ROBERT BRESSON • *Films*

Les Affaires publiques (1934 [short])
Les Anges du péché (1943)
Les Dames du Bois Boulogne (1945)
Le Journal d'un curé de campagne
(*Diary of a Country Priest*) (1951)
Un condamné à mort s'est échappé
(*A Man Escaped*) (1956)
Pickpocket (1959)
Procès de Jeanne d'Arc
(*The Trial of Joan of Arc*) (1962)
Au hasard, Balthazar (*Balthazar*) (1966)
Mouchette (1967)
Une Femme douce
(*A Gentle Creature*) (1969)
Quatre nuits d'un rêveur
(*Four Nights of a Dreamer*) (1971)
Lancelot du Lac (*Lancelot*) (1974)
Le Diable, probablement
(*The Devil, Probably*) (1977)
L'Argent (*Money*) (1982)

ROBERT BRESSON

Notes on the Cinematographer

Translated from the French by
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With an Introduction by
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INTRODUCTION

This is the other face of creation, where the energy of life coming from this continuous flow of images, from the *Diary of a Country Priest* to *Lancelot*, and from *Joan of Arc* to *L'Argent*, is marked by small touches, sketches, flashes. Year after year, Robert Bresson is asking the same questions. Questions about the actor and the model, about the use of this immature art which others call cinema, and to which he tries to give the difficult name of cinematography (the original magic of the Lumière brothers, when people were amazed to see the trees because "their leaves were moving.")

What are these questions for? For provocation, for reflection, for wisdom? They are for the invention of a new language, for perfection.

The film-maker (Bresson insists on the fundamental difference between the creator in cin-

ematography and the *metteur-en-scène*, the director, still prisoner of concepts coming from the theatre and the stage) is not a ruler on some fake creation. He is a man, just a man, trying desperately, from all his heart, to expel and give shape to the feelings of his senses. A man, not a god, not an actor.

In his log-book, Robert Bresson writes down, in concise words, his discoveries. This is what a man is made of: likings and dislikings. Mainly his disliking for vanity, intellectualism, conformism. His liking for sincerity, for nature (the good nature of Joan of Arc among her tormentors), for economy and precision in art. The being, as opposed to the seeming, meaning the model as opposed to the actor. The model (a word Bresson prefers to the commonplace of "actor") is exaltation, inspiration for the painter: *"soul, body, inimitable."*

We read here, in these brief notes, written almost casually, the essence of this extremely strong and exacting adventure, which has led Bresson to the firmament of film-making. Everything is

perceivable in these words, of his desire for exactitude, of his obsession with perfection, as well as the continuous fight against compromises and vulgarity, against the power of money. Do we realize what courage and obstinacy it requires for Bresson to struggle, after all these years, for his project of *Genesis?*

"The true is inimitable, the false, untransformable." To Bresson, art is the only possible escape from the bitterness of impotence. But it is also much more. It gives way to the only visible part of the being, its merging part. This is why Bresson is so close to the art of painting. The real image is what is hidden in a painting. We think of the great Impressionists and of Matisse. Reading these notes, we may think also of oriental artists, Hokusai for example, in connection with Zen Buddhism. There is the same sense of economy, the same liking for what is sensual, and the same play on all the senses. Life drifting, in its continuous, unpredictable flow. Life inimitable. Japanese Buddhism teaches us that art (or bliss) is surprise, it cannot be calcu-

lated. It is a prey, a catch: *"Be as ignorant of what you are going to catch as a fisherman of what is at the end of his fishing rod"* (the fish that arises from nowhere).

Now, we know that Robert Bresson has nothing to do with classicism (as *Lancelot* and *L'Argent* made obvious). His work is above all the exploration of the senses. Truth, beauty, each part of our divine mystery, is perceived by these feeble and easy-to-cheat openings. Truth is fragile, and this is why it is so necessary to be vigilant.

Year after year, Bresson is progressing alone, along his narrow, uneasy path. Each of his works is an enormous arc towards truth and perfection. This is why these notes are so valuable. They show the marks of all these years of hope and despair, learning and denial. They are profound and true like the marks on Robinson Crusoe's stick calendar. Notes, dreams, passions, meaning the complementarity of the body and the spirit, the language of shapes, the language of sounds.

"I have dreamed of my film-making itself as it goes along under my gaze, like a painter's eternally fresh canvas."

Dream: Bresson's dream to share the swarming, the over-plenty of life. His love for the human body, the human face, a young girl's nape, an arm, two feet steady on the ground.

"The things one can express with the hand, with the head, with the shoulders!...How many useless and encumbering words then disappear! What economy!"

In his hazardous, but rigorous quest, Robert Bresson teaches us the necessity of economy, and also the "voluptuousness" of creation. Art is not in the mind. Art is in the eye, in the ear, in the memory of our senses. Images, dreams. Bresson's desire for truth, through the exactitude of life. Yes, Mozart's words about his own concertos— *"They are brilliant...Yet, they lack poverty"*—are significant here.

Bresson's words have the same intensity. These words are more than notes from an experienced film-maker's diary. These words are scars, marks

of suffering, they are gems. In our darkness (the night of creation which has to come down before the screen becomes enlightened) they shine like stars, showing us the simple, troublesome way to perfection.

J.M.G. LE CLÉZIO

1950–1958

Rid myself of the accumulated errors and untruths. Get to know my resources, make sure of them.

*

The faculty of using my resources well diminishes when their number grows.

*

Master precision. Be a precision instrument myself.

*

Not have the soul of an executant (of my own projects). Find, for each shot, a new pungency

over and above what I had imagined. Invention (re-invention) on the spot.

*

Metteur-en-scène, director. The point is not to direct someone, but to direct oneself.

*

No actors.
(No directing of actors.) No parts.
(No learning of parts.) No staging.
But the use of working models, taken from life.
BEING (models) instead of SEEMING (actors).

HUMAN MODELS:

Movement from the exterior to the interior. (Actors: movement from the interior to the exterior.)

The thing that matters is not what they show me but what they hide from me and, above all, *what they do not suspect is in them.*

Between them and me: telepathic exchanges, divination.

*

(1925?) The TALKIE opens its doors to theatre which occupies the place and surrounds it with barbed wire.

*

Two types of film: those that employ the resources of the theatre (actors, direction, etc.) and use the camera in order to *reproduce*; those that employ the resources of cinematography and use the camera to *create.*

*

The terrible habit of theatre.

*

CINEMATOGRAPHY* IS A WRITING WITH IMAGES IN MOVEMENT AND WITH SOUNDS.

*

A film cannot be a stage show, because a stage show requires flesh-and-blood presence. But it can be, as photographed theatre or CINEMA is, the photographic reproduction of a stage show. The photographic reproduction of a stage show is comparable to the photographic reproduction of a painting or of a sculpture. But a photographic reproduction of Donatello's *Saint John the Baptist* or of Vermeer's *Young Woman with Necklace* has not the power, the value or the price of that sculpture or that painting. It does not create it. Does not create anything.

* As will become clear, "cinematography" for Bresson has the special meaning of creative film-making which thoroughly exploits the nature of film as such. It should not be confused with the work of a cameraman.

*

CINEMA films are historical documents whose place is in the archives: how a play was acted in 19 . . by Mr X, Miss Y.

*

An actor in cinematography might as well be in a foreign country. He does not speak its language.

*

The photographed theatre or CINEMA requires a *metteur-en-scène* or director to make some actors perform a play and to photograph these actors performing the play; afterwards he lines up the images. Bastard theatre lacking what makes

theatre: material presence of living actors, direct action of the audience on the actors.

"...sans manquer de naturel, manquent de nature."*

—CHAUTEAUBRIAND

Nature: what the dramatic art suppresses in favor of a naturalness that is learned and maintained by exercises.

*

Nothing rings more false in a film than that natural tone of the theatre copying life and traced over studied sentiments.

*

* ["...without lacking naturalness, they lack nature."]

To think it more natural for a movement to be made or a phrase said like this than like that is absurd, is meaningless in cinematography.

*

No possible relations between an actor and a tree. The two belong to different worlds. (A stage tree *simulates* a real tree.)

*

Respect man's nature without wishing it more palpable than it is.

*

No marriage of theatre and cinematography without both being exterminated.

*

Cinematographer's film where expression is obtained by relations of images and of sounds, and not by a mimicry done with gestures and intonations of voice (whether actors' or non-actors'). One that does not analyze or explain. That *recomposes.*

*

An image must be transformed by contact with other images as is a color by contact with other colors. A blue is not the same blue beside a green, a yellow, a red. No art without transformation.

*

The truth of cinematography cannot be the truth of theatre, not the truth of the novel, nor the truth of painting. (What the cinematographer captures with his or her own resources cannot be what the theatre, the novel, painting capture with theirs).

*

Cinematographer's film where the images, like the words in a dictionary, have no power and value except through their position and relation.

*

If an image, looked at by itself, expresses something sharply, if it involves an interpretation, it will not be transformed on contact with other images. The other images will have no power over it, and it will have no power over the other images. Neither action, nor reaction. It is definitive and unusable in the cinematographer's system. (A system does not regulate everything. It is a bait for something.)

*

Apply myself to insignificant (nonsignificant) images.

*

Flatten my images (as if ironing them), *without attenuating them.*

*

On the choice of models

His voice draws for me his mouth, his eyes, his face, makes for me his complete portrait, outer and inner, better than if he were in front of me. The best deciphering got by the ear alone.

ON LOOKS

Who said: "A single look lets loose a passion, a murder, a war?"

*

The ejaculatory force of the eye.

*

To set up a film is to bind persons to each other and to objects by looks.

*

Two persons, looking each other in the eye, see not their eyes but their looks. (The reason why we get the color of a person's eyes wrong?)

*

On two deaths and three births

My movie is born first in my head, dies on paper; is resuscitated by the living persons and real objects I use, which are killed on film but, placed in a certain order and projected on to a screen, come to life again like flowers in water.*

*

* To "cinematograph" someone is not to give him life. It is because they are living that actors make a stage play alive.

To admit that x may be by turns Attila, Mahomet, a bank clerk, a lumberman, is to admit that the movies in which he acts smack of the stage. Not to admit that x acts is to admit that Attila = Mahomet = a bank clerk = a lumberman, which is absurd.

*

Applause during x's film. The impression of "theatre" irresistible.

*

A model. Enclosed in his mysterious appearance. He has brought home to him all of him that was outside. He is there, behind that forehead, those cheeks.

*

"Visible parlance" of bodies, objects, houses, roads, trees, fields.

*

To create is not to deform or invent persons and things. It is to tie new relationships between persons and things which are, and *as they are.*

*

Radically suppress *intentions* in your models.

*

To your models: "Don't think what you're saying, don't think what you're doing." And also: "Don't think *about* what you say, don't think *about* what you do."

*

Your imagination will aim less at events than at feelings, while wanting these latter to be as *documentary* as possible.

*

You will guide your models according to your rules, with them letting you act in them, and you letting them act in you.

*

One single mystery of persons and objects.

*

Not to use two violins when one is enough.*

*

Shooting. Put oneself into a state of intense ignorance and curiosity, and yet see things in *advance.*

*

* "Ti avverto se in qualche concerto troverai scritto *solo* dovrà essere suonato da un solo violino." ["Note that if in any concerto the word *solo* is written it should be played by one violin only."]—VIVALDI

One recognizes the true by its efficacy, by its power.

*

Passionate for the appropriate.

*

Expressive face of the actor on which the slightest crease, controlled by him and magnified by the lens, suggests the exaggerations of the *kabuki.*

*

Counter the high relief of theatre with the smoothness of cinematography.

*

The greater the success, the closer it verges upon failure (as a masterpiece of painting approaches the color repro).

*

What happens in the joins. "The great battles," General de M...used to say, "are nearly always begun at the points of intersection of the staff maps."

*

Cinematography, a military art. Prepare a film like a battle.*

*

A whole made of good images can be detestable.

* At Hedin we all stayed at the Hôtel de France. During the night I was haunted by Napoleon's saying: "Je fais mes plans de bataille avec l'esprit de mes soldats endormis." ["I make my battle plans from the spirit of my sleeping soldiers."]

ON TRUE AND FALSE

The mixture of true and false yields falsity (photographed theatre or CINEMA).

*

The false when it is homogeneous can yield truth (theatre).

*

In a mixture of true and false, the true brings out the false, the false hinders belief in the true. An actor simulating fear of shipwreck on the deck of a real ship battered by a real storm—we believe neither in the actor, nor in the ship nor in the storm.

ON MUSIC

No music as accompaniment, support or reinforcement. *No music at all.**

The noises must become music.

*

Shooting. No part of the unexpected which is not secretly expected by you.

*

Dig deep where you are. Don't slip off elsewhere. Double, triple bottom to things.

*

* Except, of course, the music played by visible instruments.

Be sure of having used to the full all that is communicated by immobility and silence.

*

Draw from your models the proof that they exist with their oddities and their enigmas.

*

You shall call a fine film the one that gives you an exalted idea of cinematography.

*

No absolute value in an image.

Images and sounds will owe their value and their power solely to the use to which you destine them.

*

Model. Questioned (by the gestures you make him make, the words you make him say). Response (even when it's only a refusal to respond) to something which often you do not perceive but your camera records. Submitted *later* to study by you.

ON AUTOMATISM

Nine-tenths of our movements obey habit and automatism. It is anti-nature to subordinate them to will and to thought.

*

Models who have become automatic (everything weighed, measured, timed, repeated ten, twenty times) and are then dropped in the medium of the events of your film—their relations with the objects and persons around them will be *right*, because they will not be *thought*.

*

Models *automatically* inspired, inventive.

*

Your film—let people feel the soul and the heart there, but let it be made like a work of hands.

*

CINEMA draws on a common fund. The cinematographer is making a voyage of discovery on an unknown planet.

*

Where not everything is present, but each word, each look, each movement has things underlying.

*

Significant that X's film, shot at the seaside, on a beach, breathes the characteristic smell of the stage.

*

To shoot *ex tempore*, with unknown models, in unforeseen places of the right kind for keeping me in a tense state of alert.

*

Let it be the intimate union of the images that charges them with emotion.

*

Catch instants. Spontaneity, freshness.

*

How hide from oneself the fact that it all ends up on a rectangle of white fabric hung on a wall? (See your film as a surface to cover.)

*

x is imitating Napoleon, whose nature was not to imitate.

*

In * * *, a film that smacks of the theatre, this great English actor keeps fluffing to make us believe that he is inventing his lines as he goes along. His efforts to render himself more alive do just the opposite.

*

A too-expected image (cliché) will never seem right, even if it is.

*

Set up your film while shooting. It forms for itself knots (of force, of security) to which all the rest clings.

*

What no human eye is capable of catching, no pencil, brush, pen of pinning down, your camera catches without knowing what it is, and pins it down with a machine's scrupulous indifference.

*

Immobility of x's film, whose camera runs, flies.

*

A sigh, a silence, a word, a sentence, a din, a hand, the whole of your model, his face, in repose, in movement, in profile, full face, an immense view, a restricted space...Each thing exactly in its place: your only resources.

*

A flood of words does a film no harm. A matter of kind, not quantity.

*

It would not be ridiculous to say to your models: "I am inventing you as you are."

*

The insensible bond, connecting your furthest apart and most different images, is your vision.

*

Don't run after poetry. It penetrates unaided through the joins (ellipses).

*

x, an actor, uncertain like an uncertain color made from two tones superimposed.

*

On the boards, acting adds to real presence, in-

tensifies it. In films, acting does away with even the semblance of real presence, kills the illusion created by the photography.

*

(1954?) The GRANDS PRIX lunch. One-eyed man in the kingdom of the willfully blind.

Where is my judgement fled
That censures falsely what they see aright?

*

Let it be the feelings that bring about the events. Not the other way.

*

Cinematography: new way of writing, therefore of feeling.

*

Model. Two mobile eyes in a mobile head, itself on a mobile body.

*

Don't let your backgrounds (avenues, squares, public gardens, subway) absorb the faces you are applying to them.

*

Model. Thrown into the physical action, his voice, starting from even syllables, takes on automatically the inflections and modulations proper to his true nature.

*

In every art there is a diabolical principle which acts against it and tries to demolish it. An analogous principle is perhaps not altogether unfavorable to cinematography.

*

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 wandring 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 furres 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.*