



Notes on the Cinematographer

Robert Bresson , Jonathan Griffin (Translator) , J.M.G. Le Clézio (Introduction)

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Robert Bresson makes some quite radical distinctions between what he terms "cinematography" and something quite different: "cinema"—which is for him nothing but an attempt to photograph theater and use it for the screen.

Director of *The Trial of Joan of Arc*, *Pickpocket*, *A Prisoner Escapes*, *Diary of a Country Priest*, *Money*, and many other classic films, **Robert Bresson** is, quite simply, one of the most brilliant cinematographers in the history of film.

Notes on the Cinematographer Details

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From Reader Review Notes on the Cinematographer for online ebook

Tosh says

Robert Bresson is one of my all-time favorite filmmakers - and this book doesn't take away the man's mysterious powers of the cinema. It adds to it. Bresson's film notes are poetic and beautiful. He is truly an essential figure in the arts, and one can't help to think that the cinema was made for artists like Bresson.

Jonathan says

Some nice interviews on youtube with this great genius:

<https://youtu.be/FRAztry-ZoI>

<https://youtu.be/DVODh2lkVdc>

"The mixture of true and false yields falsity (photographed theater or cinema). The false when it is homogeneous can yield truth (theater).

In a mixture of true and false, the true brings out the false, the false hinders belief in the true. An actor simulating fear of shipwreck on the deck of a real ship battered by a real storm—we believe neither the actor, nor in the ship, nor in the storm."

"The truth of cinematography cannot be the truth of theater, nor the truth of the novel, nor the truth of painting. (What the cinematographer captures with his or her own resources cannot be what the theater, the novel, painting capture with theirs.)

An image must be transformed by contact with other images, as is a color by contact with other colors. A blue is not the same blue beside a green, a yellow, a red. No art without transformation."

"The eye solicited alone makes the ear impatient, the ear solicited alone makes the eye impatient. Use these impatiences. Power of the cinematographer who appeals to the two senses in a governable way. Against the tactics of speed, of noise, set tactics of slowness, of silence."

? says

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Arta says

"Provoke the unexpected. Expect it."

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Sofia says

I'm currently constructing my own vade mecum. This is one of The Books.

Katie says

Ahhhhh, yes!!:

Make visible what, without you, might perhaps never have been seen.

Because you do not have to imitate, like painters, sculptors, novelists, the appearance of persons and objects (machines do that for you), your creation or invention confines itself to the ties you knot between the various bits of reality caught. There is also the choice of the bits. Your flair decides.

One does not create by adding, but by taking away. To develop is another matter. (Not to spread out.)

When you do not know what you are doing and what you are doing is the best -- that is inspiration.

Rida Hariri says

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Robert Bresson *Notes on the Cinematographer* is my philosophy book or self-help book for putting things together in what I feel, or need, to be real in stories, images, moments. I'm sure it's one hell of a book for creative people. I don't make things so much as try to get by and live better by living elsewhere (as in outside of me). I'm not the right person to ask about that... Anyway, I'd assimilate this instead of *The Little Book of Calm* (as seen on the brilliant *Black Books* series when Manny accidentally ingests that ridiculous book and starts spouting out advice from it. "Pretend you're an orange and laugh at it." I love that show. I'd love to live in that book shop with Manny and Bernard). These are notes that Bresson jotted down to himself, pretty much. Like someone else's train of thought that would cross stations with what I think about a lot. (One thing I am not is a clear thinker.) I hope for inspiration from someone so inspired. I feel inspired watching his films. (Unfortunately, I think like pulling from the toppermost of my mental soils, seldom going down to the roots or allowing for future harvests. As in, speaking out of my ass. Got plenty of fiber, at least.)

This is one of the reasons why I watch so many movies. It's also why I have such a bad staring problem. I'm probably hoping for something... I wanna feel affirmed, probably. Find some kind of beauty. At least something not cold. (*Note I probably don't understand a fraction of most things. I'm probably like Good Charlotte when they name their brilliant beyond brilliant influences. Like they haven't ever listened to themselves! The least fat of the two did get Hilary Duff into The Smiths. Maybe when the fattest one is tired of Nicole Ritchie beating up on him he could tell me about all that I'm missing!) (What's this? A mysterious note in the margins of my book for me to get some self-esteem.)

I love that. I so agree! I liked what he said about it working when the models (Bresson doesn't call his actors "actors") and it works out right when they get his secret wishes. This is something I've thought about from time to time, whether all the other people involved in films (not just screenwriter and director. How come Charlie Kaufman is one of the only screenwriters given credit? It's like people really think that all these directors came on these scripts out of nowhere!) are also writers. I love this wavelength, "secret desires" idea of Bresson's. Maybe it really is like that. How neat. Others become arms to reach...

I try to remember this one. Communication is really hard for me. I try and remember that the flavor of other people's feelings aren't always going to be that strong for me to pick up. (Or palatable.)

A system does not regulate everything. It is a bait for something.

An unsoul-crushingly way to look at that. I need to have some sort of organization up there (thumping my noggin right now).

My movie is born first in my head, dies on paper; is resuscitated by the living persons and real objects I use, which are killed on film but, placed in a certain order and projected on to a screen, come to life again like flowers in water."

Hm.

Doing the same action twenty times in rehearsals will lead to doing them without thinking about them. That's not a direct quote. He says stuff about that a lot. John Frusciante made six records in 2004. After spending lots of efforts on different takes to get everything as perfect as can be he decided to try just one take for his singing. (People could sing his tune now, what with the surge of auto-tune...) Does it kill spontaneity? I liked that idea of it coming about again just by getting used to it and no longer thinking about what you are doing.

(It is going to get tiresome to keep quoting so much...)

I'm not sure if I agree with Bresson on true and false, or on music.

In a mixture of true and false, the true brings out the false, the false hinders belief in the true. An actor simulating fear of shipwreck on the deck of a real ship battered by a real storm - we believe neither in the actor, nor in the storm."

There could be something wrong with my brain wiring. I believe that something can be both true and false. I find it difficult to believe that any thing is all true or all false, if it is emotions. I tend to act more upset when things aren't that bad than I do when things are really, really bad. You can't always tell on the surface. I like to look for little signs, read between the lines...

Bresson wrote that there should be no music at all, unless instruments seen in the film. Lars Von Trier and his cronies based their Dogme95 theories on an essay by Bresson's fellow Frenchie Truffaut. I guess Bresson would have seen eye to eye with them on the music, at least. Pretty useless restrictions, I thought (what did any of it have to do with telling a good story?). (I really liked *Rosetta*, even if it wasn't "officially" dogme, and love *Breaking the Waves*.) I think it's a case by case thing. Some might rely on what comes from elsewhere (cool soundtracks). It's just that I think most of us make our own life soundtracks of what we hear that it becomes a part of us, and not "slipping off elsewhere". (I wanna go elsewhere.) **Music. It isolates your film from the life of your film (music delectation). It is a powerful modifier and even destroyer of the real, like alcohol or dope.** Oops.

Two types of film: those that employ the resources of the theatre (actors, direction, etc.) and use the camera in order to reproduce; those that employ the resources of cinematography to create.

I'd never been able to put into words the difference between theatre and cinema. (Usually what I read/hear from others is against cinema and in favor of theatre.)

I see it like real life versus stories. Memories versus stories. Perspectives versus reality. The closest we can get to seeing how something really happened, not just how we colored it. The closest we'll ever get to seeing in someone else's brains. I love actors (ahem or models) 'cause even though they can't totally be someone else, it is still like that Robert Bresson secret desires catching on. Of someone else. Even if they aren't real. I don't care if they are playing someone real or fake. I wanna know those secret wishes too.

Don't run after poetry. It penetrates unaided through the joins (ellipses).

I just thought this one was awesome.

A sound must never come to the rescue of an image, nor an image to the rescue of a sound.

Avoid paroxysms (anger, terror, etc.) which one is obliged to simulate, and which everybody is alike.

That's what makes the best writing (in any medium) for me. That something that is wholly another, even if it is alike. The different edges of those things are what I look for. Right-on!

From the beings and things of nature, washed clean of all art and especially the art of drama, you will make an art.

Your genius is not in the counterfeiting of nature (actors, sets), but in your way of choosing and co-

coordinating bits taken directly from it by machines.

I want those parts.

To communicate impressions, sensations.

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.

Displaying everything condemns cinema to cliché, obliges it to display things as everyone is in the habit of seeing them. Failing which, they would appear false or sham.

The real is not dramatic. Drama will be born of a certain march of non-dramatic elements.

Yes! The BIG moments in life are usually hand in hand with the most dull. Any constant fear can become sameness boring. Any Oprah memoirist might be jealous of fodder from my family history, but it is really same old.

Your film is not made for a stroll with eyes, but for going right into, for being totally absorbed in.

The crude real will not by itself yield truth.

And that's where the writing comes in. And the acting and the pretending and the making stuff out of everything and out of nothing. That's what I live for, probably...

The most ordinary word, when put in its place, suddenly acquires brilliance. That is the brilliance with which your images must shine.

What he said.

I wish that I could speak French. This book is probably even better. (Not to mention Serge Gainsbourg would be like sex after just masturbating.)

Truth and lies aren't things I really grasp in my hands. It's more like a taste on the tongue. I've gotta do it myself to get it sometimes. Try on how someone says something to me, repeat it for between the lines stuff, if they are making fun of me or not. (My favorite actresses are the ones who remind me of those I've known best in my life. I can recognize and get into the patterns. That's why Samantha Morton and Liv Ullmann types are my favorites.)

David M says

Dennis Cooper (charming author of *Frisk*) once wrote this rather beautiful appreciation of Bresson:

http://www.dennis-cooper.net/bio_bres...

' Instead of flaunting their difference, or feigning modesty by deferring to the conventions of Hollywood film, they offer up an art so unimpeachably fair, so lacking in ulterior motivation that the effect is a kind of mimicry of what perception might be like were one capable of simultaneously perceiving clearly and appreciating the process by which perception occurs. The only thing these films ask is that one share a fraction of Bresson's single-minded concern for the souls of young people whose innocence causes them to fail at the cruel, irrevocable task of adulthood.'

The affinity might not seem obvious at first; Cooper writes transgressive punk pornography. Bresson's favorite authors were Pascal and Dostoevsky. I don't think he ever listened to much music later than Bach. None of his movies can remotely be described as gay pornography. Yet what Cooper learned from Bresson is profound. They share a certain asceticism, a commitment to let the void speak directly through the bodies/faces of their young protagonists.

I'm inclined to agree Bresson was the greatest film director of all time, maybe the one true auteur in the history of cinema. His black-and-white movies of religious transfiguration have deservedly become classics.

However, to me his later color films are his most astonishing achievements - chiefly *A Gentle Creature*, *Lancelot of the Lake*, and above all *the Devil, Probably*. These are bracing, brutal works. It's unclear if Bresson lost his Christian faith as he got older. He used to say his vision hadn't become bleaker, just more 'lucid.' Simone Weil would say that while she embraced the crucifixion she couldn't accept the resurrection. This was one major reason why she couldn't bring herself to convert near the end of life. She wanted nothing to do with Christianity if it was merely a superstitious form of comfort. In his masterful films, perhaps Bresson offers this same vision of Christianity before or even without the resurrection.

Jim says

This is a rather odd book. It's a book about film that doesn't talk about any films. I believe only one actor and film is mentioned by name (Falconetti in **The Passion of Joan of Arc**). What the book consists of are thoughts about filming -- thoughts that are very different from one one usually thinks about as film, which Bresson associates with "the terrible habit of the theatre."

Robert Bresson is a great film director, so consequently his *Notes on the Cinematograph* is well worth listening to. Unlike many famous directors, such as Hitchcock, Ford, and Bergman, Bresson never had a stock company of actors he used in film after film. In fact, I can't think of any actor he used more than once. Instead of actors, he talks about models. He avoids imposing a structure on the film in the screenwriting process, yet his films are masterpieces; and the performances he achieves are memorable.

I think of Maria Casarès in **Les Dames du Bois de Boulogne** or Martin La Salle in **Pickpocket** or Nadine Nortier in **Mouchette**. The films Bresson makes with them end up consuming them as useful for any other picture. Yet he gets great performances, such as Claude Laydu in **Journal d'un Curé de Campagne** or Anna Wiazemsky in **Au Hasard Balthazar**.

What Bresson attempts is not easy, which is why in his forty-year career he has completed only thirteen features.

Lee says

Collection of insights into making movies, an art Bresson calls "cinematography," not to be confused with what's commonly called cinematography or cinema. It's more like the flow of life captured by the director's diving rods of camera and tape recorder. Actors are called "models" -- and they should be unrecognizable conveyors of volitionless expression, or something like that. The whole thing's very French, very Zen, stressing silence, intuition, economy. Metaphorically valuable for those not making movies. Ideal pretentious bathroom book or stocking stuffer for a young aesthete. With that said, it's only pretentious in that it's the work of someone who thinks deeply about artistic prearrangements required to create philosophically ideal effects that stay true to a precise understanding of reality expressed via the knotting of images deemed simple and true. Ideas to keep in mind while watching his films -- I've only seen one a few years ago and now hardly remember it. Read this because Will Oldham mentions it as inspiration for "I Am a Cinematographer."

Craig Werner says

Brilliant short book on the aesthetics of the film (mostly non-commercial, largely non-American) of the 50s through 70s that speaks to me most deeply (Godard, Bergman, Antonioni to skim the A list). Bresson isn't quite "New Wave"--he began making his pieces a bit earlier and rather than developing an instantly recognizable "style" (like Godard or Fellini), he developed the approach outlined here that resulted in movies that superficially may seem quite different but bear a deeply personal stamp. Among other things, these aphorisms, paragraphs, include an approach to actors (Bresson calls them "models" and would reject "acting" almost entirely as a baleful hangover from the stage.). Rather than try to summarize the lyrical, introspective, improvisational, near-Zen, vision, I'll include a series of quotes that capture the flavor of the book:

"To create is not to deform, or invent persons and things. It is to tie new relationships between persons and things which are, and as they are." (p. 13)

"The insensible bond, connecting your furthest apart and most different images, is your vision." (p. 20)

"Hide the ideas, but so that people find them. The most important will be the most hidden." (p. 25)

"Not to shoot a film in order to illustrate a thesis, or to display men and women confined to their external aspect, but to discover the matter they are made of. To attain that 'heart of the heart' which does not let itself be caught either by poetry, or by philosophy, or by drama." (p. 27)

"Recognize the unorganized noises (what you think you hear is not what you hear) of a street, a railroad station, an airport....Play them back one by one in silence and adjust the blend." (p. 31)

"Be the first to see what you see as you see it." (p. 33)

"Two simplicities. The bad: simplicity as starting-point, sought too soon. The good: simplicity as end product, recompense for years of effort." (p. 46)

"Extreme complexity. Your films: attempts, trials." (p. 56)
