

# French filmmaker Robert Bresson

## (1901-1999)

"When one is in prison, the most important thing is the door"

David Walsh  
20 January 2000

"I think in the whole world things are going very badly. People are becoming more materialist and cruel ... Cruel by laziness, by indifference, egotism, because they only think about themselves and not at all about what is happening around them, so they let everything grow ugly and stupid. They are all interested in money only. Money is becoming their God. God doesn't exist for many. Money is becoming something you must live for. You know, even your astronauts, the first one who put his foot on the moon, said that when he first saw our earth, he said it was something so miraculous, so marvelous, don't spoil it, don't touch it. More deeply I feel the rotten way they are spoiling the earth. All the countries. Silence doesn't exist anymore; you can't find it. That, for me, would make it impossible to live."—Robert Bresson

Reference books have always given September 25, 1907 as French filmmaker Robert Bresson's date of birth. Following his death December 18, obituaries in the press reported that he was born, in fact, on that day six years earlier, in 1901. If that's indeed the case, then Bresson lived all but 21 months or so of the twentieth century. His filmmaking career spanned 40 years, from 1943 to 1983, during which time he directed 13 films.

It's my view that Bresson was one of the great film artists of the century, one of the great *artists* of the century. The spectator who surrenders him or herself to Bresson's work is not likely to remain unaffected by the intensity of the emotions conveyed, the formal rigor and seriousness, or the deep commitment of the filmmaker to his conceptions.

That Bresson deserves the title of the most thoroughly twentieth century artist, simply by virtue of his birth and death dates, will strike some as ironic at first glance. A deeply devout man, Bresson's attempt in a relatively timeless manner to address Good and Evil, redemption, the power of love and self-sacrifice and other spiritual problems may seem to us and perhaps was in fact something of a retrogression. Analysis, however, might show that Bresson establishes his modernity as an artist precisely in "retrogressing" in the manner and under the particular historical circumstances that he did.

The details of Bresson's personal life are not well-documented. He was not given to self-promotion or self-revelation. According to the *New York Times* obituary, he challenged a potential interviewer in 1983: "Have you seen my film?" When the journalist replied that he or she had, Bresson continued, "Then you know as much as I do. What do we have to talk about?"

He was born in the small town of Bromont-Lamothe in central France and turned to painting after graduating from secondary school, where he excelled in Greek, Latin and philosophy. Bresson married for the first time at 19. In 1933 he made his debut in film, as a screenwriter; the following year he directed a medium-length comedy, *Les Affaires publiques*, no copies of which survive. He collaborated on several more scripts before

the beginning of the war, soon after which he was captured as a prisoner of war and held for a year and a half by the Germans—a significant event in his life.

Bresson's first two full-length films—*Les Anges du Péché* (*Angels of the Streets*, 1943) and *Les Dames du Bois de Boulogne* (*Ladies of the Park*, 1945)—have certain features that set them apart from the rest of his work: the use of professional actors, "literary" scripts, a certain artificiality in the lighting, even a baroque quality to some sequences. These features almost entirely disappear (except for the employment of a few professional actors in secondary roles) in his next film, *Diary of a Country Priest* (1951), based on the 1936 novel by Georges Bernanos.

This work, one of Bresson's best known, recounts the last days in the life of a young priest in a remote country parish. It is the record largely of his physical and mental suffering. The late critic Richard Roud commented: "By the end of the film, even the non-believer is forced to acknowledge that the little country priest is a saint—whatever that word may mean." French film critic André Bazin, in a famous essay, indicated "the analogies with Christ that abound toward the end of the film." He further observed: "In no sense is it true to say that the life of the curé of Ambricourt is an imitation of its divine model; rather it is a repetition and a picturing forth of that life. Each bears his own cross and each cross is different ..."

Bresson drew upon the prison experiences of André Devigny, a Resistance fighter who escaped from German hands only hours before his scheduled execution in 1943, and his own in his next film, *A Man Escaped* (1956). The subtitle of the film is "The Spirit breathes where it will," Christ's words to Nicodemus in the Gospel of St. John.

The film follows Fontaine, imprisoned by the Germans and facing the threat of a death sentence, as he plans and executes his escape. Critic Leo Murray has described the opening sequence in which Fontaine is being driven to the prison: "The film itself begins with a close-up of a man's hand resting on his knees. Cautiously his left hand moves to a car door-handle and discovers that it is not locked. The hand comes back to the knees. The camera pulls back and tilts slightly up to reveal the man's face (it is Fontaine), then pans left to reveal a second man and then a third. Then it tilts down to show us that the second and third man are handcuffed together."

Shot by shot, Murray describes the scene, in which Fontaine makes a break for it and is recaptured. He then adds: "The entire sequence is composed of about two dozen shots, mostly close-ups and extremely brief.... Fontaine's will to escape as well as his hesitancy are evident from the opening shot where his hand moves cautiously to the door to see if it can be opened. In a sense, the entire film is going to be nothing more than an elaboration of this brief opening shot."

To Bresson human and supernatural elements combine to make

Fontaine's narrow escape possible. The latter has to work cleverly and diligently for months to remove his cell door and construct an apparatus with which to make his getaway. He requires as well the help and advice—and failures—of others. As the day of his planned escape approaches, he gets a cell mate, a young boy. Should he trust him? In the end, he is obliged to, and the two break out together. As it turns out, Fontaine would not have been able to scale one of the walls without the boy.

Bresson had wanted to entitle the film “Aide-toi” (“Help yourself”), part of the French expression, “Aide-toi, le ciel t’aidera”: in other words, “Heaven helps those who help themselves.” He commented: “I would like to show this miracle: an invisible hand over the prison, directing what happens and causing such and such a thing to succeed for one and not for another.... The film is a mystery...The Spirit breathes where it will.”

*Pickpocket* (1959) was the first film for which Bresson wrote an original script, although the work owes a good deal to Dostoyevsky's *Crime and Punishment*. Michel is a pickpocket in Paris. He works the streets and racetracks. One day the police pick him up and an inspector interviews him; he is released for lack of evidence. Michel goes to visit his mother, whom he hasn't seen in a month. A neighbor, a young woman, Jeanne, tells him his mother needs him, but he goes away without seeing her.

Michel and the inspector have a conversation in a café. Echoing Dostoyevsky's Raskolnikov, Michel expounds his theory: “Isn't it possible to admit that some men are more capable, more intelligent, and stronger ... and should be free to break the law?” Following his mother's death, Michel becomes better acquainted with Jeanne. Meanwhile he also learns more tricks of the pickpocket's trade. He and two companions carry out daring and elegant thefts. Their audacity knows no bounds. In one case, they steal a man's wallet, empty it and place it back in his breast pocket without his being any the wiser.

After another conversation with the inspector and an argument with Jeanne, Michel leaves Paris and travels for two years. On his return he gets a job and takes his wages to Jeanne. He allows himself to be lured into picking a pocket and the handcuffs are clapped on him. When Jeanne visits him in jail, he is unfriendly. He later regrets his unkindness, especially when she fails to come for several weeks. She finally visits him again. He kisses her: “Oh Jeanne,” he says, “what a strange road I had to take to find you.”

It is difficult to imagine a more sublime film. Bresson has thoroughly mastered his approach. The acting has that terrifying awkwardness and simplicity to it which suggests truth at every level. There doesn't appear to be an extraneous word or movement. The camera work, the performances, the editing, the music—every element works toward the consideration of one question: how does a man elevate himself out of cynicism and an almost semi-bestial existence?

Michel tries various avenues. Bourgeois respectability proves inadequate. So does penance by itself. He can't free himself from his condition until he sees through his own selfishness and accepts the needs and realities of others, including, above all, Jeanne's love.

Bresson chose to make *The Trial of Joan of Arc* (1962) in part because he felt that Joan belonged to “the family of mystics. She had her feet on the ground, and spoke quite naturally about the things from above, her visions, as if they were the most ordinary things in the world.” For dialogue the film uses the official transcript of the trial in 1431.

Bresson told British film critic Ian Cameron in an interview that he wanted to make Joan “real and immediate.” This exchange ensued:

*You haven't allowed it to become a drama in the normal sense.*

*My idea is to suggest the things and the feelings also.*

*What do you expect the audience to bring to your film?*

*Not their brains but their capacity for feeling.*

*Do you expect them to know the facts of the trial? Is that why you don't explain who the various participants are?*

I never explain anything, as it is done in the theatre.

Bresson began shooting *Mouchette* (1967) less than seven months after finishing his previous film, *Balthazar* (1966), the story of a donkey. The former is also based on a novel by Bernanos. Mouchette is a 14-year-old girl living in the country. All the odds are against her. At school, where her wooden shoes embarrass her, a teacher singles her out for harassment. Her mother is fatally ill. Her father is a drunk who makes illegal whiskey with her older brother. Her one moment of pleasure comes on the bumper cars at an amusement park, where a boy keeps banging into her. After the ride is over, she follows him. Mouchette's father instantly intervenes, slapping her; the girl goes to sit by him without a word.

After school Mouchette jumps in a ditch and throws clumps of dirt at the other girls. She goes off into the woods. She gets caught in a rainstorm and waits it out under a tree. After dark, Mouchette witnesses a fight between Arsène, a poacher, and Mathieu, a married gamekeeper, who are rivals for the affections of a barmaid. Arsène discovers Mouchette and takes her to his cabin to dry off. He seems to need an alibi. Mouchette tells him, “You can trust me ... I detest them.” Later Arsène has an epileptic fit and she comforts him. When he recovers, he assaults her.

Mouchette arrives home some time before dawn and has to feed her baby brother. She tries to tell her mother what's happened, but the older woman is too weak. She dies. The next morning Mouchette goes out for some milk for the baby, swearing at her father. At the grocery store, a woman expresses sympathy about Mouchette's mother, but her attitude quickly turns to apparent disapproval about the girl's “loose morals.” At Mathieu's house, she runs into more disapproval from the gamekeeper and his prudish wife. An old woman calls Mouchette into her house, and talks about the dead. They are “gods,” she declares, giving the girl a shroud for her mother and some other items, including a white dress. Mouchette takes a dislike to the woman, who, in turn, tells the young girl, “You are bad.... You have evil in your eyes.”

The girl walks out of town. She sees hunters shooting at and killing several rabbits. She comes to the bank of a stream and holds the dress up against her body. It gets caught on a bush and tears. Mouchette wraps it around herself and rolls down the little hill, stopping short of the stream. She sees a farmer on a tractor and waves to him. He sees her, but doesn't wave. She rolls down the hill again. She gets up and trudges to the top. She rolls down once more, over the edge and into the water. The ripples subside, the water settles. It is one of the most remarkable sequences in cinema.

Bresson said: “Mouchette offers evidence of misery and cruelty. She is found everywhere: wars, concentration camps, tortures, assassinations.”

For his next film, *Une Femme Douce* ( *A Gentle Creature*, 1969), Bresson turned to a short story by Dostoyevsky. The work, his first color film, begins with a woman jumping to her death from the window of her apartment. The events leading up to the suicide are shown in flashback, recounted by her husband as he paces up and down a room in which the body of his dead wife is laid out.

The man is a pawnbroker. He meets his future wife, the “gentle creature,” when she comes into his shop as a customer. He pursues her and she eventually agrees to marry him, although she doesn't love him. He is possessive and concerned with money. Their relations are strained. At one point she seems to have taken a lover. The husband comes upon the two seated in a car. He tells us that she was rejecting the other man. We only have his word for it. She seems too sensitive to survive this earth and her cold fish of a husband, and indeed she doesn't.

French writer Michel Estève, in his work on Bresson, notes: “Bresson, here as in his last films, translates the psychological evolution of his characters not by words, but by images.... *Une Femme Douce* admirably suggests that it does no good to take without giving, and that conjugal love which goes unfulfilled leads, one way or another, inexorably to death.” This is another beautiful film, which makes a strong protest

against coldness and insensitivity.

*Four Nights of a Dreamer* (1971) is also based on a story by Dostoyevsky (filmed as well by Luchino Visconti). In contemporary Paris a young and lonely man, Jacques, meets the woman of his dreams, Marthe, along the banks of the Seine. They arrange to meet again the next night, and the one after that. It turns out that she is waiting for her lover to show up. On the fourth night, the other man turns up. *Lancelot of the Lake* (1974) is the story of the tragic love between Lancelot and Guinevere, the failure to find the Holy Grail and the end of the Middle Ages. It ends with the slaughter of the Knights of the Round table by foot soldiers with crossbows. In *The Devil, Probably* (1977) a teenager in present-day France expresses his disgust with society—consumerism, greed, the destruction of the environment—and all the alternatives open to him: political activism, the “New Church,” psychoanalysis. He tells a psychologist: “My only problem is that I see too clearly.”

In *Argent* ( *Money*, 1983), Bresson's last film, a young truck driver, Yvon, unwittingly passes on a counterfeit 500 franc note. The action has devastating consequences for him. He's arrested, protesting his innocence. The man who handed him the bill denies the fact, and gets others to lie for him. Yvon goes to jail, losing his wife in the process. After his release, he commits a terrible murder. The film is based on a story by Tolstoy. At a time, in the post-1968 era, when so many French intellectuals were discovering the virtues of the “market,” Bresson produced one of his strongest condemnations of greed and self-interest.

To describe the 13 films and suggest certain of their themes perhaps does little to convey their overall impact. Bresson worked at the emotional truth of his films with an almost unbearable intensity, out of a deep feeling of responsibility to his audience. It was not the aim of his filmmaking to impress the viewers with his brilliance or the brilliance of his performers, but to make them share something of his own tragic and ecstatic vision. “Make visible what, without you, might perhaps never have been seen,” he wrote.

My first encounter with Bresson's work came some 30 years ago. I saw *Mouchette* one evening and it made an immediate impact. But one goes about one's business. The next day, however, I was nearly incapacitated by the emotions the work generated. And they have never left me. Bresson: “Your film is not made for a stroll with the eyes, but for going right into, for being totally absorbed in.”

Bresson's films are difficult at first because they lack certain familiar and reassuring elements. “One does not create by adding, but by taking away,” he asserted. His films are composed of hundreds of relatively brief shots, each one fairly “flat,” taken individually. He told an interviewer, “Painting taught me that one should not make beautiful images, but rather the necessary images.” There are no “establishing shots,” to help an audience orient itself, and the opening shot is just as likely to be of a hand or an object as it is a face or an entire body. Camera movement is at a minimum. The camera shows what Bresson thinks is important and nothing more. It often lingers on a physical space after the performer has left the frame. Dialogue is limited and the performers, obviously not professionals, speak in a curious “undramatic” tone. Although they speak quietly and their movements are stiff and subdued, their features bear a mesmerizing intensity.

His objections to professional film actors and what he considered the impermissible mixing of theater and cinema are renowned. Interviewed in 1959 about his upcoming film *Pickpocket*, Bresson remarked: “I would like to make a film out of hands, looks, objects; to reject everything of the theater. Theater kills cinema (and cinema kills theater). In a film, it is man who matters. Even (and above all) a talented actor gives us an image of a human being that is too simple and thus false. It is not what my actors show me that is important. It is all that they *hide*. A look, captured unexpectedly, can be sublime.” An immobile face he felt could contain more potential emotion than a mobile one if it were placed in a certain

relation to other images. He told his actors to speak their lines as if they were speaking to themselves. He had one overriding interest, to disclose the secret inner life of his characters. “It is the internal that commands ...” he wrote as early as 1946.

It is not necessary to agree with or emulate Bresson (there is something very formal and stiff about his declarations that since the actor is “unable to be wholly *the other*, he is not that other,” and that “There exists no imaginable relationship between an actor and a tree. They do not belong to the same system”), to recognize the astonishing and authentic results he achieved. He preferred to call his actors “models” and himself, not a “*metteur en scène*” (the ordinary French term for director), but “*metteur en ordre*” (one who puts things in order).

The dramatic elements are built up painstakingly, often through patterns of repetition and variation. There is no grand finale. The truth of the piece is in every frame. At the conclusion one feels, above all else, that one has been brought face to face with an *essential* problem or condition. Whatever the nature of Bresson's outlook, the overall effect is a deeply *human* one. In his attitude toward his protagonists the filmmaker does not betray the slightest sneering or condescension. He treats their difficulties and failings with utter seriousness. And his subject, despite the lack of reference to contemporary events, was clearly life in the twentieth century.

In answer to a question about his attitude toward realism, Bresson responded: “I wish and make myself as realistic as possible, using only raw material taken from real life. But I aim at a final realism which is not ‘realism.’” And who is to say that his mystical unity of nature, man and objects could not attain a higher truth, at least in certain areas, than the pragmatic, empirical approach adopted by most of his contemporaries?

Bresson took his work very seriously. In his *Notes on the Cinematographer* (1975), he cites Cézanne: “At each touch, I risk my life.” His films, many of which run less than 90 minutes, took months to shoot. They were often made on limited budgets, in the face of considerable material obstacles. “Why do you impose these difficulties on yourself?” he was asked. “In order to capture only the real,” he responded.

His performers endured their own martyrdom—Bresson's demands. Claude Laydu, who played the country priest, was obliged to stick his hands innumerable times into the flames to retrieve a letter in one critical scene. One line in *A Man Escaped*, “Lie down and sleep,” required 60 takes. For certain shots in *Pickpocket*, Bresson insisted on one hundred takes.

Yet he grasped the dialectic of consciousness and spontaneity. For an artist who carried out such extensive preparation and controlled each element of the filmmaking process so firmly, he believed strongly in surprise, chance and improvisation. One of his notes from the 1950s: “Shooting. Put yourself into a state of intense ignorance and curiosity, and yet see things in *advance*.” And another: “Provoke the unexpected. Expect it.” And: “The things we bring off by chance—what power they have!”

Here is Bresson on simplicity: “Two simplicities. The bad: simplicity as starting-point, sought too soon. The good: simplicity as end-product, recompense for years of effort.” On “poverty” in art: “Letter of Mozart's, about some of his own concertos (K. 413, K. 414, K. 415): ‘They had the happy mean between the too difficult and the too easy. They are brilliant..., but they miss poverty.’” On art and the masses: “X demonstrates a great stupidity when he says that to touch the masses there is no need of art.”

One remembers certain things about his films forever: Fontaine's persistent work on his door, Michel the pickpocket in jail kissing his girlfriend through the bars, Mouchette's night in the woods, the fluttering curtains and the open window after the “gentle creature” has jumped to her death. In some fashion they transcend mere film moments and become

part of one's own memory and consciousness.

Is it possible to admire the films yet reject the religiosity? I believe so. I choose to read Bresson's films materialistically. Where he sees the operation of free will and grace, I see freedom and necessity. Where he sees the mystical unity of the spiritual and the material, I see the material interconnection of all things. Where he sees communion with supernatural forces, I see intuition into the workings of man and nature.

There are areas into which it is impossible to follow him. He rejected the need for common political action by the oppressed, the goal of social revolution, the possibility of perfecting man and society. He viewed, at least consciously, salvation and "liberation" in the traditional Christian sense, as entering freely into God's love. Bresson saw certain aspects of life with extraordinary clarity. Other things he didn't see or refused to see.

But I agree with Bresson about many things. He hated cruelty, opportunism and compromise with evil. He hated a world dominated by money and greed. He was extremely prescient about the moral bankruptcy of modern society and the impact it would have on the youth. There is a ferocity in his work that has little to do with "Christian meekness." However Bresson meant us to take Mouchette's angry exclamation, "You can trust me ... I detest them," it is nonetheless what one takes away from the film. Michel Estève noted about Bresson's protagonists: "A primary character trait attracts attention: their intransigence." He continues: "Intransigent, Bresson's hero—to attain his goals—disposes of an essential trump card: will, the force before which all must capitulate."

Dostoyevsky was one of Bresson's favorite authors, but there is in many of the former's major works the quality of repentance and self-abnegation that is so distasteful. In the Russian's case, it expresses at least in part regret for a radical youth. The element of repentance is missing in Bresson's work. Perhaps because he never entertained revolutionary views and had nothing to recant. He also lived in another era and confronted different problems. In any case, the filmmaker maintained an uncompromising posture.

And Bresson understood very well, and in this he is our contemporary and perhaps our teacher, that there is an irrepressible impulse to freedom in every human being. However metaphysically he may have seen the matter, Bresson was perpetually concerned with one central problem: *how to escape from the prison in which we find ourselves*. I think that Estève is right when he says that the filmmaker's work "addresses itself to men who believe in hope and in freedom—to beings who wish to become free."

Both in their substance and form the films stand as a protest against the existing state of things. It is because Bresson rebukes everything—money, celebrity, shallowness, insincerity, pusillanimity—that now holds sway in the film and "entertainment industry" that he is largely a "dead dog." And the social layer that once attended his films is now more likely to keep an eye on share prices. One commentator has pointed out that there have been 30 books written in the last decade in English about the second-rate director X and not one about Bresson, a man who continued making films into the 1980s. There are not many in French either. Most of the studies of his work date from the 1960s.

A legitimate question will be raised: how could an artist in the modern age hold on to Christian dogma and contribute so much?

In the first place, there is the general fact that the development of social life and ideology is never harmonious. People hold on to all sorts of conceptions, long after they have been *objectively* consigned to the dustbin of history, with great stubbornness. This "merely shows how limited the human imagination is," to cite Trotsky discussing a slightly different problem, "and how man tries to maintain an economy of energy in every kind of creation, even in the artistic."

And there is the intellectual unevenness between the different portions, often sealed off like the compartments in a ship's hold, of each individual's brain and soul. The ability of one and the same human being to hold on to quite contradictory and even sharply opposed ideas is well known and has

had many celebrated illustrations.

I would say, however, that these general tendencies, which we might refer to as uneven and combined intellectual development, assumed a particularly acute and almost malignant form in the second half of the twentieth century. Humanity had made the first conscious and systematic effort to establish a higher form of social organization in the Russian Revolution, and had been harshly thrown back. Society in the past 50 years has known an extremely one-sided development, with science and technology making great strides while social life and culture have stagnated and retrogressed.

From what one knows of Bresson's views, it seems safe to assume that the great tragedies of the century had a profound impact on his thinking. I'm not suggesting that those events made him a Christian, but they certainly must have served to deepen his conviction that only a spiritual revolution could save mankind.

More specifically, toward whom should he have looked as an example, this deeply moral and principled man? The Soviet regime? The French Communist Party? The French "left" in general? Or, for that matter, existentialists such as Jean-Paul Sartre, who wrote voluminously and loftily about human freedom and had the most intimate relations with its mortal enemies, the Stalinists?

Bresson is of course responsible for believing in Christian mythology to begin with, but I think it's safe to say that the filthiness of the "Communist" and "Socialist" bureaucracies, and all their hangers-on, helped ensure that he would never question seriously his faith. (One thinks as well of certain artists in eastern Europe and the Soviet Union, particularly Andrei Tarkovsky!)

In its own way, the example of Bresson, with all his one-sidedness, brings into relief the tragedy of the left-wing intellectuals in the twentieth century. How many such figures in reality were left uncompromised or undamaged by their connections to the various bureaucratic apparatuses?

And this was not merely a matter of their political or moral lives. The "hardheaded," "practical" approach to life, taught by the opportunists in the workers movement and absorbed by many artists (most disastrously perhaps by Bertolt Brecht), meant that an entire range of human problems was excluded from possible consideration, essential problems: for example, the power of love. Consideration of such matters was designated "sentimentality." But they were going to be treated artistically by someone!

It would be wrong to draw the conclusion that Bresson's apparent abstention from political life was an "advantage." That is too simple and formal an answer, and leaves aside the problem of his own blind spots. Nonetheless his independence from the official "left" did permit him to examine relations between people in an honest and original manner, without his feeling that terrible and debilitating need to measure up ideologically. Perhaps only André Breton and the Surrealists, at the opposite end of the artistic and political spectrum, enjoyed that kind of freedom.

Bresson's body of work is remarkably consistent. I prefer individual works by socialist or Marxist-influenced filmmakers such as Pasolini, Fassbinder, Godard and Visconti, because they treat the ensemble of social and emotional relations in a more penetrating manner, but Bresson's *body of work* is perhaps unsurpassed. For better or worse, he experienced less peaks and valleys than filmmakers more affected by the vicissitudes of the century's political traumas.

I would not recommend anyone trying to subsist on an exclusive diet of his films. Important sides of life are absent. To exclude him, however, from one's intellectual and moral universe is, in my view, to deprive oneself of much needed light and air. I can't urge strongly enough a revival of interest in his films.



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