MOVIES
PAUL SCHRADER

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A custom of Medieval architecture holds that the final portion of a structure should be left unfinished, perhaps a cupola or fillip of design, as a testament to man's humility and his faith in God's power to complete the building. The work of Robert Bresson strikes us as just that final touch of architecture, so pure it could have scarcely been made by man, and yet so consummate it caps and sanctifies the whole human effort.

Ascetic, proud, saintly, the films of Bresson rank among the finest expressions of the human spirit. To find another who affects us as deeply and permanently we must press the limits of media and time: Dostoevsky, Shakespeare, Beethoven, Breughel. Bresson attempts and achieves the highest function of art; he elevates the spirit, not only of his characters and viewers, but somehow of the system which has entrapped us all.

PICKPOCKET, Bresson's fifth film (out of eight films in a 36-year career), is presently having its West Coast premiere ten years after it was made. It is one of those consummate works of art which in one flash pales everything you have ever seen. I would be tempted to say "Pickpockert" is the finest film I've seen if Bresson hadn't made three or four other films which affect me as deeply. Do not expect objectivity; those of us who love and admire Robert Bresson do not so much analyze him as proselytize for him.

Because "Pickpocker" is such an unmitigated masterpiece, and because Bresson is relatively unknown to the mass audience, I hope to discuss "Pickpocket" over a two-week period. This week I want to point out some of the landmarks of Bresson's rigid personal style, and next week demonstrate how Bresson brings the viewer to his knees in the moment of "transformation." I'll admit that this two-week plan has some personal reasons. Firstly, I'll get two paychecks for one article, and, secondly, just as when Jack or Bob Kennedy's body was still above the ground I could not bring myself to leave that pale TV image, similarly as long as "Pickpocket" is showing in town I don't have the desire to talk about any other picture.

"Pickpocket," like all of Bresson's films, concerns the progression of a soul from confinement to freedom. Sometimes his heroes are caught in actual prisons ("A Man Escapes"), sometimes they are subject to the divine agony ("Diary of a Country Priest"), and sometimes, as in "Pickpocket'," they are the victims of a life of crime. Their progression occurs slowly, fitfully, yet as inevitably as the stations of the cross. And when Bresson arrives at the final station, the sepulchre of the old self, whether that be death, physical freedom or incarceration, the film abruptly ends.

Michel is a compulsive pickpocket; not for money or pleasure, but simply because it is a project and a fulfillment. He robs his dying mother, yet weeps at her bedside. Like Dostoevsky's Raskolnikov, Michel is in a continual debate with the police inspector. Also like the hero of "Crime and Punishment," Michel contends that some men, because of their indispensability to society, are above the law. "But how do they know who they are?" the inspector asks. "They ask themselves," Michel replies. In long, ballet-like, silent sequences Michel perfects his craft, but like Raskolinkov he is compulsively drawn back to the police, the cell, and the love of Jeanne, a long-time family friend. But ironically it is in prison that Michel surrenders his old life and finds salvation in love. In a shatteringly tender scene he kisses her forehead, she his hand, and he says through the prison bars, "How long it has taken me to come to you."

The elevation of the spirit is never accidental in Bresson's films. Although they look very human, his films are highly stylized. Bresson is one of cinema's great formalists. Briefly, this means that his intentions are always expressed by his style ("The film is not a spectacle, it is in the first place a style."). He has worked out a form which expresses exactly what he wants to say. This is different from directors whose form is what they want to say, or those who use form as form because they have nothing to say. It is Bresson's rigid, repetitive directorial influence which brings meaning to "Pickpocket." This is the opposite from the sort of thing Gene Youngblood is usually talking about, and from the spectacle tradition of Brecht and Godard.

Bresson's style is, as Susan Sontag says, of the "reflective mode." Miss Sontag continues: "In reflective art the form of the work of art is present in an emphatic way. The effect of the spectator's being aware of form is to elongate or retard the emotions." This is why Bresson seems so perverse to the uninitiated viewer; Bresson relentlessly destroys traditional emotional constructs, which he calls "screens." Even essentials like plot and acting can become screens which provide cheap thrills and spectacle, giving the viewer an easy way out of the dramatic situation. And Bresson is determined not to let anything interfere with his spirit and the viewer's. The viewer can have no special interests; he must be prepared to give all or nothing. A brief rundown will reveal Bresson's unconventional attitudes toward basic movie elements.

ACTING. Bresson detests acting—"it is for theater, a bastard art." All his characters are amateurs who, at his insistence, mouth their lines in the most banal manner, and who, in fact,

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look like Bresson himself. When an actor acts, Bresson contends, he simplifies himself, being false both to the character and to the audience. "We are complex. What the actor projects is not complex." He is also fearful of an actor's exerting competitive imaginative power. "You cannot be inside an actor. It is he who creates. It is not you." And in a Bresson film, it is Bresson who does all the creating.

PLOT. Bresson has little interest in "how it will come out." Although he is an excellent photographer and cutter, Bresson will not allow the viewer to see "Pickpocker" just for the action. His elliptical style can reveal a complex plot maneuver in three bland shots. By denying a motion picture its motion, he spurns the most basic of cinematic "screens." The spectator can no longer exert emotional control over a screen action (for when the viewer sympathizes with an action he can later be smug in its completion). Bresson has described his film, "A Man Escapes," as a single sequence with each shot leading only to the next.

CINEMATOGRAPHY. Compositional beauty for itself is an indulgence Bresson cannot afford. "Painting," he says, "taught me to make not beautiful images but necessary ones." He is able to create the vacuous prettiness of "Elvira Madigan" yet also knows how dangerous it can be. Bresson insists that his images, like his acting and plot, be flat and unexpressive.