

from Notes on the Cinematographer
by Robert Bresson

*

Forms that resemble ideas. Treat them as actual ideas.

*

Model. "All face."*

*

* "Je ne sais qui demandait à un de nos gueux qu'il voyait en chemise en plain hyver aussi scarrebillat que tel qui se tient ammitoné dans les martres jusques aux oreilles, comme il pouvait avoir patience: 'Et vous, Monsieur,' répondit-il, 'vous avez bien la face découverte: or moy, je suis tout face.'" [“A certain man demanded of one of our loytring rogues, whom in the deep of frosty Winter he saw wandering up and downe with nothing but his shirt about him, and yet as blithe and lusty as an other who keepes himselfe muffled and wrapt in warme furies up to the ears, how he could have patience to go so. *And have not you, good Sir,* (answered he) *your face all bare? Imagine I am all face.*] Montaigne, *Essays*, 1, chapter XXI [John Florio's translation.]

Shooting

Wonderful chances, those that act with precision.* Way of putting aside the bad ones, to attract the good ones. To reserve for them, in advance, a place in your composition.

*

Actors, costumes, sets and stage furniture are bound to make one think at once of the stage. Take care that the persons and objects in my film may not make people think at once of the cinematographer.

*

* "Je peins souvent les bouquets du côté où je ne les ai pas préparés." ["I often paint bouquets on the side where I have not planned them."] *Auguste Renoir to Matisse. Quoted from memory.*

Someone who can work with the minimum can work with the most. One who can with the most cannot, inevitably, with the minimum.

*

Shooting. Stick exclusively to impressions, to sensations. No intervention of intelligence which is foreign to these impressions and sensations.

*

The power your (flattened) images have of being other than they are. The same image brought in by ten different routes will be a different image ten times.

*

NEITHER THE DIRECTOR NOR SCENARIO-WRITER. FORGET YOU ARE MAKING A FILM.

Actor. The "to-and-fro of the character in front of his nature" forces the public to look for talent on his face, instead of the enigma peculiar to each living creature.

*

No intellectual or cerebral mechanism. Simply a mechanism.

*

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

*

Unbalance so as to re-balance.

*

Hide the ideas, but so that people find them.
The most important will be the most hidden.

*

Acting, which seems to have an existence of its own, apart, outside the actor; to be palpable.

ON POVERTY

Letter of Mozart's, about some of his own concertos (K 413, K 414, K 415): "They hold the happy mean between the too difficult and the too easy. They are brilliant..., but they miss poverty."

*

Montaigne: "Les mouvements de l'âme naissaient avec même progrès que ceux du corps."*

*

Unusual approaches to bodies.

On the watch for the most imperceptible, the most inward movements.

*

Not artful, but agile.

*

Sudden rise of my film when I improvise, decline when I execute.

*

* ["The movements of the soul were born with the same progression as those of the body."]

CINEMA seeks *immediate* and *definitive* expression through mimicry, gestures, intonations of voice. This system inevitably excludes expression through contacts and exchanges of images and of sounds and the transformations that result from them.

*

What has passed through one art and is still marked by it can no longer enter another.*

*

Impossible to express something strongly by the coupled resources of two arts. It is all the one or all the other.

*

* CINEMA and theatre stick together for convenience. Mixing them up is a practical interest.

Not to shoot a film in order to illustrate a thesis, or to display men and women confined to their external aspect, but to discover the matter they are made of. To attain that "heart of the heart" which does not let itself be caught either by poetry, or by philosophy, or by drama.

*

Images and sounds like people who make acquaintance on a journey and afterwards cannot separate.

*

Nothing too much, nothing deficient.

*

x's film. Two wicked eyes, trying to be good; a bitter mouth made for silence, which never stops talking and contradicting the words as soon as

said: *Star-system* in which men and women have a factual existence (as phantoms).

*

Charm of x's film made of bric-a-brac.

*

As they are intended, CINEMA films can only use actors, films of cinematography models only.

*

Music takes up all the room and gives no increased value to the image to which it is added.

*

THE SOUNDTRACK INVENTED SILENCE.

*

Absolute silence and silence obtained by a *pianissimo* of noises.

*

x's film. Vociferations, roarings, as in the theatre.

*

Model. What you make known of yourself by coincidence with him.

Let each image, each sound exert its weight not only upon your film and your models, but upon you.

*

Draw the attention of the public (as we say that a chimney draws).

*

A small subject can provide the pretext for many profound combinations. Avoid subjects that are too vast or too remote, in which nothing warns you when you are going astray. Or else take from them only what can be mingled with your life and belongs to your experience.

*

Generality of music, which does not correspond to a film's generality. Exaltation that hinders the other exaltations.

*

"The devil hopped into his mouth": don't have a devil hop into a mouth. "All husbands are ugly": don't show a multitude of ugly husbands.

*

Of lighting

Things made more *visible* not by more light, but by the fresh angle at which I regard them.

*

Bring together things that have as yet never been brought together and did not seem predisposed to be so.

*

x's film, open on all sides. Dispersion.

*

Model. Over his features thoughts or feelings not materially expressed, rendered *visible* by intercommunication and interaction of two or several other images.

*

Neither inflation nor overloading.

*

Debussy himself used to play with the piano's lid down.

*

A single word, a single movement that is not right or is merely in the wrong place gets in the way of all the rest.

*

Rhythmic value of a noise

Noise of a door opening and shutting, noise of footsteps, etc., for the sake of rhythm.

*

A thing that has failed can, if you change its place, be a thing that has come off.

*

Model. His *permanence*: always the same way of being different.

*

An actor needs to get out of himself in order to see himself in *the other person*. YOUR MODELS, ONCE OUTSIDE THEMSELVES, WILL NOT BE ABLE TO GET IN AGAIN.

*

Reorganize the unorganized noises (what you think you hear is not what you hear) of a street, a railroad station, an airport... Play them back one by one in silence and adjust the blend.

*

Acting

The actor: "It's not me you are seeing and hearing, it's *the other man*." But being unable to be wholly *the other*, he is not that other.

*

CINEMA films controlled by intelligence, going no further.

*

Retouch some real with some real.

*

Model. His pure essence.

*

The exchanges that are produced between images and images, sounds and sounds, images and sounds, give the people and objects in your films

their cinematographic life and, by a subtle phenomenon, unify your composition.

*

Images, conductors of the gaze. BUT THE ACTOR'S ACTING THROWS THE EYE.

*

With the Beaux-Arts, no rivalry.

*

Dismantle and put together till one gets *intensity*.

*

Don't think of your film outside the resources you have made for yourself.

*

An actor coming from the theatre brings with him inevitably its conventions, its morality and *some duties towards his art.*

*

Make yourself homogeneous with your models, make them homogeneous with you.

*

Images chosen in prevision of their *inner* association.

*

Models mechanized externally, internally free. On their faces nothing willful. "The constant, the eternal beneath the accidental."

*

Be the first to see what you see as you see it.

*

Naïve barbarity of dubbing

Voices without reality, not conforming to the movement of the lips. They "have mistaken their mouth."

*

Return the past to the present. Magic of the present.

*

Model. All those things you could not conceive of him *before*, or even *during*.

*

Model. Soul, body, both inimitable.

*

An old thing becomes new if you detach it from what usually surrounds it.

*

All those effects you can get from *repetition* (of an image, of a sound).

*

To find a kinship between image, sound and silence. To give them an air of being glad to be together, of having chosen their place. Milton: *Silence was pleased*.

*

Model. Reduce to the minimum the share his consciousness has. Tighten the meshing within which he cannot any longer not be him and where he can now do nothing that is not *useful*.

*

Images. Like the modulations in music.

*

Model. Withdrawn into himself. Of the little he lets escape, take *only what suits you*.

*

Model. His way of being inward. Unique, inimitable.

*

x's film. Contagion of literature: description by a succession of things (pans and traveling shots).

*

It does happen that the disorder of a film, because it is monotonous, deceives us, gives us the illusion of order. But it is a negative, sterile or-

der. AT A RESPECTFUL DISTANCE FROM
ORDER AND DISORDER.

*

Dig into your sensation. Look at what there is within. Don't analyze it with words. Translate it into sister images, into equivalent sounds. The clearer it is, the more your style affirms itself. (Style: all that is not technique.)

*

Shooting

Your film must resemble what you see on shutting your eyes. (You must be capable, at any instant, of seeing *and hearing* it entire.)

SIGHT AND HEARING

To know thoroughly what business that sound (or that image) has there.

What is for the eye must not duplicate what is for the ear.

*

If the eye is entirely won, give nothing or almost nothing to the ear.* One cannot be at the same time all eye and all ear.

*

When a sound can replace an image, cut the image or neutralize it. The ear goes more towards the within, the eye towards the outer.

*

* And *vice versa*, if the ear is entirely won, give nothing to the eye.

A sound must never come to the rescue of an image, nor an image to the rescue of a sound.

*

If a sound is the obligatory complement of an image, give preponderance either to the sound, or to the image. If equal, they damage or kill each other, as we say of colors.

*

Image and sound must not support each other, but must work each in turn through *a sort of relay*.

*

The eye solicited alone makes the ear impatient, the ear solicited alone makes the eye impatient. *Use these impatiences*. Power of the cinematographer who appeals to the two senses *in a governable way*.

Against the tactics of speed, of noise, set tactics of slowness, of silence.

*

*** American (English?) film in which the two stars compete for the attention of the public. They impose an order on their features and never cease watching it. Waxwork aspect of their faces photographed in color.

*

Model. Preserved from any obligation towards the art of drama.

*

On the stage a horse or dog that is not plaster or cardboard causes uneasiness. Unlike cinematography, looking for a truth in the real is fatal in the theatre.

*

Model. The cause which makes him say this sentence or make that movement is not in him, it is in you. The causes are not in the models. On the stage and in CINEMA films, the actor *must* make us believe that the cause is in him.

*

Everything escapes and disperses. Continually bring it all back to one.

*

The cinematographer's field is incommensurable. It gives you an unlimited power of creating.

*

Model. Don't just reduce or abolish the gap between you and him. Deep exploration.

*

Actors. The nearer they approach (on the screen) with their *expressiveness*, the further away they get. Houses, trees come nearer; the actors go away.

*

Nothing more inelegant and ineffective than an art conceived in another art's form.

*

There is nothing to expect from a CINEMA anchored in the theatre.

*

Natural voice, trained voice

The voice, soul made flesh. Trained, as in X's case, it is no longer either soul or flesh. A precision instrument, but an instrument on its own.

*

To be constantly changing lenses in photographing is like, constantly changing one's glasses.

*

Belief

Theatre and CINEMA: alternation of believing and not believing. Cinematography: continually believing.

*

Practice the precept: find without seeking.

*

Models. Letting themselves be led not by you, but by the words and gestures you make them say and do.

*

To your models: "One must not act either somebody else or oneself. One must not act *anybody*."

*

A thing expressible solely by the cinematographically new, therefore a new thing.

*

Simultaneous precision and imprecision of music. A thousand possible, *unforeseeable* sensations.

*

An actor draws from him what is not really there. Illusionist.

*

Avoid paroxysms (anger, terror, etc.) which one is obliged to simulate, and in which everybody is alike.

*

Rhythms

The omnipotence of rhythms.

Nothing is durable but what is caught up in rhythms. Bend content to form and sense to rhythms.

GESTURES AND WORDS

Gestures and words cannot form the substance of a film as they form the substance of a stage play. But the substance of a film can be that...thing or those things which *provoke* the gestures and words and which are produced in some obscure way in your models. Your camera sees them and records them. So one escapes from the photographic reproduction of actors perform-

ing a play; and cinematography, that new writing, becomes at the same time a method of discovery.*

*

Your models, pitched into the action of your film, will get used to gestures they have repeated twenty times. The words they have learned with their lips will find, *without their minds taking part in this*, the inflections and the lilt proper to their true natures. A way of recovering the automatism of real life. (The talent of one or several actors or stars no longer comes into it. What matters is how you approach your models and the unknown and the virgin nature you manage to draw from them.)

*

- * Does so because a mechanism gives rise to the unknown, and not because one has found this unknown in advance.

One forgets too easily the difference between a man and his image, and that there is none between the sound of his voice on the screen and in real life.

*

Your models must not *lend* themselves to your (camera or microphone) take. Render their attitude (what is singular about it) easy for them.

*

Your film will have the beauty, or the sadness, or what have you, that one finds in a town, in a countryside, in a house, and not the beauty, sadness, etc. that one finds in the photograph of a town, a countryside, or a house.

*

IN THIS LANGUAGE OF IMAGES, ONE
MUST LOSE COMPLETELY THE NOTION

OF IMAGE. THE IMAGES MUST EXCLUDE
THE IDEA OF IMAGE.

*

Voice and face

They have formed together and have grown used to each other.

*

Your film is not readymade. It *makes* itself as it goes along under your gaze. Images and sounds in a state of waiting and reserve.

*

Today* I was not present at a projection of images and of sounds; I was present at the visible and instantaneous action they were exerting on

* Cutting, October 1956?

one another and at their transformation. The bewitched reel.

*

The distance Racine demands is the impassable distance which separates the stage from the audience. Distance of the play from reality, and not the distance of the writer from his model(s).

*

Formerly, Religion of the Beautiful and sublimation of the subject. Today the same noble aspirations: to scrape oneself clean of matter and realism, to emerge from vulgar imitation of nature. But the sublimation turns towards technique...The CINEMA falls between two stools. It cannot sublimate either the technique (photography) or the actors (whom it imitates as they are). Not absolutely realistic, because it is theatrical and conventional. Not absolutely theatrical and conventional because it is realistic.

*

The sight of movement gives happiness: horse, athlete, bird.

*

The actor projects himself before him in the form of the character he wants to seem; lends him his own body, face, voice; makes him sit down, stand up, walk; penetrates him with sentiments and passions he himself does not have. This "I" who is not his "I" is incompatible with cinematography.

*

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

*

Let images and sounds present themselves spontaneously to your eyes and ears as words do to the spirit of a creative writer.

*

x demonstrates a great stupidity when he says that to touch the masses there is no need of art.

*

Because you do not have to imitate, like painters, sculptors, novelists, the appearance of persons and objects (machines do that for you), your creation or invention confines itself to the ties you knot between the various bits of reality caught. There is also the choice of the bits. Your flair decides.

*

What ennobles an actor on the boards can make him vulgar on the screen (practice of one art in the form belonging to another).

*

Models. What they lose in apparent prominence during the shooting, they gain in depth and in truth on the screen. It is the flattest and dullest parts that have in the end the most life.

*

“Ils pensent que cette simplicité est une marque de peu d’invention.” (Racine, preface to *Bérénice*).*

*

* [“They think this simplicity is a sign of meager invention.”]

Two simplicities. The bad: simplicity as starting-point, sought too soon. The good: simplicity as end-product, recompense for years of effort.

*

Corot: "Il ne faut pas chercher, il faut attendre."*

*

Model. His (untrained) voice gives us his intimate character and his philosophy, better than his physical aspect.

*

To TRANSLATE the invisible wind by the water it sculpts in passing.

*

* ["One must not seek, one must wait."]

Model. He shuts himself up in himself. So does x, that excellent actor. But he does it to reappear masked by acting, unrecognizable.

*

Models. Capable of eluding their own vigilance, capable of being divinely "themselves."

*

Life cannot be rendered by photographic recopying of life, but by the secret laws in the midst of which you can feel your models moving.

*

With the centuries, the theatre has bourgeoisified. The CINEMA (photographed theatre) shows how far.

*