

WHAT IS CINEMA?

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*Diary of a Country Priest and the Robert Bresson Style*

Bresson does not ask his cast to act out the text—whose literary turn makes such a thing impossible—or even to live it, but only to speak it. This is why the text recited in voice-over fits so well with what the actors are saying on screen: there is no essential difference in style or tone between them. This approach contrasts not only with an actor's dramatic expression but also with any sort of psychological expressivity. What we are required to read in the actors' faces is not at all the momentary reflection of what they are saying but the essence of being, the mask of spiritual destiny. This is why this 'poorly acted' film makes us feel the absolute necessity of its faces. The most typical image in this sense is that of Chantal in the confessional, dressed in black and withdrawn in shadow. The actress Ladmiraal shows us only a grey mask, hovering between night and light, rough like a wax seal.

Like Dreyer, Bresson is naturally drawn to the most sensual aspects of the face which, to the extent that no acting is involved, is simply a privileged impression of existence, the most legible trace of the soul. Nothing about these faces eludes the dignity of the sign. They reveal to us not psychology but an existential physiognomy. Hence the solemnity of the acting, the slowness and ambiguity of the actors' gestures, the stubborn repetitiveness of their behaviour, the impression of dream-like slow motion engraved in our memory. Nothing

relative could happen to these characters, caught as they are in their own existence, taken up with persevering against divine favour or with tearing Nessus' burning tunic from their sinners' bodies. Their features do not change: their inner conflicts and stages of battle with the Angel are not plainly conveyed by their appearance. What we see, rather, is closer to painful concentration, to the incoherent spasms of a reptile moulting or an animal dropping its young. When we speak of Bresson stripping his characters bare, we mean it literally.

Opposed to psychological analysis as it is, the film is no less removed from the usual dramatic categories. Here, events are not organised according to the rules of a mechanism of passion whose fulfilment would satisfy our minds. Their sequence is an accidental necessity, a series of independent actions and coincidences. Each moment, each shot, has the destiny and freedom it needs. These undoubtedly tend towards a certain direction, but separately, like iron filings around a magnet. The word 'tragedy' comes to mind, but to label this a tragedy would be to misconstrue what is happening, because the film can only be a tragedy of free will. The transcendence of the Bernanos-Bresson world is not that of the ordained fate described by the Ancients, or even that of Racinian passion. It is the transcendence of grace, which each of us can refuse. The reason the film's events seem just as coherent and the characters' causal efficiency just as rigorous as traditional drama, however, is because they conform to a prophetic order (or perhaps one should say a Kierkegaardian repetition) as different from destiny as causality is from analogy.