

MOVIES

PAUL SCHRADER

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Last week in this column I wrote about the formalism of French director Robert Bresson. In "Pickpocket," as in all his films, Bresson uses a rigid and austere style to ward off superficial emotional release, intent instead on creating a "transformation." He says, "There must, at a certain moment, be a transformation; if not, there is no art."

Transformation for Bresson is of the rarest and most-difficult sort. He wants you to believe in something you don't want to believe in—the supernatural and the spiritual. And not just because his characters believe in the spiritual, but because there IS a spiritual. He seeks to expose "those extraordinary currents, the presence of something or someone, call it what you wish, which confirms that there is a hand guiding everything."

Religious and sacrilegious artists have been trying to accomplish this for some time, but nowhere has their failure been so pronounced as in film. To appreciate the scope and innovation of Bresson's art one need only examine previous attempts. Andre Bazin has pointed out that since its origin, painting has been torn between two ambitions: the aesthetic and spiritual, exemplified by the mosaic icon, and the psychological and duplicatory, exemplified by the death mask.

The first ambition gradually succumbed to the latter, and painting became increasingly realistic. The Byzantine mosaics yielded to the sequential paintings of Hogarth. Cinema, an art of time and space, is the logical result of the mimetic tradition; it was first called "life itself." For those who wanted to make the supernatural real, that is make spiritual art, cinema seemed like the ideal solution. Since film was

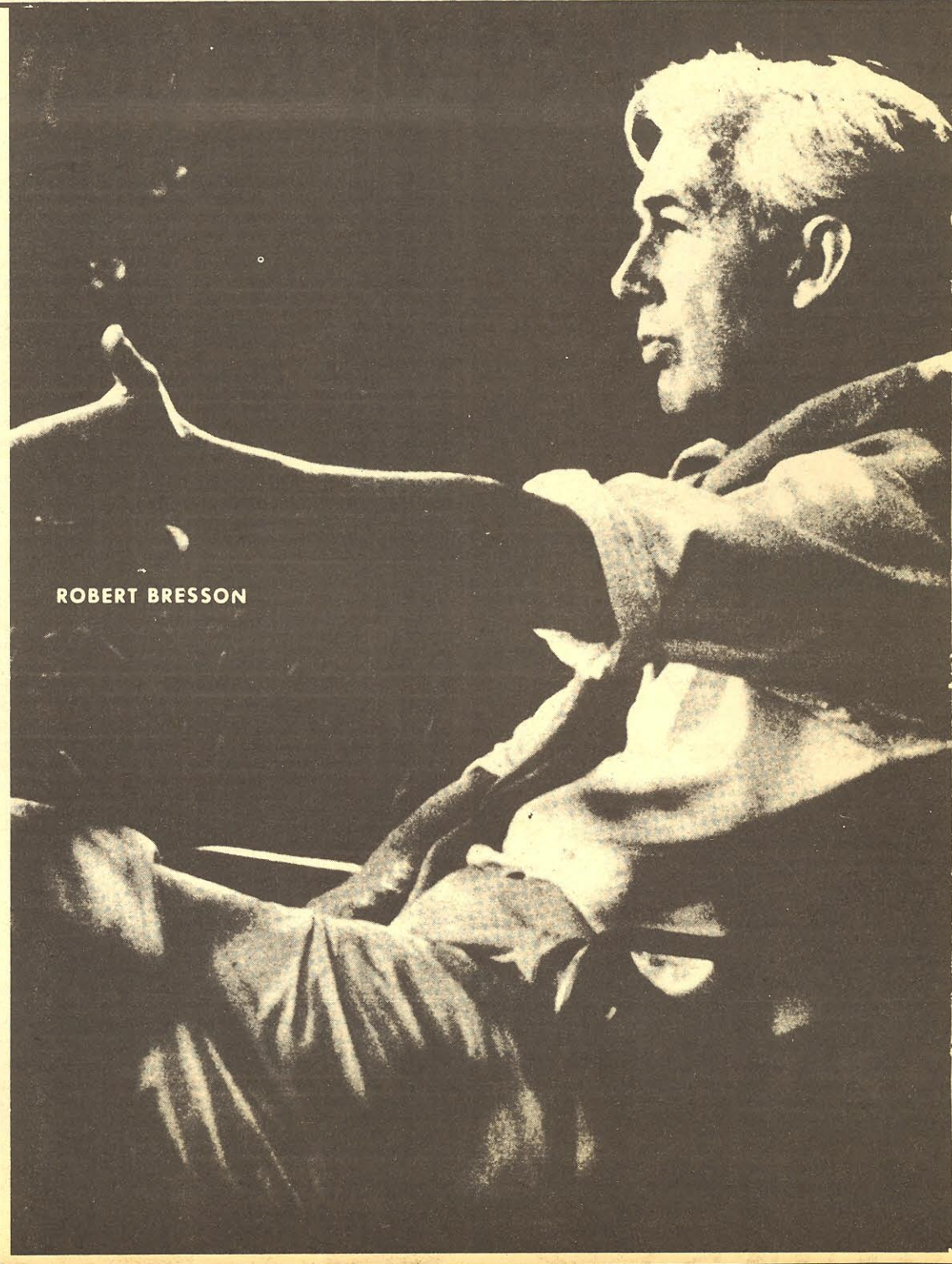
innately "real," all one had to do was put the spiritual on film. Thus we have a history of cinematic magic: the blind are made to see, the lame to walk, the deaf to hear, all on camera. On the cynical level we had the Biblical epics of DeMille and Satanic epic of Polanski; on the sincere level there were the many films produced by Gospel Films, World Vision, and other Billy Graham oriented organizations.

But they didn't work. We knew that the divine fireball of "The Ten Commandments" was not conceived in Heaven, but in some film laboratory, and that the slapdash conversion of "The Restless Heart" was not caused by divine intervention, but by some hack scriptwriter. These films called attention to the supposedly realistic nature of the medium, and broke our faith in it.

Robert Bresson, in one of those original bursts of genius that leaves the rest of us numb, uses the realistic properties of film against itself. He uses his new freedom—the innate reality of the cinema—to create icons. The films of Bresson are blatantly hieratic, the most unabashedly iconographic art the West has had since Cromwell smashed England's Catholic statuary.

The spiritual transformation incumbent to iconography must be extremely subtle. Bresson wants to leave the viewer so free, so unencumbered that he must perforce come to agree with Bresson himself. Bresson makes no secret of this: "You must leave the spectator free. And at the same time you must make yourself loved by him. You must make him love the way in which you render things. That is to say: show him things in the order and in the way that you love to see them; make him feel them, in present-

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ing them to him, as you see them and feel them yourself, and this, while leaving him a great freedom, while making him free."

To make the viewer free all the while imprisoning him, Bresson creates realistic images, all the while undercutting them.

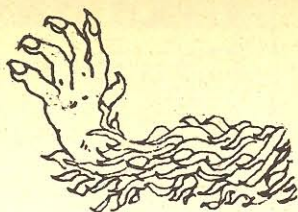
Bresson always choses the most realistic settings and situations. He makes a great use of two of film's most credible devices: the narration and the printed word. We trust the soothing voice of a narrator, just as we think there is something innately verifiable about words which are written on the screen. But then Bresson sets his termites on our comfortable structure. As I mentioned last week he starts doubling his action and narration, making the same realistic statement over and over again. The action becomes so ostensibly real that it is suspicious.

And in that magical process lies the secret of Bresson's peculiar genius. It takes no great talent to ignore the viewer, to deprive him of the things he enjoys. Yet Bresson both alienates the viewer and keeps him interested. His realistic and straightforward technique hold the audience's interest in lieu of the cheap vicarious thrills. Bresson makes us feel that there must be something more than what appears on the surface—and he doesn't disappoint us.

Bresson culminates his suspicious mood with a final, blatant anti-realistic gesture. He defiantly undercuts the weakened realistic structure. His films end with an inexplicably spiritual act: the death of a saint, the liberation of a soul, or, as in "Pickpocket," an unpremeditated act of love. We have not been set up for it, yet we accept it. It is at that moment Bresson claims the "transformation" occurs. At this moment all Bresson's flat images, bland dialogue, and dull characterization unite, transform into a new object. Bresson's speech constantly reiterates the need for this union: "I have noticed that the flatter an image is, the less it expresses, the more easily it is transformed in contact with other images... It is necessary for the images to have something in common, to participate in a sort of union... cinema must express itself not through images but through the relationship of images, which is not quite the same thing."

The moment of transition presupposes a volitional act by the

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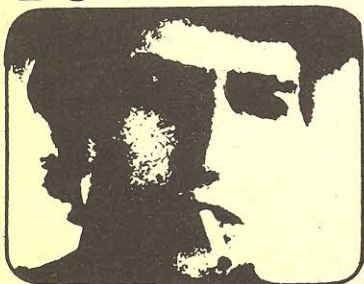
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viewer. The viewer, whose feelings have been shunned but has feelings nonetheless can, at the moment of transition, do one of two things: he can refuse to take the film seriously, or he can accommodate his thinking to his feelings. Having been given no emotional constructs by the director, the viewer constructs his own "screen." He creates a translucent shield through which he can cope with his feelings and the picture. This shield may be very simple. In the case of "Pickpocket" it could be: people such as Michel and Jeanne have spirits which are spiritually connected and they need no earthly rationale for their love. Bresson uses the viewer's own natural defenses, his protective mechanism, to cause him to of his free will come to the identical decision that Bresson had determined for him.

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The moment the viewer creates his own shield, the moment of transformation, Bresson has accomplished not only the task of the artist, but of the evangelist and the iconographer as well. The evangelist is theoretically a man who evokes a conversion not by his own sophistry but by bringing the listener into contact with the divine. In this sense Bresson's methods greatly resemble the Calvinist and Jansenist doctrines of predestination. The doctrine of predestination holds that man, having already been chosen by God, is now free to chose God himself. God is truth; truth makes you free; and freedom is choosing God. It is a neat jungle of logic which seems quite preposterous from the outside. Yet when one is submitted to Bresson's version of the divine agony it seems the natural thing to do.

Consequently Bresson's characters, his movies, and Bresson himself all become icons. Bresson is often criticized for his pride, yet pride is one of the chief attributes of an icon. Saint Peter was intolerably cocksure and boastful, but when Roman Catholics worship him as an icon they admit that his pride was justified because he was a man of God. A saint justifies and sanctifies his own pride. Bresson's art presumes that there are men and works of art which can serve as icons, and that onlookers can be purified and edified by contemplating them. And Bresson fully intends to be one of those icons.

The final image of Bresson's films is often a blatant symbol. In "Diary of a Country Priest" it is actually the shadow of the cross. In "Pickpocket" it is the tender love scene of Michel and Jeanne. Bresson pulls out the stops; he can apply all his emotional tricks. The music surges, the symbol is obvious. When Michel and Jeanne kiss it is no longer important whether we regard that act as plausible, but whether we are willing to worship that act. Bresson has transcended himself: he is blazed in mosaics in some moss-grown temple.

