on the everyday details of prison life and avoiding melodramatic effects, Bresson brings us close to Devigny's actual experience and encourages reflection on the meaning of imprisonment and liberation.

As Eric Rohmer observes, after Fontaine's first attempt to escape while being driven to prison he is met by the brutality of the guards: after he is captured, Bresson avoids any direct presentation of violence. His subject, unlike that of *Diary of a Country Priest*, is not the inner life of the soul, but the methodical preparation and hour-by-hour execution of a dangerous attempt to escape:

It is a question of employing the most humble technique in order to convert everyday objects into instruments for escape. This is a more prosaic combat than that of the curé of Ambricourt. But matter is modeled with as many considerations, if not more difficulties, than the soul. What counts is the respectful prevision of the gesture, the beauty of a man at work. Bresson introduces into his film a tension which is that of the ordinary rhythm of life and owes nothing to the dramatic schemas used by most directors. A period of time that they would insist on embellishing he meticulously fills with nothing but expectation. Each instant is full, and if the idea of boredom is strange to anyone, it is especially to our prisoner, who does not know the day of his execution or that of his escape, whose hour grows further away to the degree that he finishes his preparations. Should we talk of suspense? No, not if what one means by that word is a skillfully measured choice of good or bad signals. Yes, if it is true that nothing is able to distract us from one thought—escape.

The effect of Bresson's daring aesthetic choice is summarized aptly by J.L. Tallenay:

Bresson has chosen to tell us the story of an adventure but has succeeded in the tour de force of making us forget the actual events. He has forced the public to pay

attention to the reactions of one man. Suspense remains, but its object has changed: it is no longer a matter of what is going to happen, but the passionate desire to know how a man is going to conduct himself.

With Fontaine's running commentary as the backbone of its construction, most of the film is presented in the first person. The voice-overs are not superimposed on the dialogue, as in *Diary*; in general, we hear the voice after we see the image. Our awareness that Fontaine will ultimately escape is reinforced by the fact that the commentary is in the past tense.

This final *result* of the narrative cause-effect chain is known. As a result our suspense is centered on the *causes*—not *whether* Fontaine will escape, but *how* he will escape. The film guides our expectations towards the minute details of Fontaine's work to break out of prison. The commentary and the sound effects draw our attention to tiny gestures and ordinary objects that become crucial to the escape.

Paradoxically, by presenting events with cool detachment, even during moments of great danger, audience involvement becomes even more intense.

A Man Escaped represents a further break with standard moviemaking. As he was finishing work on it, Bresson told François Truffaut, "I wanted to achieve a great purity, a greater asceticism than in *Diary of a Country Priest*. This time I don't have a single professional actor." Bresson's rejection of actors is central to his conception of cinematography. He has great admiration for live actors in a theater who can create with their bodies, but cinematography calls for the use of what he terms "models," whom he does not want to "act" at all. "On the boards," Bresson writes, "acting adds to real presence, intensifies it. In films, acting does away with even the semblance of real presence, and kills the illusion created by the photography." His frequent insistence on many "takes" and his effort to control not only the gestures his models are to employ but even the diction with which they speak their lines are a training in a kind of automatism, undertaken in a belief that we reveal who we are truly when our gestures are automatic.

Regular moviegoers, accustomed to performances based on a very different set of assumptions, may find this approach upsetting at first, or simply complain about "bad acting." Since his rejection of actors made it difficult to acquire financing for his projects, the use of "models" was clearly more than a theoretical quirk for Bresson:

What I am very pretentiously trying to capture is this essential soul....What I tell them [the models] to do or say must bring light to something they had not realized they contained. The camera catches it; neither they nor I really know it before it happens. The unknown is what I wish to conquer.

Bresson even says, "It would not be ridiculous to say to your models: 'I am inventing you as you are.'"

It is apparent that in *A Man Escaped* Bresson offers a more complete embodiment of his understanding of cinematography than before. There is not only a nearly total control of his non-actors, but of the flow as well. We never have a clear sense of the overall layout of the jail; space itself is deliberately fragmented. This approach forces the spectator to an extra alertness; it is almost as if we have to work out the specifics of the escape ourselves, facing the same difficulties as Fontaine.

In the overall effort to ensure authenticity, the exterior

shooting of *A Man Escaped* took place at Lyon and Fort Montluc in the presence of André Deligny himself, and the prison cell was reconstructed with real materials at studio Saint Maurice. In his earlier movies Bresson used the music of Jean-Jacques Grunewald to heighten the emotion of individual scenes. Here he practices greater restraint: music is restricted to a leitmotif of chords from Mozart's Mass in C minor, which are heard at several points during the action. At the same time, natural sounds, whose importance has already been noted in *Diary* (and even in Bresson's earlier work), become a major factor in the film's composition. He was deeply convinced that sounds were more expressive than images: "When a sound can replace an image, cut the image or neutralize it. The ear goes more toward the interior, the eye to the exterior."

Devigny had published the story of his escape in *Figaro littéraire* (November 20-27, 1954). In a press conference at the 1956 Cannes festival Bresson spoke of his reaction to the narrative: "It was a very precise, even technical, account of the escape. The effect was of great beauty; written in a very precise, cold tone, even its construction was beautiful....It had both the coldness and simplicity that make one feel this is the work of a man who writes with his heart."

The film deliberately concentrates on the escape itself; nothing is said of Fontaine's resistance activities, nor do we learn about what happened to him after leaving prison. (In reality he was captured and escaped again.) As the credits roll, Bresson projects a brief signed statement: "This story is true, I present it as it is, without ornaments." At the same time, neither in *Escaped* nor in later films is he aiming at a complete historical reconstruction of events; "even if historical circumstances play a determining role in regard to external events and interior reactions, these circumstances nevertheless remain secondary in regard to them."

Bresson retains all the exact material details that made the escape possible; as François Leterrier, the model for Fontaine, said, "the objects against which the prisoner struggles should have been listed in the credits." In addition to the bent spoon, there is the hatpin that initially enabled him to open his handcuffs, the latticework of the bed, a lantern, fabricated hooks, and the shirts and sheets that Fontaine transformed into ropes. Note how all these objects had to be forced into a new shape in order to see the prisoner's needs. In the process, the attempt to dominate matter becomes a kind of spiritual transformation.

Bresson's first title for the film was *Help Yourself*; when this was discarded, he chose a subtitle, "the spirit blows where it wills," from St. John's Gospel (3:8). Fontaine is acting out a complex dialectic between faith and free will: God is with him, but at the same time he has an obligation to employ all human resources to achieve his own liberation. Bresson explained his underlying intention: "I want to show this miracle: an invisible hand over the prison directing events and making something succeed for one person and not for another." As Amédée Ayfre comments, however, this is "an invisible hand which never acts except by the hand of Fontaine, by that obstinate hand that makes tools and forces doors."

A Man Escaped begins with a shot of a plaque at Fort Montluc, announcing that seven thousand of the ten thousand prisoners sent there died during the German occupation; during the credits we hear the "Kyrie" from Mozart's Mass in C minor. The film itself is made up of innumerable quick-moving, chronologically ordered fragments. Although there are six hundred separate shots, the escape itself, which has several stages, is its only extended

sequence. "It was a matter," Bresson said, "of making rapid film out of slow-moving things, suggesting the ponderous life of prison." No summary can do justice to the small encounters between prisoners who are forbidden by their German guards to talk to each other. Details that seem unimportant during a first viewing can ultimately be seen as preparing a significant change in attitude that will later affect the central action.

Bresson never presents an overall view of the cell; we see only what Fontaine observes....

During an encounter in the washroom, the Protestant pastor gives Fontaine a slip of paper with the text of John 3:8. In it Jesus speaks to Nicodemus of the need to be born again, and the line also contains the words of the movie's subtitle, "The spirit blows where it wills." The pastor counsels prayer and reliance on divine help, but Fontaine responds realistically that the individual must do his part: "it would be too easy if God took care of everything."

Robert Bresson. Edited by James Quandt. Toronto International Film Festival Group, Toronto 1998

Susan Sontag: "Spiritual Style in the Films of Robert Bresson"

Some art aims directly at arousing the feelings; some art appeals to the feelings through the route of the intelligence. There is art that involves, that creates empathy. There is art that detaches, that provokes reflection. Great reflective art is not frigid. It can exalt the spectator, it can present images that appall, it can make him weep. But its emotional power is mediated. The pull toward emotional involvement is counterbalanced by elements in the work that promote distance, disinterestedness, impartiality. Emotional involvement is always, to a greater or lesser degree, postponed.

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

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

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

The form of Bresson's films is designed (like Ozu's) to discipline the emotions at the same time that it arouses them: to induce a certain tranquillity in the spectator, a state of spiritual balance that is itself the subject of the film.

Reflective art is art which, in effect, imposes a certain discipline on the audience—postponing easy gratification.

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

In *Un condamné à mort s'est échappé*, which is set in a German-run prison in occupied France, confinement is most literally represented. So is liberation: the hero triumphs over himself (his despair, the temptation of inertia) and escapes. The obstacles are embodied both in material things and in the incalculability of the human beings in the vicinity of the solitary hero. But Fontaine risks trusting the two strangers in the courtyard at the beginning of

his imprisonment, and his trust is not betrayed.

In *Un condamné à mort s'est échappé*, the elderly man in the adjoining cell asks the hero querulously, "Why do you fight?" Fontaine answers, "To fight. To fight against myself." The true fight is against one's heaviness, one's gravity. And the instrument of this fight is the idea of work, a project, a task.

Jean Cocteau has said (*Cocteau on the Film*, A Conversation Recorded by André Fraigneau, 1951) that minds and souls today "live without a syntax, that is to say, without a moral system. This moral system has nothing to do with morality proper, and should be built up by each one of us as an inner style, without which no outer style is possible." Cocteau's films may be understood as portraying this inwardness which is the true morality; so may Bresson's.... In fact, the most entirely successful of all Bresson's films—*Un condamné à mort s'est échappé*—is one which, while it has a sensitive and intelligent priest in the background (one of the prisoners), bypasses the religious way of posing the problem. The religious vocation supplies one setting for ideas about gravity, lucidity, and martyrdom. But the drastically secular subjects of crime, the revenge of betrayed love, and solitary imprisonment also yield the same themes.

For Bresson, art is the discovery of what is necessary—of that, and nothing more. The power of Bresson's six films lies in the fact that his purity and fastidiousness are not just an assertion about the resources of the cinema, as much of modern painting is mainly a comment in paint about painting. They are at the same time an idea about life, about what Cocteau called "inner style," about the most serious way of being human.

"Burel & Bresson" Interview by Rui Nogueira

For me, *Un condamné à mort s'est échappé* (1956) is by far the best thing Bresson has done. It's a masterpiece and proved he was really one of the really great directors, on a par—although all three are very different—with Feyder and Gance. And coming from me, that's no small praise, believe me. Furthermore the film is a challenge, it throws down the gauntlet. To start by saying this man has escaped and I am going to tell you how, and then to do so entirely without artifice or dramatic effects, in absolute simplicity...well, that is mastery.

The filming caused me a lot of headaches for a very simple reason. Which was that many scenes had to be shot in studio sets, and these same scenes would begin or end in the real setting of the prison at Lyon. My problem was to ensure that the spectator could never say this bit was shot in a studio set, and that bit in the Montluc prison. But that's my job, and I did it by studying the lighting in the cells at Montluc, then repeating the lighting exactly in the studio. The scenes done at Montluc were the ones in which the prisoner came out of his cell into the gallery; there had to be a correlation between the cell and the much more brilliantly illuminated corridor, and the cell itself had to be lit to match exactly the one I had lit in the studio.

I had to be extremely careful, too, because photographically speaking, I was living dangerously by filming almost without light. When you are working within a comfortable range, a little more or less doesn't really matter; but when you're stuck at one end of the scale, then the slightest error can mean catastrophe. For the scenes with Fontaine and Jost in their cell, which is illuminated only by a fanlight, it would have been ridiculous to show them with shadows, especially as the fanlight is

right above them. As you don't actually see it until later, I wanted to suggest that the whole cell was illuminated by this fanlight you hadn't seen but which you know was there. So I think I was one of the first cameraman to use reflected instead of direct light. I threw the light on to a sort of large white shield, so that instead of falling directly on the actors it was reflected on to them. It became an ambience, an atmosphere, and though directed, came not from a particular point but from an extensive surface. It was easy enough because Bresson works so much in close-up and because there were never more than three actors in a shot. With a big set or a wider field, I could never have done it.

When Fontaine comes out into the corridor, on the other hand, I used directional light to suggest illumination from much larger windows. Nothing was left to chance. The escape scenes were shot at Montluc at the dead of night and I used an absolute minimum of light. Sometimes there's a bit of light and you can just barely see the two of them; but since there was almost nothing else on the screen, you knew they were there.

"Filmmakers on Bresson"

Bernardo Bertolucci: In the last ten years the name Bresson has become a pure world, an entity, a kind of film *manifesto* for poetic rigour. Bressonian meant for me and my friends the ultimate, moral, unreachable, sublime, punishing cinematic tension. Punishing because his movies are strong sensual experiences with no relief (apart from aesthetic relief, itself a devastating pleasure).

Jean Cocteau: Bresson is isolated in his terrible profession. As a poet does with his pen, he expresses himself cinematographically. Deep is the abyss between his nobility, silence, gravity, dreams, and the rest of the world, where they are taken to be uncertainty and obsession.

Marguerite Duras: If you will, what has been accomplished in poetry, in literature, Bresson has done with the cinema. One might say that, until Bresson, cinema was parasitic, derived from other arts. With him came a pure cinema....

Atom Egoyan: No one responds the way we expect them to. Bresson is entirely comfortable in showing the banal indifference which characterizes most of our actions.... If education is formulated on making us understand the relationship of action to consequence, Bresson is the supreme teacher.

Rainer Werner Fassbinder: The questions Bresson asks will never be unimportant.

Agnieszka Holland: I saw *A Man Escaped* for the first time in a ciné-club in Warsaw in the sixties. I was about fifteen years old, and I *felt* this film like no previous film. It is difficult to express, but the experience was a kind of awakening for me—the film expressed such essential truths....For me, Bresson is one of the giants of the last fifty years of cinema. Maybe *the* giant.

Aki Kaurismäki: Without mercy he denies everything, including life, and I couldn't agree more. Maybe James Agee would have something to say about this but he can't, not in this world. He is already and safely outside of suffering and under mercy.

What I am really trying to say is that Bresson is not only a melodrama director but also a comedy filmmaker, who could—if needed—easily challenge any Lenny Bruce on the stage. But the man is hiding.

The very same man who wrote that music is not needed in cinema and the next day used one instrumental guitar piece in *Mouchette*. Altogether, I would never have survived in this God-forgotten world without the realistic lies of Mr. Bresson, for which I will always be thankful until I die and thereafter.

Jean-Pierre Lefebvre: When I despair that film has become the opium of the people, when I despair at seeing the seventh art throwing millions at some self-conscious dispelling of illusions, I make a point of seeing once again *Un condamné à mort s'est échappé* or *L'Argent*. It is then that I rediscover the deep and fundamental meaning of my craft as a filmmaker, just as much as I rediscover the craft of being human—for filmmaking is, above all, a most humanistic craft.

Louis Malle: That's what I admire about Bresson: that he has managed to create these sensual moments. When I worked with him on *Un condamné à mort s'est échappé*, Bresson was interested in me because I came from documentaries. He asked me to take care of all of the details such as the spoon with which the prisoner was digging—all of these details which had to do with the escape. I was very impressed with all of his close-ups of such details and with his concern to show a sense of touch.

The soundtrack of the film was also remarkable. I saw it again recently and it is extraordinary. He manages to create a world of sensation that he conveys. In that sense I feel very close to him.

The only reason I worked with Bresson was because I admired him. I put him on a pedestal, much higher than any other French director. I had great admiration for Renoir, but Renoir was not working in France at that time....Early on he put me in touch with the man on whose wartime experiences the film was based. His name was Devigny. He was a Resistance hero, an officer. Bresson said, "You're going to work with Devigny, and you're going to prepare all the props and all the details. I want everything to be absolutely authentic; it's going to help me tremendously..."For me he was the ultimate.

Martin Scorsese: It's a strange experience to watch a Bresson film at this particular moment in history, because a great deal of today's popular cinema is so big, loud, kinetic and, in many cases, grotesque. In other words, the antithesis of Bresson's cinema. I saw *A Man Escaped* again recently, and it's such a completely pure experience, with absolutely nothing extraneous—it functions like a delicate and perfectly calibrated hand-made machine. I have to wonder whether or not young people who have grown up on digitally engineered effects and DTS soundtracks can actually find the patience required to watch a film by a Bresson or, for that matter, an Ozu or an Antonioni. In a way, it seems impossible: it's as though they're from different worlds. To be honest, I also find Bresson's films difficult at times. But once I settle into his particular orbit, the experience is always rewarding, because he focuses on things that are beyond the reach of most movies. You can call it transcendental but perhaps it's simpler to say that Bresson focuses on the moments that happen between the ones that appear in most other movies. But he is also an incredibly dynamic filmmaker, and I learn a lot each time I watch one of his pictures. There's a cheap dynamism that's easily attainable through the many technological advances in movies, but in Bresson you get a true dynamism generated by the most elemental relationships between image and sound.

Andrey Tarkovsky: Bresson was the only director who knew how to captivate and surprise me. I was particularly touched by the absolute independence of the spectator.

There are many reasons I consider Bresson a unique phenomenon in the world of film. Indeed, Bresson is one of the artists who has shown that cinema is an artistic discipline on the same level as the classic artistic disciplines such as poetry, literature, painting and music.

Every serious artist strives for simplicity, but only a few manage to achieve it. Bresson is one of the few who have succeeded.

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.

François Truffaut: Bresson's remark, "Cinema is interior movement," is frequently quoted....Jean Renoir often says that

cinema is an art more secret than painting, and that a film is made for three people. I haven't the slightest doubt that there are not three people in the world who don't find Bresson's work mysterious.

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

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

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

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Nov 8 Peter Yates **BULLITT** 1968 (35mm)

Nov 15 Woody Allen **ANNIE HALL** 1977 (35mm)

Nov 22 Rainer Werner Fassbinder **MARRIAGE OF MARIA BRAUN/DIE EHE DER MARIA BRAUN** 1979 (35mm)

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Nov Dec 6 Luchino Visconti **THE LEOPARD/IL GATTOPADRO** 1963 (35mm)

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November 10 (Introduction by Diane Christian): **The Future of Food**. Deborah Koons Garcia. 2003. 88 min. Video. (U.S./Canada/Mexico)

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