



Moments of Grace

The Films of Robert Bresson

David Gariff, National Gallery of Art

Grace fills up, but it can enter only where there is an empty space to receive it, and it makes this empty space itself.

—*Simone Weil*

I will always be a painter. But I had to stop. When I had to stop I had to fill up an emptiness.

—*Robert Bresson*

The critical literature on the films of the French director Robert Bresson (1901–1999) is characterized by a vocabulary of words like pure, rigorous, taut, spare, austere, economical, ascetic, spiritual, and metaphysical. On the opposite side of that same coin are descriptions such as gloomy, pessimistic, static, bleak, boring, cold, and inaccessible.

Beginning in 1934 with his short film *Public Affairs* (*Les affaires publiques*), recently rediscovered, and concluding in 1983 with *Money* (*L'argent*), Bresson's body of work (thirteen features in total) charts a course that is remarkable in its discipline and clarity of purpose. Say what one will about Bresson; there can be no argument that as a filmmaker he knew what he wanted, developed a meticulous strategy for its achievement, and never wavered from his belief system.

Diary of a Country Priest, 1950 (Photofest)

Bresson favored the word “cinematography” in describing his philosophy of film and filmmaking (see his *Notes on Cinematography*, 1975). The Bressonian sense of this word, however, extends far beyond the traditional definition of lighting and camerawork to embrace a more penetrating and extensive exploration of the deeper fabric of film language. For Bresson, film is less about storytelling, performance, and plot—less about subject matter—and more about sights, sounds, movements, silences, spaces, and rhythms.

Bresson’s early training was as a painter. As a filmmaker his formalist approach parallels changes in painting that began with Édouard Manet, Edgar Degas, and Paul Cézanne, and accelerated through the opening decades of the twentieth century. Compare statements from his *Notes* with the thoughts of Cézanne. Bresson writes:

Images will release their phosphorus only in aggregating...an image must be transformed by contact with other images. A blue is not the same blue beside a green, a yellow, a red...Dismantle and put together till one gets *intensity*.

Cézanne writes:

Objects penetrate each other...They do not stop living...They are spread imperceptibly around themselves by intimate reflections, like we are by our regard and our words. It is believed that a sugar bowl does not have an expression, a soul. But that changes every day too. It is necessary to know how to take them and coax them, these beings... These glasses, these plates, they speak to each other.

Among the formal devices of filmmaking most closely associated with Bresson is his use of ellipsis or elliptical storytelling. Briefly defined, ellipsis involves breaks or gaps in the narrative. It favors scenes separated from each other, which may create strange or symbolic visual juxtapositions and dialogues and subvert narrative logic. The viewer must infer that which is omitted. In this regard, Bresson is close to the visual language and theoretical principles of cubist painting.

Few filmmakers approach the frame of a composition, its *mise-en-scène*, with as insightful and revelatory a use of physical elements and emptiness. All forms, spaces, sounds, and movements work together. The rhythms of Bresson’s editing hold us for a beat before moving away from a corridor, wall, or door. We are acutely aware of our physical surroundings and of the sounds that help to define both what we see in the frame and what we do not see.

Sound includes all aspects of sound effects, dialogue, and music for Bresson. Music plays a minimal role in his films. When he does choose to use music, especially something weighty (Lully in *Pickpocket*, 1959; Schubert in *Au hasard Balthazar*, 1966; Monteverdi in *Mouchette*, 1967; Mozart in *The Devil Probably/Le diable probablement*, 1977), he is sensitive to music’s unique power to transform the formal and thematic moments in a film.

Few directors force us to look at what is before our eyes as intently and insistently as Bresson. His films demonstrate the notion that to look at something is not the same as to see it; to listen is not necessarily to hear. His compositions, like those of Manet and Degas, express meaning in and of themselves and, as film compositions, even before any action or dialogue takes place. As Bresson himself remarked, “The form must embody the idea.”



Une Femme Douce, 1969 (Photofest)



Pickpocket, 1959 (Photofest)

Bresson's casting methods, instructions to his "performers," and rigid control of every aspect of "performance" are well known to students and admirers of his films. Words like "performer" and "performance" must be qualified when discussing Bresson's work. He rarely used professional actors and never the same actor twice (with just one exception). He did not like the word "actor," preferring to think of his cast members as interpreters before finally settling on the word "models." The preparation of his models for a film consisted of draining them of every emotion, expressive gesture, theatrical artifice, and personal affect. This was achieved, in part, by having performers repeat movements, gestures, glances, and dialogue through rehearsals and repetitive takes, often as many as thirty or forty. Bresson sought to make his performers neutral vessels for the pure conveyance of formal elements, actions, or effects. He sought to reveal the very essence of the person he had chosen for a particular role, which is why *how* they looked was as important as *what* they did. Speaking to this point, he said: "Films can only be made by bypassing the will of those who appear in them, using not what they do, but what they are."

In discussions of the films' themes and meanings, descriptions arise that evoke the vocabulary commonly used to analyze Bresson's formal language. We find such often-repeated terms as awe, grace, despair, death, freedom, redemption, transcendence, mysticism, existentialism, and nihilism: terms invoked as both praise and condemnation.

Bresson was a man of faith acutely aware of its demands and challenges. He was a Roman Catholic and a Jansenist. The major tenets of Jansenist theology — original sin, evil, predestination, redemption, and divine grace — are fundamental to the major themes of his films. As with any great artist,

however, the obvious is not always the direct path to the truth. In the same way that Bresson's visual language negotiates between the sensual and the ascetic, his ideas on the spiritual and the ethical also range from the tragic to the sublime. His films leave us struggling with the paradox and duality of good and evil, faith and skepticism, action and inaction, hope and despair. Such concerns logically attracted Bresson to writers like Dostoyevsky, Tolstoy, and the lesser-known (to American audiences at least) Georges Bernanos (1888–1948).

Four films reside at the core of Bresson's work as a filmmaker. They are often referred to as the "prison cycle" and confront the viewer with images and ideas close to Bresson's heart, mind, faith, artistic philosophy, and personal experience. They are *Diary of a Country Priest* (*Journal d'un curé de campagne*, 1951), *A Man Escaped* (*Un condamné à mort s'est échappé*, 1956), *Pickpocket* (1959), and *The Trial of Joan of Arc* (*Procès de Jeanne d'Arc*, 1962).

Bresson joined the French army in 1939, and spent a year as a prisoner of war in a German camp. His films often deal, on many levels, with the concept of imprisonment (imprisonment in jail, personal imprisonment, spiritual imprisonment) and its opposite (freedom, liberation, redemption), also on many levels. Such a dialectic in no way assures the viewer of happy endings to his films, however. Revelation may very well bring with it a stark, if not brutal, message. And we are again thrown back into the anguish of life, the mystery of fate, and the miracle of grace.

Bresson's work as a filmmaker yielded a compressed but powerful body of work. (Compression can refer to his entire body of work, to the rhythms found in each film, and even to their running times; most Bresson films run under ninety minutes.) The influence of his cinematic vision, his unique

interpretation of the filmmaking process, and his definition of the purpose of film inspired diverse filmmakers, including members of the French new wave, the Russian director Andrei Tarkovsky (1932–1986), and the American Paul Schrader (see *Transcendental Style in Film: Ozu, Bresson, Dreyer*, 1972).

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