

Robert Bresson: Depth Behind Simplicity

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*On December 18, 1999, one of the world's greatest filmmakers, Robert Bresson, passed away at the age of 98. Although Bresson made only thirteen films over forty years, together they represent a body of work that is unparalleled in its stylistic consistency and the strength of its singular vision. Aside from Jean-Luc Godard, no other post-war French filmmaker's influence has spanned so many generations of filmmakers, so many countries, and such diverse aesthetics. Bresson's contribution to modern cinema has, however, only relatively recently come to proper recognition. As a result (and due to his own insistence on privacy), very little is known of the man himself or the events of his personal life.⁽¹⁾ What details we do know are vague: he began his career as a painter, turned to script-writing in the thirties (at which time he directed a short comedy, *Les affaires publiques*), and spent the beginning of WWII in a German prison camp before resuming his career with his first full-length feature, *Les anges du péché*. (1943). In 1945 he completed *Les dames du Bois de Boulogne* with co-writer Jean Cocteau, but it was not until 1951 that he achieved critical acclaim for *Le journal d'un curé de campagne*. His subsequent films: *Un condamné à mort s'est échappé* (1956), *Pickpocket* (1959), *Procès de Jeanne d'Arc* (1962), *Au hasard Balthazar* (1966), *Mouchette* (1967), *Une femme douce* (1969), *Quatre nuits d'un rêveur* (1972), *Lancelot du lac* (1974), *Le diable probablement* (1977), and *L'argent* (1983) are each characterized by a philosophical integrity and uncompromising filmic style that set him apart from most of his contemporaries and placed him in a pivotal role in the development of modern cinema.*

IT WAS with the films, *Le journal d'un curé de campagne* (1951) and *Un condamné à mort s'est échappé*, that Robert Bresson developed the severe, formalist style with which he came to be identified for the rest of his career. This stylistic system, which he called *le cinématographe*, arose from a desire to make film "express the ineffable", to give it what he called an "interior movement". Bresson's desire to capture on film a trace of the essence of the human soul led him to remove from his works everything that he considered false or unnecessary. Economy of means was a major concern for Bresson who used to say 'when one violin is enough, don't use two... one doesn't create by adding, but by subtracting'. To simply call Bresson's work minimalist, however, only reduces a highly developed and complex stylistic order to a facile and superficial explanation. Certainly, the desire to find truth by stripping reality to its essentials, can be discerned in Bresson's treatment of narrative elements that give structure and meaning to his films. But what is remarkable about Robert Bresson is not his "minimalism" itself, but his ability to yield maximal effects with a minimum of means.

Bresson once said: "I am a maniac of the TRUE, for the slightest detail." Rejecting the tradition of "quality cinema", he avoided studio shooting and explained that a false use of lighting was just as dangerous as a false word or a false gesture. Bresson used a simple 50mm lens, and rejected elaborate camera movements including "laboured dolly" or panoramic shots, which, in his opinion, did not correspond to our way of seeing. From this same realist sentiment came Bresson's refusal to use trained actors in his films: "For me, film-making is combining images and sounds of real things in an order that makes them effective. What I disapprove of is photographing things that are not real. Sets and actors are not real." (Samuels, 58). For Bresson, the physical and tonal expressiveness willed by actors, while appropriate and necessary in theatre, only competed with the expressiveness of sound and image essential in film. Moreover, it competed with the expressiveness of what people *are* as opposed to how they consciously represent themselves -- their material and spiritual essence as opposed to their "character". Accordingly, Bresson called his actors "models" and trained them to repeat their lines without inflection or emotion.

On the other hand, Bresson also warned against blind respect of the natural: "Unfiltered reality will not of itself create truth." According to his *Notes on the Cinematographe*, it is impossible to preserve the beauty of the true by merely recording things, one must attempt to capture the inner reality. "I want the essence of my films to be not the words my people say or even the gestures they perform, but what these words and gestures provoke in them. What I tell them to do or say must bring to light something they had not realized

they contained. The camera catches it; neither they nor I really know before it happens. The unknown is what I wish to capture." Thus he rejected both documentary style realism of Italian Neorealism, and the superficial and artificial expressionism of cinematic styles which aimed more for drama and beauty than truth such as French poetic realism.

The reality found in Bresson's films is of a peculiar type; an abstraction of real life which heightens and intensifies selected aspects of human existence, while paring away all unnecessary details. In fact, this "realism" might be better described as "purified vision", through which Bresson is better equipped to search for his ultimate goal: the essence or soul of human existence (Predal, 78). The film-maker himself said: "I simplify everything, first by elimination on paper and then, much more so, during shooting, so as not to over-burden the pictures, so as not to render them opaque.... The poetry, if there is any, comes from the tautness. It is not a "poetic" poetry, but a cinematographic poetry. It arises out of simplification, which is only a more direct way of seeing people and things" (Ciment, 503).

What Bresson is really seeking is truth rather than reality itself. Once past the initial shock created by the apparent inexpressiveness of Bresson's models, one realizes that he hasn't, in fact, created unrealistic, hollow people bereft of character and personality, but ones that, though strange, are universal in their humanity. One way that he maintains their validity is by emphasizing certain carefully chosen details, objects, and gestures that are powerfully grounded in every-day life (i.e.. the bottle of wine in *Diary of a Country Priest* and Fontaine's hands and their role in his escape in *A Man Escaped*). What is most interesting about these isolated details is their ability to suddenly, mysteriously transcend their simple state and acquire meaning and significance through their placement in relationship with each other and in the context of the narrative. The *curé's* fatal illness, though seen in the flesh (vomiting, blood), and rationally explained as stomach cancer, is understood as spiritual suffering: "...I was prisoner of the Holy Agony!" In *A Man Escaped*, the second time we hear the sound made by the guard's keys against the railing, it has an immense emotional power, reminding Fontaine and the audience of the brutality and oppression of the prison. Bresson said of *A Man Escaped*: "I was hoping to make a film about objects which would at the same time have a soul. That is to say, to reach the latter through the former" (Prédal, 85) For Bresson, it is the stylistic arrangement of all these concrete details that gives them meaning and ultimately determines the soul of a character, a situation, or a film.

Thus, the creation of art out of distilled reality, so essential to Bresson's vision, takes place not in the subject or content of the film, but in the structure of the narrative. Jean-Pierre Oudart discusses Bresson's modernist approach, where true meaning is not found in the subject of the film, but in the way that cinematic elements and formal structures are themselves used: "it is no longer for the *character* to SAY it, or for a subjective *fiction* to PRODUCE it, but for the literal *image*, as a cinematographic construct, to EXPRESS it" (Prédal, 78). Bresson avoids conventional narrative structure, preferring to replace it through a unique use of framing, editing, image, sound, and music. In his films, these formal elements come together as a highly stylized but expressive language through which he can highlight his central concerns.

Bresson's films do not correspond to conventional character development; each person seems to be driven by internal desires, isolated in his individual outlook from the worlds of others. Their inner conflicts, the various phases that Bresson's characters undergo in what he calls "the universal struggle of self-fulfillment" (Bazin, 33), are not outwardly revealed or explained (even though the voice-over and diary -- devices which he used extensively -- would have easily lent themselves to such first-person explanation). Jean Collet wrote of the extraordinary lack of psychological detail in Bresson's films:

Robert Bresson does not want us to know his characters. He does not believe in psychological knowledge, he does not reveal characters, he does not trace a coherent, accessible portrait of the beings who fill the screen. Rather, he asserts that any being is inaccessible, that any character is a mystery..."(Reader, 291)

This reflects the way people encounter "the other" in actual experience. According to Bresson, the mystery of the human spirit is incomprehensible, and cinema that pretends to reveal it is not only false, but cheapening. Bresson is not concerned with psychology, but with the "physiology of existence" (Bazin, 58). "The psychologist discovers only what he can explain. I don't want to explain anything... the trouble with most films is that they explain everything." (Samuels, 61) In contrast, next to nothing is known of the past or

future of Bresson's characters, except for their precise role in the chosen events. Bresson speaks of "illumination rather than explanation", and induces his audience to become involved in finding meaning through the process of interpretation. At the beginning of *Diary of a Country Priest*, the first words we hear after a series of images showing the protagonist's arrival in the village are: "My parish. My first parish." This phrase, in its simplicity and ambiguity, and in the context of images and sounds, carries in the imagination of the audience much more meaning than the words do themselves. Instead of telling everything about Lieutenant Fontaine, of his actions in the Resistance, and the details of his capture, Bresson only says that he is in prison and is planning to escape. Even at the end of the film, when he walks away from the prison, we have no idea as to what he plans to do with his freedom -- Bresson was interested only in the events that got Fontaine to that point, and felt no responsibility to provide a conclusion that would 'tie up the loose ends'.

In Bresson's works, first-person narration in the form of voice-over replaces dialogue as the primary means of relaying the story. But interestingly, what the narration tells us is usually nothing that we don't already know or are about to learn. In a way, it doubles the action. In the scene where the *curé* returns to the salon where he had spoken to the countess on the day before her death, the voice-over states: "the Countess's armchair, the blackened logs were in the same place", even though the camera's close-up on these details makes this fact perfectly obvious. Fontaine recounts through the voice-over how he made the rope -- "I folded the cloth four times, tucking the edges to avoid fraying. I twisted it and tied it with wire to hold the twist" -- at the same time as the camera shows this very same action to us. Outwardly, this duplication might seem to run contrary to Bresson's minimalist perspective, but in fact, there is no real redundancy, as the voice-over is never merely a simple commentary on the image, nor is the image a simple illustration of the text; their parallelism maintains that division which is present in our senses. Bresson deliberately overlaps narration and image in order to emphasize the significance of certain actions or details. Its punctuation also serves to establish a certain rhythm which helps to carry the narrative.

One important distinction between what is seen and what is spoken in the voice-over, is that while the visuals appear to be taking place in the present, the narration is always in the past-tense. This has the effect of breaking down real-time -- the illusion on which standard narrative structure is usually based. Bresson is never interested in maintaining an exact account of time in consistent duration. The passage of time is subjective and is measured in relation to significant events in the lives of the protagonists. In *Diary of a Country Priest*, these events are recorded in the *curé's* diary which serves to establish the continuity and order of things, but rarely specific time. One entry begins with a specific time: "I left the castle at two o'clock", and is followed by a very vague one: "Catechism class ended much later than I thought" (when did it start / end?). Subjective time plays a very important role in *A Man Escaped* as we follow Fontaine's slow, but determined efforts to escape. Fontaine measures time according to the routines of prison ("empty your bucket and wash, back to your cell for the day"), progress in relation to his escape ("for an iron spoon I had to wait several days"), "time passed, our chances faded"), intervals at which trains pass, guards change, and in terms of his physical state ("After three days I was able to move again").

While the succession of events follows a necessary order, never is one event explained as the necessary consequence of another. It is understood that in Bresson's universe, events occur within a framework of free acts, coincidences and interventions of divine grace, making causal explanations unnecessary. Bresson does not bother to explain just how a spoon came to be in the washroom the day that the one Fontaine was using broke. The unexpected arrival of Jost, which at first seems to upset Fontaine's plans of escape, turns out to be fortunate, as without his help, Fontaine would not have been able to escape. As its secondary title alludes, (*Le vent souffle où il veut*, or 'the Spirit breathes where it will'), the film is essentially about the will of Fontaine to escape and the fate or "grace" (divine intervention) which allows things to occur as they do -- both of which refute easy explanations based on causal effects.

Bresson's characteristic understatement is clearly seen in his unconventional use of ellipsis. Through the careful editing of transitions, directors are able to minimize gaps between shots and scenes, artfully removing "unnecessary" transitions through a montage of actions that appear to seamlessly bridge them. Thus the appearance of narrative continuity is maintained (Kline, 239). Bresson's frequent use of ellipsis, on the other hand, seems dedicated to maximizing our sense of discontinuity. Throughout both films, transitions between scenes are consistently omitted, and important events, as well as what would typically provide narrative "climaxes" (such as deaths), are merely reported, alluded to or left off-screen. Upon arrival at the prison,

we see Fontaine being taken into a room; one of the guards picks up a shovel, follows him in and closes the door, effectively blocking our vision. Yet we know instinctively that Fontaine is about to be beaten, though Bresson refuses to show the violent act. By this understatement, the film-maker avoids sensationalism, and at the same time cuts out everything unessential to the purpose. Bresson explains:

” it would be false to show the beating since the audience knows that the actor isn’t really being beaten, and such falsity would stop the film. Moreover, this is what it was like when I was a prisoner of the Germans. Once I heard someone being whipped through a door, and then I heard the body fall. That was ten times worse than if I had seen the whipping. When you see Fontaine with his bloody face being brought back to the cell, you are forced to imagine the awfulness of the beating -- which makes it very powerful.” (Samuels, 66)

The use of ellipsis in Bresson’s film undermines conventional narrative structure, as the audience is not passively told a story, but asked, in a way, to fill in the blanks with their own interpretation. In the opening sequence of *A Man Escaped* we watch as Fontaine prepares to make his break from the car in which he is being held prisoner. At the opportune moment, he jumps out of the car -- and out of the camera’s field of vision. We hear the noises of whistles, running and shouting, through which we can imagine what is going on, but the fact that the camera does not follow him in his escape tells the viewer that these actions are unimportant -- Fontaine will inevitably be brought back to the empty seat on which the camera remains fixed.

Bresson’s use of editing and framing to avoid presenting a straightforward narrative goes beyond the mere use of ellipsis. As specifics of location are just as unimportant to Bresson as specifics of time, the film-maker never employs a conventional establishing shot, and transitions between scenes are often omitted, juxtaposing places without the least sign that might help the viewer locate himself. Distances between places and their relationship to each other are vague: we never get a view of the priest’s village or how far away the church or castle was to his house. Similarly, we never get a general shot of the prison or of Fontaine’s cell -- there is an abundance of close-ups which show its parts individually, as they become important to Fontaine (i.e., the door, the window, the skylight).

The viewer also never sees or hears much more than the protagonist, and often not even that much. In *Diary of a Country Priest*, the camera often rests on the silent face of the *curé* while he listens to his parishioners. In the scene where the cure goes to pay his last respects to the countess, the voice-over speaks of her appearance: ”I had wished... I don’t know...maybe a smile from her... But she didn’t smile”. Yet, unexpectedly, this does not lead to a shot of her lying in bed, not smiling -- the camera is interested only in how the *curé* responds. Likewise, the camera refuses to show us what Fontaine sees as he looks out his window and plans his detailed escape across the prison walls. By limiting the camera’s field of view, Bresson not only forces the audience to perceive the world in terms of what is important from the protagonist’s point of view (the search for God, for the *curé*, and the will to escape for Fontaine), but effectively suggests human vision.

In fact, deploying the human gaze is very important to Bresson. Bresson’s editing guides the audience through the narrative by following the gaze of his protagonists: ”editing a film means linking the characters to each other and to the objects through their eyes” (Prédal, 87). In order to do this, Bresson minimizes distracting backgrounds and pictorial effects, though in no way do they become insignificant. In their simplicity, the barren landscapes of *Diary of a Country Priest* and *Balthazar*, and the stark empty cells, hallways and courtyards that provide backdrops in *A Man Escaped* and *L’argent*, actually intensify the isolation of the protagonist and help to focus our attention on his interior struggle. The dramatic contrast of light and dark in the composition of the scene near the end of *A Man Escaped*, where Jost and Fontaine climb through the skylight and crawl along the prison wall, not only creates needed tension, but also becomes a powerful metaphor for their struggle.

Yet it is only in the context of narrative that the composition and framing of shots carry meaning. In fact, one of the fundamental principles on which Bresson’s narrative structure is based is the subordination of individual images or shots to the composition of the whole. Bresson once said: ”I flatten the image as though I was ironing it. I do not deprive pictures of meaning, but I minimize it so that each picture loses its independence” (Thiher, 230). Bresson calls himself a ”*mettre en ordre*” rather than a ”*mettre en*

scène”, and insists that the only authentic cinematographic creation involves a fragmentation of reality into a montage-like narrative of images and sounds. Bresson explains that in a film,

”each shot is like a word, which means nothing by itself, or rather means so many things that in effect it is meaningless. But a word in a poem is transformed, its meaning made precise and unique, by its placing in relation to the words around it: in the same way a shot in a film is given its meaning by its context, and each shot modifies the meaning of the previous one until with the last shot a total, unaparaphrasable meaning has been arrived at.” (Sontag, 63)

Thus, it is through the creation of a system of relationships among projected images and sound that narrative comes to have meaning.

The use of sound in Bresson’s films is particularly significant, as its implementation corresponds with the film-maker’s desire to eliminate distractions and leave the imagination of his viewers free. Bresson explains that: ”each time I can replace an image with a noise, I do so”, because ”the ear is profound, whereas the eye is frivolous, too easily satisfied. The ear is active, imaginative, whereas the eye is passive. When you hear a noise at night, instantly you imagine its cause. The sound of a train whistle conjures up the whole station. The eye can perceive only what is presented to it.” (Sontag, 62) Sound is one of Bresson’s most important sources of narrative economy; it never duplicates an image, and often replaces one. Sound provides an essential structural dimension, creating depth, and making characters and their surroundings tangible. In *Diary of a Country Priest*, the sound of unseen raking punctuates the cure’s conversation with the countess, and in *A Man Escaped*, off-screen sound becomes extremely important as it provides the only link to the world outside the prison.

Thus sounds, in Bresson’s films, are never treated as mere consequences of visible actions, but stand on their own and carry meaning (as in the sound of machine guns Fontaine hears from his window). In *A Man Escaped*, the element of sound even plays a role in the development of narrative. Confined in his cell, Fontaine develops a heightened sensitivity to sound, and his awareness of it is essential to his escape. The absence or presence of sound dictates whether it is safe for Fontaine to continue in his endeavours to flee: just as footsteps warn of a guard’s approach, so does the initial silence of Fontaine’s neighbour causes him to be suspicious. Off-screen sounds occasionally determine the action within the frame, as when Fontaine waits for the train to pass in order to cover up the sounds of the guard’s murder.

In order to concentrate the effectiveness and power of a sound, Bresson isolates it from its context and distills it, pulling it from the chaos of background noise, thus stylizing its description. The film-maker is more interested in conveying the subjective impression of sound than capturing its real impact. Humans, he explains, know how to focus their ears selectively -- they will hear the passage of cars as individual sounds, not as the auditory ”hubbub” that would be recorded by a machine. Therefore, Bresson records all sounds separately, and it is from their placement alongside the composition of images that they acquire meaning.

Just as Bresson elevated the use of sound from its conventional role in the background to a new significance as a narrative element, so he did with music. In his *Notes on the Cinematographer*, Bresson states that there should be ”no music as accompaniment, support or reinforcement” (Richie, 299). A conventional score was used in *Diary of a Country Priest*, as it was not until *A Man Escaped* that Bresson was in full control of the music and could use it as he wanted. He used excerpts from Mozart’s ”Kyrie eleison” of the *Mass in C Minor*, which he said had a ”colour” matching the film (Richie, 299). Heard only sparingly, the music was meant to create another dimension of the film and convey meaning. Of the seven sequences in which it is heard, four are scenes in which the men come together in the courtyard, one is the scene in which Orsini attempts to escape, one, his (unseen) execution, and one, the scene where Fontaine is posed with the problem of whether to kill Jost, or take the latter with him. At the end of the film the music is heard again as Fontaine and Jost walk off in the night as free men. All of these scenes involve communication between the prisoners, and in this way, music becomes a sign of communion, as well as Providence. Susan Sontag has observed that ”all of Bresson’s films have a common theme: the meaning of confinement and liberty” (Sontag, 63). *A Man Escaped* is possibly Bresson’s most positive film, in that its use of music seems to suggest that oppression and suffering can be combatted and overcome through human communion and faith. The striking juxtaposition of Mozart’s Mass with the emptying of slop-buckets in the courtyard remind us, in the words of Sémolué: ”... that the simplest facts hide and reveal the execution of a secret design” (Murray, 79). For Bresson, music is

a form of narration. It can take us into a region no longer merely terrestrial, a place which he says, "I would even call divine" (Richie, 301).

As his fragmented use of sounds, images and music suggests, Bresson is not reproducing reality, but communicating his impressions of reality in a way that is meaningful. "In order to gain a true impression of something", he states, "one must strip away all that prevents one from grasping it" (Ciment, 308). However, simply calling Bresson's cinematographic style 'minimalist' does not allow for a true understanding of Bresson's complex stylistic system. As Ontario Cinematheque's James Quandt points out, Bresson's unique vision creates:

"...a cinema of paradox, in which "the denial of emotion creates emotionally overwhelming works, minimalism becomes plenitude, the withholding of information makes for narrative density, fragmentation evokes a sense of the world's wholeness, and attention to 'the surface of the work', as Bresson called it, produces inexhaustible depth" (Quandt, 7)

Perhaps Bresson's depiction of reality would be better described as "essentialist" rather than "minimalist", as the film-maker creates a maximal effect with a minimal of means.

Once past the novelty of Bresson's highly formalistic style, what impresses one most is not his rigour, but his vigour, not his highly structured system, but what is he able to express within this system. And within this energy, what surfaces is its profundity. For Bresson's particular minimalist style has been created in pursuit of something far greater than intellectual formalism: an artistic expression of the nature of human existence.



Figure 1: Director Robert Bresson (1901-1999)*

Notes

1. There is even confusion about Bresson's year of birth. Often indicated as 1907, film historians now appear to agree that he was actually born in 1901.
2. Photo courtesy of The Film Reference Library Toronto.

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