

The Limits of Exchange in the Work of Robert Bresson

“Expliquez!”
- MICHEL to JACQUES, *Pickpocket*

In 1960, Robert Bresson appeared (an apparition, indeed) on the French television show *Cinépanorama*; he sat there, centered on the lonely, spotlighted set, and answered questions at the behest of two oddly skeptical and curt television hosts. One of the queries asked him, either inanely or ingeniously, "Do you think people understand you?" - to which he replied, looking down, "I don't know if they understand me..." - he raises and lowers his eyes, continuing, "...but is the issue here the film or me? If it's the film, I think..." - ("Let's start with the film," interrupts an inquisitor - Bresson looks up, and down once more) - "... I'd rather people feel a film before understanding it. I'd rather feelings arise before intellect."¹

It is, no doubt, certainly hard to take his word for it - when confronted with as much exegetic discourse as there is surrounding the life and works of Robert Bresson. For that is precisely the role of this body of criticism: *not* to take his word for it - rather, this exegesis tends to take itself for his words. In general, however, there are many texts which are indeed written (films are indeed directed) with this future extrapolation in mind, this analogization (this equals that, that equals this, and so on) - and they are therefore fulfilled by it: that is, in fact, the very function of the reader in relation to allegory. The works of Bresson, on the other hand, represent a sort of limit case - they resist extrapolation, and even defy basic interpretation. This is because Bresson deploys a style of non-communication which is essential to "understanding" his films (rather, "feeling" them) - yet it closes them off from a discourse of "reading." They are, in a sense, tautologies, closed-circuits (the bane of the interpreter); even his intertextualities are ambiguous at best, irrelevant discarded footnotes at worst. In one exception to this, Bresson quotes Pascal: "Ils veulent trouver la solution là où tout n'est qu'énigme."²

And yet Bresson's work is not abstract. It is concrete, perceptive, verging on realism - he writes, to himself, to his readers: "Neither beautify nor uglify. Do not denature."³ Furthermore, his films are almost entirely narrative; there is no foray into surrealism, nor even expressionism (his black-and-white films are rather shades of grey). He never dallies in description - and he never dabbles in the absurd. And if Bresson was truly interested in non-representation, he might have bequeathed to us Brakhage permutations, blinded by the brilliant opacity of the medium, in making the medium the end. Instead, Bresson is practically Brakhage's foil - rather than "experimentation" (a secret lineage of rationalism?), or formalism, Bresson's method is a human transparency, a phenomenology of life as it is lived: a transparent enigmatics, an understated overemphasis, a determinate banality, a deliberate faithfulness. His focus, moreover, is not on the film-strip itself, but on his straightforward (not even) characters, and the traces of their paths through the everyday. He holds pretenses to neither deconstruct nor discover reality (i.e. neither post-modernist nor Enlightenment tendencies). On the other hand, he maintains a somewhat constructivist orientation, however subtle: "An image must be transformed by contact with other images... No art without transformation."⁴ All in all, Bresson is not interested in the existence of film (he is not a modernist/formalist) - nor in the film of existence (not an ethnographer/

1 1960 *Cinépanorama* Interview of Bresson by France Roche and François Chalais, DVD Extra Features, *Pickpocket* (Criterion Collection, 2005)

2 ["They want to find the solution where all is enigma only."], p.84, Bresson, *Notes on the Cinematographer*

3 p.88, Bresson, *Notes sur le cinématographe*

4 p.20, Bresson, *Notes sur le cinématographe*

documentarian); he is rather interested in film through existence, or in existence through film.

And of course, this tells us nothing. It is only beating about the bush, in the hopes that a stray metaphor might, in some unexpected realm, touch upon Bresson's ineffable insights. Yet is even this not a bit similar to Bresson's own methodology? He writes, "If an image, looked at by itself, expresses something sharply, if it involves an interpretation... it is definitive and unusable in the cinematographer's system. (A system does not regulate everything. It is a bait for something.)"⁵ This is the paradox inherent in subjecting Bresson's work to critical analysis: its lacunae seem to beg for it, and yet to fill in those gaps - in other words, to elucidate the film's Dostoevskian intertextuality, to unearth its Catholic allegory, to liberate its Oedipal desire - is to run the mortal risk of hermeneuticizing the text to the point where it is reduced to vociferousness - its potency in fact occluded by paragraphs rather than activated by the breaks in between. Indeed, the secret subversion of Bresson's films lies in their silences, in what they leave unsaid - indeed, in what they cannot say. But cannot say for what reason? Bresson certainly characterizes his message as an urgent one: "...I move farther and farther away from a cinema... that is losing completely its strength and its interest (and not only its interest, but its power), and that is going toward catastrophe."⁶ Yet what is an urgent message, when silent? Bresson's brilliance lies not in showing us what we, his audience, do not, can never know (and thus tempting us, derisively, into some sadistic mirror-maze) - but rather, he shows us *how* we do not know. Let us therefore attempt to avoid the pitfalls of the overeager analyst (which the overeager analyst would then attempt to fill in), and let us instead meander along the celluloid tightrope which Bresson has set out before us. Let us not attempt to explicate that which Bresson refuses to, but let us rather follow the path by which Bresson comes to this point of refusal in the first place.

As I have noted, Bresson's films are subversive. Au contraire, retort the Godardians: Bresson depicts no Revolution! Just look at *Le diable probablement!* It shows us the impotence of revolt, the impossibility of creating change - it ridicules the radicals! All true. This is because Bresson saw, like Foucault, more fundamental powers than mere ideologies. Let us turn, oddly, then, not to Foucault, but rather to Baudrillard (in many ways his successor). Baudrillard characterizes Revolution not as the *overturning* of late capitalism, but rather as the *turning over* of the system of production from one order of simulacra unto the next (and also, in a sense, of labour power *turning over* in its grave). He writes, less than a decade after 1968:

Contemporary revolutions are indexed on the immediately prior state of the system... All these liberations provide the ideal content for the system to devour in its successive revolutions, and which it brings subtly back to life as mere phantasmas of revolution. These revolutions are only transitions towards generalised manipulation. At the stage of the aleatory processes of control, even revolution becomes meaningless.⁷

Revolution therefore - to Baudrillard, at least - is not the shock to the system that could tear down the entire façade. It is rather the shock that defibrillates the heart-attack of capitalism - that defers its death one step beyond even the prognosis of the good Dr. Marx. To Baudrillard, Revolution is merely the indigestion of an unfamiliar stomach, which, once hardened, can soon consume more regularly whatever exotic fruit it was that gave it the runs in the first place.

Yet Bresson's sparse, disaffected filmic style could not be more opposed to Baudrillard's effusive, hyperbolic discourse; though they were contemporary Parisians, it seems almost absurd to place them on the same planet, much less on the same page of post-Marxist thought. Bresson is colloquially known as a "spiritual and austere" director, while Baudrillard is anything but that - colloquially, he is referred to as the "high priest of post-modernism." Both of those reputations are, however, quite trite and, according to Bresson and Baudrillard respectively, the result of misunderstandings. In any case, the focus here should be the films of Bresson, not some biographeme

5 p.21, Bresson, *Notes sur le cinématographe*

6 p.463, "The Question: Interview by Jean-Luc Godard and Michel Delahaye," *Robert Bresson*, ed. James Quandt

7 p.3, Baudrillard, *Symbolic Exchange and Death* (Sage Publications, 1993)

or aspect of his popular perception. On the other hand, perhaps the popular misunderstandings that plagued these two figures during their lives in fact point to a more intense, *unstated* (in the Bressonian sense, *overstated* in the Baudrillardian) resonance. In this vein, Bresson did, in fact, see his films as depictions, if not critiques, of the contemporary "materialist" dystopia (a similar stance, at least, to that of Baudrillard - if not the majority of intellectuals): "I think in the whole world things are going very badly. People are becoming more and more materialistic and cruel... Money is becoming their God."⁸ He goes on in this interview with Paul Schrader of all people to describe the worrisome confluence of the Catholic church with materialism, a decidedly (pop-) Marxist argument. In fact, he relates this to the central problem of *Le diable probablement*, and we may here begin to see a hint of subversion peek through what might otherwise appear to be a bleak, anti-Revolutionary - even, to the unattuned, nihilistic film.

BRESSON: 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. The way this young person wants to die... He kills himself for a big purpose.

SCHRADER: Does he kill himself for personal reasons or to make the world better?

BRESSON: Yes, there is both in his reasons. Yes, to be an example. Yes, to be martyred.

Bresson's statement that the lack of silence makes it impossible to live is key to charting the currents of his filmmaking not only in *Le diable probablement*, but throughout his career. What then, is "silence" to Bresson? In his *Notes sur le cinématographe*, he writes, "THE SOUNDTRACK INVENTED SILENCE."⁹ In this regard, it may be important to note Bresson's qualifier in the former statement: "That, *for me*, would make it impossible to live." Could we surmise then that the reason Bresson did not commit suicide like Charles (or the "femme," or Mouchette, or even Jeanne d'Arc... and Balthazar?), is that he found silence - or rather, that he created it, in his films? Might we even say, if we are brash (and if we disregard the psychologization inherent in this conjecture) that perhaps those characters committed suicide so as to alleviate Bresson of the responsibility?

As a matter of chance (or is it predestination?), Baudrillard yet again becomes relevant to the discussion. He proffers an alternative practice to the banal failures of ideological revolution: the symbolic value of death. In this vein, he writes, pertinently here, of the Church and the ascetic (echoes of Bresson shall ring to those steeped in his biographical image - echoes of Jeanne d'Arc to the more cinephilic):

The routes of symbolic effectiveness are those of an alternative politics.

Thus the dying ascetic challenges God ever to give him the equivalent of this death. He will then have triumphed over God, and become God himself. That is why the ascetic is always close to heresy and sacrilege, and as such condemned by the Church, whose function it is merely to preserve God from this symbolic face-to-face, to protect Him from this mortal challenge where He is summoned to die, to sacrifice Himself in order to take up the challenge of the mortified ascetic. The Church will have had this role for all time, avoiding this type of catastrophic confrontation (catastrophic primarily for the Church) and substituting a rule-bound exchange of penitences and gratifications, the impressario of a system of equivalences between God and men.

The same situation exists in our relation to the system of power... And this is the source of our profound boredom.

Baudrillard's theory here turns on his structural distinction between the semiotic order and that

⁸ p.489, "Robert Bresson, Possibly" (interview of Bresson by Paul Schrader), *Robert Bresson*, ed. James Quandt

⁹ p.48, Bresson, *Notes sur le cinématographe*

of the symbolic. The semiotic order poses a "system of equivalences" wherein, as in the world of commodity, each object (or objectified subject, à la Sartre on "the look") gains its value, in accordance with the overall structure, basically from that which it is not (the root of alienation). This provides the object with an exchange-value, or social meaning, which is derived from an overall system of difference (and thus equivalence) - whether it be on the market or through *langue* (or even in the Panopticon, as Baudrillard later noticed). This is the Saussurean model of linguistics (to which Baudrillard counters "the Saussure of the *Anagrams*"¹⁰). It is also, for Baudrillard, the necessary basis for Marxist sociology and Freudian psychoanalysis, in regard to the notions of political and libidinal economies¹¹ (Baudrillard suggests "the Freud of the death drive" as a counter to the Law of the Father, and "even against Freud's own version of the death drive"¹²).

Furthermore, Baudrillard contends that this semiotic system of equivalence, on the level of the symbolic, "presupposes death."¹³ Yet "this death is not violent and physical, it is the indifferent consumption of life and death, the mutual neutralisation of life and death in sur-vival, or death *deferred*."¹⁴ The semiotic, the capitalist, the patriarchal structure in which we find our-modern-selves thus derives its power over us (under us) not through some sovereign's rite of execution, but in the coded gift of life (this notion is fully evident in Foucault's *Surveiller et Punir*; also in Derrida's *différance*, the deferral of ultimate meaning). To allow to live (literally, *to buy time*) is thus to introduce the object (or subject) into the order of equivalences (Baudrillard relates this to Hegel's master-slave dialectic, the latter term of which he genealogizes into the modern wage-slave¹⁵). It is not far-fetched to say that Bresson recognized this symbolic "stake"¹⁶ when he told Schrader about the motives of suicide: "When we talked about the void, I didn't mean when somebody thinks his life is nothing. The void is a total absence of something."¹⁷ In other words, Baudrillard: "Labour is not opposed, like a sort of death, to the 'fulfillment of life', which is the idealist view; labour is opposed as a *slow death* to a violent death."¹⁸

That violence may in fact be the result of Baudrillard's polemical style - in any case, a slow death is opposed to an immediate death, which is the death we see (or glimpse, or think we glimpse) in Bresson's suicides. On the other hand, perhaps the depiction of violence amounts to an aesthetic choice on the part of the filmmaker. Bresson makes reference to this, here responding to Schrader's inquiry as to why his suicides are non-violent (Schrader's mind must have been in Cannes, where he was about pick up his Palm d'Or for *Taxi Driver*): "Because I do not like violence. When you see violence in a movie, you know that it is false."¹⁹

For an example of what *not* to do as a director according to Bresson (an example other than *Taxi Driver*, that is), we can turn to the absurd showdown scene to which Marthe and her mother are subjected after they are "tricked" into attending a movie-premiere in *Quatre nuits d'un rêveur*. The ridiculous violence (and just about every other directorial decision) in this critical scene-within-a-scene makes it impossible to find any sort of affect - beyond humor - in the theatrical, overdrawn death of the lead actor. In opposition to this ludicrous sadism, Bresson chooses rather to meticulously under-emphasize the deaths of his own characters, even to the point where their deaths are left ambiguous, shrouded in ellipsis. Perhaps this is, moreover, the only way in which fictional death-on-film can be left to its proper order in the symbolic, rather than be absorbed into the hegemony of the semiotic. In other words, the aesthetic death which Bresson *does* depict (the pseudo-film, parenthesized by Marthe's rejection of it) is clearly a death *for* something - it thus has an exchange-value - and one that is even

10 p.2, Baudrillard, *Symbolic Exchange and Death* (Sage Publications, 1993)

11 p.1, Baudrillard, *Symbolic Exchange and Death* (Sage Publications, 1993)

12 p.2, Baudrillard, *Symbolic Exchange and Death* (Sage Publications, 1993)

13 p.39, Baudrillard, *Symbolic Exchange and Death* (Sage Publications, 1993)

14 p.39, Baudrillard, *Symbolic Exchange and Death* (Sage Publications, 1993)

15 p.40, Baudrillard, *Symbolic Exchange and Death* (Sage Publications, 1993)

16 p.39, Baudrillard, *Symbolic Exchange and Death* (Sage Publications, 1993)

17 p.490, "Robert Bresson, Possibly" (interview of Bresson by Paul Schrader), *Robert Bresson*, ed. James Quandt

18 p.39, Baudrillard, *Symbolic Exchange and Death* (Sage Publications, 1993)

19 p.495, "Robert Bresson, Possibly" (interview of Bresson by Paul Schrader), *Robert Bresson*, ed. James Quandt

more overdetermined by the actor's final gaze at the photograph of his beloved, which he conveniently manifests from his pocket with his last ounce of production-value. In contrast to this, the deaths which Bresson does *not* fully depict (the suicides of his own characters, namely) are deaths *in spite of* something - namely, the nefarious gift of *death deferred*. As Bresson goes on to explain to Schrader:

Sometimes you see things well done of this sort, but it is not moving - because you know it is false, because it is forced. But what you can have is the sensation of death. You can be moved by death if you don't show it, if you suggest it. But if you show it, it's finished. The same thing about love. You don't feel love if you see two people making love.²⁰

In a more theoretical sense, death - and, here also, love - are lacunae in the order of the sign (hence Bresson's problem with pornography). Baudrillard writes, "Nothing *corresponds* to death except death."²¹ The same might be said for love. They are both outside the realm of equivalence. This is the point that Roland Barthes makes in *Camera Lucida*, a book which is in fact grounded in the confluence of love and death ("Pity"²²). Barthes here draws a distinction between what he calls the *studium* of the photograph - its broad, cultural significance - its always heavy-handed, intentional meaning - and the photograph's *punctum*, which is a kind of poignancy, a subtle beyond, an excess of meaning. He writes, in regards to the *punctum*, "What I can name cannot really prick me."²³ This is the first clue as to the extra-semiotic place of the *punctum*: it is that which cannot be said, cannot be communicated. Compare this to Bresson's statement on his conception of God: "...the more life is what it is... without pronouncing the word 'God,' the more I see the presence of God in that."²⁴ A fuller picture of Baudrillard's ascetic, if perhaps a little less radical, begins to take shape at this point.

Barthes also writes, "... the *punctum* could accommodate a certain latency (but never any scrutiny)"²⁵ - and furthermore, "Absolute subjectivity is achieved only in a state, an effort, of silence (shutting your eyes is to make the image speak in silence)."²⁶ This is entirely pertinent to the work of Bresson, and moreover, to his methodology. We have already seen a bit of Bresson's conception of silence. In regard to latency, he notes: "Shooting. Agony of making sure not to let slip any part of what I merely glimpse, of what I perhaps do not yet see and shall only later be able to see."²⁷ This method of uncertainty is akin to the unexpected nature of the *punctum*.

To Barthes, the *punctum* belongs to the indexical trace of the Real in the photographic image - it is, in fact, the recognition (on the part of the viewer) of the death of the Referent (the actual moment, the undifferentiated object before the lens, in the time and space of exposure). That death, moreover, is the result of a unique *contingency* - in other words, the actual moment which is "captured" on film is irreproducible. On the other hand, however, film is itself always, inescapably, primarily a reproduction. This is perhaps one of the root causes of Bresson's use of ellipsis in story-telling, insofar as he might wish to avoid this paradox as much as possible. Notwithstanding, we should admit that it is in fact only the iconic value of the image (its semiotic meaning, its *studium*) which is actually "reproduced," in the sense of the commodity; the indexical trace merely floats on top of all these successions, neither aggregating nor diminishing over time and space, as a result of its non-relational, singular nature. For the same reason, furthermore, the contingency of the photograph cannot be expressed verbally - it is precluded from the formal system of difference and equivalence by its absolute singularity. This is, moreover, akin to the state, which Barthes invokes in the viewer, of "absolute subjectivity... in an

20 p.496, "Robert Bresson, Possibly" (interview of Bresson by Paul Schrader), *Robert Bresson*, ed. James Quandt

21 p.37, Baudrillard, *Symbolic Exchange and Death* (Sage Publications, 1993)

22 p.116, Barthes, *Camera Lucida* (Hill and Wang, 1982)

23 p.51, Barthes, *Camera Lucida* (Hill and Wang, 1982)

24 p.487, "Robert Bresson, Possibly" (interview of Bresson by Paul Schrader), *Robert Bresson*, ed. James Quandt

25 p.54, "Robert Bresson, Possibly" (interview of Bresson by Paul Schrader), *Robert Bresson*, ed. James Quandt

26 p.55, "Robert Bresson, Possibly" (interview of Bresson by Paul Schrader), *Robert Bresson*, ed. James Quandt

27 p.93, Bresson, *Notes sur le cinematographe*

effort... of silence" - this is the only state that allows, or rather calls for the viewer of the photograph to recognize not only the death of the Referent, but also, in the same glimpse, her own impending death: the death which had hitherto been occluded by the machinations of deferral inherent to the semiotic order.

Bresson's use of models - in fact, the entire system of his *cinematographe* - is designed with these purposes in mind, however intuitively. Barthes claims, similarly, to have written *Camera Lucida* not from a stance of theory (in which he came to see only ideology - an effect, as we have seen, of the order of semiotic exchange), but rather from a stance of phenomenology (from that state of "absolute subjectivity"). This sort of intuition is indeed the underpinning of Bresson's method as well, despite his reputation for what might seem to be an absolute overdetermination of gesture and scripting (the unending retakes, the almost obsessional repetition of lines and movements to the point of habituation).

Bresson saw, nonetheless, that it was through this very habituation that his models could be free of self-recognition, of self-involvement, of self-representation, and therefore free, momentarily, of the semiotic order (to which the disdained "cinema" - Bresson's conception of the mainstream film industry, an ideological capitalist manifestation - still fully ascribes). Barthes' description of the subject of the photograph and his relation to the *punctum* is attuned to Bresson's methods here: "The air... is a kind of intractable supplement to identity, what is given as an act of grace, stripped of any 'importance': the air expresses the subject, insofar as that subject assigns itself no importance."²⁸ Bresson writes, similarly, "Models mechanized externally, internally free. On their faces nothing willful. 'The constant, the eternal beneath the accidental.'"²⁹ Bresson's conjunction of the constant and the accidental here resonate, on the one hand, with the formulation of death (the symbolic order) in Baudrillard - death is deferred yet inevitable - and, on the other hand, with the notion of contingency in Barthes (which conjures the very presence of death).

Furthermore, the "willful" which Bresson rejects is akin to the intentionality of Barthes' *studium*. Bresson wanted the images he made to be as free of determinate meaning as possible - he writes, "Apply myself to insignificant (non-significant) images."³⁰ And how should one create insignificant images? Bresson replies, "Thinking is a terrible enemy. You should try to work not with your intelligence, but with your senses and your heart. With your intuition."³¹ This practically ineffable intuition (to which Bresson returns again and again) seems to have been his method for attempting to remove any sort of truly definite meaning from the individual images in his films (this is related to Deleuze's concept of the "any-space-whatever," to which we will return shortly). In other words, intuition was Bresson's method for diminishing the *studium*, thus dis-inhibiting the *punctum*, the poignancy beyond meaning. Barthes writes ambivalently about the *studium*: "It is rather as if I had to read the Photographer's myths in the Photograph, fraternizing with them but not quite believing in them."³² This echoes Bresson's aforementioned words about the depiction of violence on film; specifically, he says filmic violence "is not moving - because you know it is false, because it is forced." The reasoning behind his elision of the suicides emerges at this point. Bresson says concerning the death of Mouchette: "That death is there and mystery is there, as in *Mouchette*, the way she kills herself, you can feel there is something, which, of course, I don't want to show or talk about. But there is a presence of something which I call God, but I don't want to show it too much. I prefer to make people feel it."³³

It would seem then that Barthes and Bresson hold quite similar relations to the photograph and the *cinematographe*, respectively. Yet Barthes was not shy in voicing his distaste for the cinema (on the other hand, neither was Bresson). Barthes' critique, however, was more universal, more fundamentally structural than that of Bresson. Barthes writes in *Camera Lucida*:

28 p.109, Barthes, *Camera Lucida* (Hill and Wang, 1982)

29 p.56, Barthes, *Camera Lucida* (Hill and Wang, 1982)

30 p.21, Bresson, *Notes sur le cinematographe*

31 p.494, "Robert Bresson, Possibly" (interview of Bresson by Paul Schrader), *Robert Bresson*, ed. James Quandt

32 p.28, Barthes, *Camera Lucida* (Hill and Wang, 1982)

33 p.487, "Robert Bresson, Possibly" (interview of Bresson by Paul Schrader), *Robert Bresson*, ed. James Quandt

[The *punctum*] is what I add to the photograph and *what is nonetheless already there...* Do I add to the images in movies? I don't think so; I don't have time: in front of the screen, I am not free to shut my eyes; otherwise, opening them again, I would not discover the same image; I am constrained to a continuous voracity; a host of other qualities, but not *pensiveness*.

At this point, the question arises, is it even possible to find the *punctum* in the cinematic image? Is the necessary mode of being ("pensiveness") impossible to achieve in the movie-theater? Bresson retorts laconically, "To have discernment (precision in perception)."³⁴ Yet is this a quality of the ideal director or of the ideal audience? Perhaps both. Bresson would say that to make a film work - on this level of non-communication - is a very difficult endeavor indeed, and it in fact requires that space of active silence primarily on the part of the filmmaker, but also necessarily on the part of the audience. Bresson seldom found this in his audience, and he lamented it: "So the public is now conditioned to films where you show everything. It is terrible, I can't work anymore. If I can't make people guess, if I am obliged to show everything, it doesn't interest me to work."³⁵ Just as the activation of the photographic *punctum* requires a viewer who is listening to the silences within herself, unconditioned to all expectations ("absolute subjectivity," as conditioning suggests a cultural influence), Bresson's films require an audience which is actively engaged in the silences of the film, feeling them resonate profoundly in the order of the symbolic. Bresson writes to himself, "Your film is not made for a stroll with the eyes, but for going right into, for being totally absorbed in."³⁶ Compare this to Barthes' description of his experience of the *punctum*: "...inescapably, I passed beyond the unreality of the thing represented, I entered crazily into the spectacle, into the image, taking into my arms what is dead, what is going to die..."³⁷

And yet perhaps problematically, Bresson also notes to himself, "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."³⁸ At first glance, this would seem to suggest that Bresson wants to achieve something which photography does not offer - but, on second thought, this "beauty, or... sadness, or what have you" of the Real (which Bresson notably refers to here as the simple, everyday, rural life) is exactly what Barthes finds in the few photographs he analyzes - thousands more, he says, never affected him beyond a simple cultural appreciation. It is important to note, then, that the *punctum* is not something entirely inherent in the photograph, neither in the cinematograph. It is, as Barthes says, "given as an act of grace." Bresson also (unsurprisingly) uses the terms of a religious experience to describe the coincidence of this affect: "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."³⁹ This feeling of entering, or becoming one with the space and subjects of the film (or as in Barthes, the photograph) is very important, because it is necessarily of an order other than the semiotic, which is based in difference. It is, to use Barthes' terminology once again, a sort of human "Pity" - a recognition of similitude (rather than difference and equivalence). This similitude exists on the order of the symbolic (to etymologize the word "symbol": Greek, *syn*-, "together" + *ballein* "to throw" - thus, "a throwing together"). This is not, furthermore, the same process of identification that the spectator undergoes when watching what Bresson would call a film of "cinema." That identification is rather based upon an exchangeability - of the psychologized character with the psychologizing audience member. In this system, the audience must be shown everything, or at least enough to *evaluate* the

34 p.80, Bresson, *Notes sur le cinematographe*

35 p.494, "Robert Bresson, Possibly" (interview of Bresson by Paul Schrader), *Robert Bresson*, ed. James Quandt

36 p.95, Bresson, *Notes sur le cinematographe*

37 p.117, Barthes, *Camera Lucida* (Hill and Wang, 1982)

38 p.70, Bresson, *Notes sur le cinematographe*

39 p.43, Bresson, *Notes sur le cinematographe*

moral worth - the production value - of the character. As Bresson states, "Ideology is the moral. I don't want to be ideological. I want to be true, I want to have a certain way of being on top of life, and I don't want to show you anything especially. I want to make people feel life as I do."⁴⁰ This "on top of life" is the *punctum*, it is the symbolic (rather than the "anything especially" of the ; moreover, to Bresson (and even to Baudrillard) it is where God resides.

Perhaps it is somewhat reductionist, however, to speak merely of Bresson's form, his methods, and ignore the wealth of content, or story. On the other hand, there is such a marriage of form and content in Bresson that it practically escapes this dichotomization. In other words, though Bresson is ever the narrativist, a form which tends to presuppose a linear, diegetic reality-within-the-frame, the reality-of-the-frame in Bresson undergoes affects, or rather, affects the audience in the same sort of way that his characters are affected within the diegesis. That is, who is to say that the monotonal line-delivery of his models is an example of form over content, or vice-versa? In the *cinematographe*, these distinctions do not hold up. This is what we referred to earlier as Bresson's "constructivist orientation, however subtle" - indeed, in this way, Bresson has something in common with Eisenstein and his conception of montage, though truly not in practice (Eisenstein is overwrought and ideological, while Bresson is understated and emotional). Nonetheless, as a testament to Bresson's faith in montage, he writes of his craft, "The power of 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."⁴¹

On the other hand, Bresson contends, "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."⁴² As we have mentioned, this lack of *studium* is designed to give rise to the *punctum*. Yet here it seems that the power of the *punctum* is not solely derived from the image itself, as in Barthes - it is rather a potentiality that is at least partially activated on contact with other images. This allows us to speak of Deleuze's conception of the *any-space-whatever*, which is radically opposed to what Bresson has previously mentioned that he is working against: showing us "anything especially." Deleuze characterizes the *any-space-whatever* in Bresson as concerning "the affect as complex spiritual entity... the part of the event which is not reducible to the state of things, the mystery of this begun-again present."⁴³ Thus, Deleuze's concept of the *any-space-whatever* is not far off from the concept of the *punctum* in Barthes or the symbolic in Baudrillard - they all reside in a realm irreducible to a "state of things" (the *studium* and the semiotic order, respectively).

Furthermore, Deleuze writes that the *any-space-whatever* "is the construction of a space... of tactile value... The law of this space is fragmentation."⁴⁴ We can immediately correlate this "tactile value" with Barthes' mad inhabitation of the frame and with Bresson's idea of the audience's absorption into the film. This tactile value also replaces the iconic value of the image, which is the root of intellection, of reading, of the *studium* and semiotic exchange. Furthermore, this idea of touching is at least etymologically related to the notion not only of contingency (Latin, *con-*, "with" + *tangere*, "to touch"), which is essential to the indexicality of the image (as light literally touches the object, then touches the negative, and thereafter the relation is inverted by the projection of the positive - so, in a way the audience does in fact touch the object), but it is also related to the notion of the symbolic (again, "a throwing together" - here, the movement of light is that throwing).

Yet how is the *any-space-whatever* constructed by Bresson? In *Pickpocket*, for one, it is achieved not only through the recurrent close-ups of hands (which immediately suggests a tactile space), but also, more subtly, through the use of medium shots in all other cases. Those medium shots, furthermore, are often featureless - they designate a singular space, yet one which is devoid of any

40 p.487, "Robert Bresson, Possibly" (interview of Bresson by Paul Schrader), *Robert Bresson*, ed. James Quandt

41 p.42, Bresson, *Notes sur le cinematographe*

42 p.21, Bresson, *Notes sur le cinematographe*

43 p.108, Deleuze, *The spiritual affect and space in Bresson*

44 p.108, Deleuze, *The spiritual affect and space in Bresson*

recognizable, evaluative, readable, individualizing traits. Deleuze calls this "potentiality"⁴⁵ - a potentiality not unlike the *punctum*, yet which is activated, or rather magnified, upon montage (another double meaning of contingency). Furthermore, Deleuze writes that the *any-space-whatever* is object "as affect, and nothing is more opposed to an abstract or general idea, although it is not actualised in an individual state of things."⁴⁶ Take, for specific example, the stair sequences in *Pickpocket* - they are stairs as pure affect - they represent nothing specifically (although they are inhabited as actual spaces). The sequences of thieving, also, such as the grand one in the train station, utilize the tactility of the *any-space-whatever* to create an affect of thievery, and affect of pockets.

Finally, it is extremely important to note that both of these examples are forms of limit spaces. The stairs, on the one hand, are an active limit space between the inside and the outside, the private and the public (if you like, the *punctum* and the *studium*, or even singular symbolic death and hegemonic semiotic control). Moreover, the stairs are a limit space between the unconditional love of Michel's *dying* mother (and, eventually, the love of Marie, who lives next-door) and Michel's life of seclusion, of self-imprisonment. Michel himself, as pickpocket, is in fact the limit case of work and his refusal to do so. He is also the limit case of the Law: he is situated between his existence as criminal and his existence as the friend of the police-chief. The act of pickpocketing, itself, furthermore (and the pickpocketing scenes as the affect of pickpocketing) constitutes a limit space between private and public, between symbolic and semiotic exchange - between money as an object, as in the case of Michel's hidden stash, and money as a commodity, as it crosses the sheen of the tellers' counters.

Even the final scene in *Pickpocket* is an example of a limit case. The medium shot, first of all, turns the prison space into the affect of prison. In terms of the content of the scene, however, we are confronted with a limit space between love (on the order of the symbolic, of contingency) and the individualization as enforced by the bars of the prison.

All of Bresson's films are in fact riddled with these "limit cases." Balthazar is a good example - he is the limit case between the human world of semiotic representation and the symbolic world of animal noises. Mouchette also constitutes a limit case - she is situated at the very limit of the patriarchal, economic, and semiotic orders. For instance, her relationship with Arsène is somewhere between love and rape.

There is one important shot in *Mouchette* that uses the *any-space-whatever* in an ingenious way. The shot in question can be found about mid-way through the film, and it begins with a medium shot behind the bar-counter, the activity provided by a set of hands washing dishes - this is a tactile *any-space-whatever*. As we have seen Luisa, and only Luisa behind the bar, we naturally assume that the hands are hers. Yet it is revealed momentarily that the hands are in fact those of Mouchette, who then uses them to collect her pay. Subsequently, she walks outside, and immediately hands the coins to her father, who compensates her with a drink. This sequence, much like the scene of the rape, situates Mouchette on the very verge of the economic order. Yet unlike Michel in *Pickpocket*, who is saved by the symbolic love of Marie, Mouchette has no recourse but to symbolic death.

It is thus clear that the films of Robert Bresson are deeply involved in the idea of the limit. Indeed, the medium of film itself (for that matter photography) is a limit case, situated between the index and the icon, between the *punctum* and the *studium*, between the *any-space-whatever* and the "anything especially," between Baudrillard's orders of the symbolic and the semiotic. It was Bresson's genius to realize this potential. Yet perhaps this was due to Bresson's own situation as a limit case: between Jansenist and Catholic, between the *cinematographe* and Hollywood, between the devotion of his followers and the misunderstandings of his detractors.

45 p.111, Deleuze, *The spiritual affect and space in Bresson*

46 p.111, Deleuze, *The spiritual affect and space in Bresson*