Divinely Human:
Robert Bresson's Spiritual Reflections
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The moral task of man is a process of spiritualization. All creatures are go-betweens, and we are placed in time that by diligence in spiritual business we may grow liker and nearer to God. The aim of man is beyond the temporal — in the serene region of the everlasting Present.

— MEISTER ECKHART, OP, “Sermon VII”

This talk reads Robert Bresson’s *Notes on the Cinematographer*,¹ not as a mere collection of thoughts, but as spiritual reflections. These brief meditations record aspects of his film practice in condensed form and reveal the connection between contemplation and action. The contemplative tone of the book becomes perceptible through the careful observation that originates each note. The goal seems to be to set parameters for transformation — so that art changes without losing sight of its core, so that this change makes sense and explores the possibilities of the cinematographic medium. Bresson did not want to “have the soul of an executant,” he wanted instead to “find, for every shot, a new pungency over and above what” he “had imagined.”² He therefore cultivated a spirit of openness and a capacity for reinvention.

It is true that I am not the first to read Bresson’s notes spiritually, although my reading seeks to be more systematic and developed. It is common in the studies of his work as director to mention both his writings and his Christian faith. But it is also usual not to connect these two aspects despite their mention. They connect in the importance of sensory images as a gateway to the mystery of existence. Thomas Aquinas says that what is proper to spiritual beings like humans is the search for knowledge and understanding through sensory images.³ Bresson puts feeling ahead of thinking without belittling the second. Hence the role of intuition, which is no more than our ability to

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understand immediately, without the need for conscious reasoning. For the Italian Dominican theologian and for the French artist, understanding can be clearly distinguished from comprehension, because it is always partial, incomplete, provisional. The mystery of people and things must be intensified by art and it is “one single mystery” that manifests itself differently.

More precisely, the spiritual nature of Bresson’s reflections is twofold.

On the one hand, Bresson speaks explicitly about the soul in several passages, in an attempt not to succumb to the superficial powers of photography. For him, cinematography, or photography in motion, has the ability to capture life, the soul of living things, and not just their appearance: “Your camera catches not only physical movements that are inapprehensible by pencil, brush or pen, but also certain states of soul recognizable by indices which it alone can reveal.” Bresson follows Catholic doctrine in his non-dualistic view of the soul-body relationship. It is a Thomistic perspective, which regards the soul as the substance of the living body and the living body as the form of the soul. The person is body and soul and the uniqueness of their integration. At one point, Bresson paraphrases Montaigne: “The movements of the soul were born with the same progression as those of the body.” Reading the original text by the French philosopher, we notice that Montaigne had written “functions” instead of “movements”. The sentence, as presented in the filmmaker’s notes, is inspired by Montaigne, but it is undoubtedly Bresson’s in its dialectics. The movements of the soul are the sources of the movements of the cinematographer. There is a virtuality in these movements, in the sense that Gilles Deleuze understands the virtual, as that which is real but not actual and is thus the condition of all experience. Bresson insists that this makes us wait for the unexpected within the life contained in and sprouted up from his films.

4. Bresson, Notes, 8.
5. See ibid., 60: “To defeat the false power of photography.”
6. Ibid., 53.
7. Ibid., 19.
On the other hand, there is a religious background to his remarks that, although well known, is only made explicit once when the author mentions a Greek-Catholic liturgy saying: “Be attentive!” The exact phrase is “Let us be attentive!” and it is even more fitting for Bresson’s notes since they are written simultaneously from the point of view of the artist and of the viewer. Both need to pay attention, to be vigilant about what is seen and heard when a film is projected.

These two aspects, the vibration of the soul and the importance of attention, can be further discussed by focusing on a concept that Bresson develops: that of model (a “divinely man” or a “divinely woman” as he writes), which replaces the notion of actor. Models are seen according to the perspective of the cinematographer (who works with them in the creation of the film) or the viewer/hearer (who sees their images and listens to their sounds in the finished work). The soul and the body of a model are therefore inimitable. Models become unique presences that sharpen the attention to every thing instead of demanding it for themselves. That which they reveal to the camera is then composed by editing to give it resonance in relation to other elements of the work, making what they reveal even clearer. Just as the studio models who are painted or drawn adapt to the positions asked of them, so cinematic models adapt to what Bresson asked them to say and do, without pretending to be others or ceasing to be who they are. We could say that models work in a centripetal way. They are affected from the outside, collect energy from what surrounds them, revealing what they “do not suspect is in them.” Their interiority is always in flux, whereas the actors presuppose an interiority that is not their own. Actors are at home in theater because theatrical art is based on representation, on things that are not actually so, as the importance of sets and props demonstrate. Walter Benjamin says something similar evoking Pirandello

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10. Ibid., 60.
12. See ibid., 1: “No actors. / (No directing of actors). / No parts. / (No learning of parts). / No staging. / But the use of working models, taken from life. BEING (models) instead of SEEMING (actors).”
13. Ibid., 2.
and drawing on Rudolf Arnheim in his famous essay “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction.” The model of the cinematographer can only be herself or himself precisely because she or he faces, not an audience, but a machine. Her or his image is like the image of any other filmed element, placed in a certain place in the final composition of the film.

The last scene of *Mouchette* (1967) allow us to explore questions around a model in detail — the way that they relate to viewer presumptions about Christian perspectives on suicide and death as well as to the place of ritual in significant moments of life.

*Mouchette*, the poor and abused girl embodied by Nadine Nortier, glues the dress to her body and the dress is immediately ripped. She does not get to wear it. She slides and rolls down a hill until her body stops near a river. The camera follows her movement in a tense manner, framing it obliquely from the upper left corner to the lower right corner. Mouchette gets up and tries to catch the eye of someone by vigorously raising her right arm, then lowering it slowly, in dismay. Only after seeing her reaction do we see a man on a tractor who seems to recognize her, but who pulls away, merely glancing back. This is an example of the cause appearing after the effect, thus making the effect more impressive. Dispirited, Mouchette’s eyes are downcast as she climbs the hill. This time, the shots become more fixed and there is only a small camera movement at the beginning, after she lies down to roll away again. The two descents are a *game of life or death*. Expressing the difference and contrast between them, the framing of the second descent accentuates the diagonal that goes from the upper right corner to the lower left corner. Mouchette goes off screen and the camera focuses on the river, lingering, as if anticipating the last shot of the film. Mouchette follows the same path and the shots follow the same visual composition, but the final image is

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15. See Bresson, *Notes*, 51: “Let the cause follow the effect, not accompany it or precede it.”

quite different. The dress is caught in the shore vegetation and a big splash of water ensues. We cannot discern her body in this rapid occurrence. This final shot deliberately does not show her body, either next to the water or beneath it. It is a strikingly different gesture from that described in Georges Bernanos’s adapted text, in which the character goes into the water to rest quietly underneath it and her bodily parts (the hands, the palms, the back of the head, the ears, the nostrils) are carefully commented upon.\(^{17}\) It is perhaps too hasty to describe Mouchette’s gesture as a suicide like João Bénard da Costa, the historic president of the Portuguese Cinemateque, does, for example.\(^{18}\) I call it a \textit{game of life or death} because, without stepping outside the world of children’s games, Mouchette risks losing her life as though she is playing Russian roulette. Certainly, this needs to be distinguished from the direct pursuit of death. We see the unfolding of these moments as a cycle of repetition. After the first descent and the film leaves open the possibility that the second descent will end like the first. It is worth noticing that this game comes after a group of hunters shoot down a rabbit. Death is present from the start in the scene. Mouchette observes the hunt and then stares at the dead rabbit. Perhaps the film reinforces the sense of game in her gestures and makes her body absent in the end in order to differentiate her death from the rabbit’s.

The sound of church bells uttering single tolls marks the rhythm of the scene. The first toll coincides with the rabbit’s death. Music erupts only when the image, in a way, stands still. The last shot is prolonged and remains almost unchanged, except for the

\(^{17}\) Georges Bernanos, \textit{Nouvelle histoire de Mouchette} [1937] (Paris: Édition Ebooks libres et gratuits, 2005), 104: “Mouchette se laissa glisser sur la côte jusqu’à ce qu’elle sentît le long de sa jambe et jusqu’à son flanc la douce morsure de l’eau froide. Le silence qui s’était fait soudain en elle était immense. C’était celui de la foule qui retient son haleine lorsque l’équilibriste atteint le dernier barreau de l’échelle vertigineuse. La volonté défaillante de Mouchette acheva de s’y perdre. Pour obéir, elle avança un peu plus, en rampant, une de ses mains posée contre la rive. La simple pression de sa paume suffisait à maintenir son corps à la surface de l’eau, pourtant peu profonde. Un moment, par une sorte de jeu sinistre, elle renversa la tête en arrière, fixant le point le plus haut du ciel. L’eau insidieuse glissa le long de sa nuque, remplit ses oreilles d’un joyeux murmure de fête. Et, pivotant doucement sur les reins, elle crut sentir la vie se dérober sous elle tandis que montait à ses narines l’odeur même de la tombe.”

tiny movements in the water. For this reason, the music, Claudio Monteverdi’s Magnificat, appears as an expressive element that overlaps, and perhaps overwhelms, the blankness of the image. Charles Thomas Samuels once asked Bresson if it was not heretical to celebrate a suicide with a Magnificat as he apparently does. Before commenting on suicide and saying that “to be aware of a certain emptiness can make life impossible,” he replied yes, that it was. It is paradoxical that he himself was not able to avoid this kind of rationalization, but in the end such an answer only shows the difficulty in doing so. As we have seen, it is ambiguous whether this is truly a suicide, unlike the unmistakable suicide of the woman in the later Une femme douce (A Gentle Woman, 1969). In addition, the Magnificat or Song of Mary is a central song in the Office of the Dead. It is a prayer said for the peace of a deceased person’s soul, so that the departed finds eternal dwelling in God. This is also the function it plays in Bresson’s film.

In conclusion, we must remind ourselves that Bresson saw cinematographic works as capable of returning “the past to the present”, of unmasking the magic of the present. This present fascinates because it transcends the temporal, the delimited time that limits, as Meister Eckhart says. Joseph Ratzinger writes that, in the human sense, to have a soul means simply to be called to an “eternal dialogue,” that is, to be “God’s partner in a dialogue.” Bresson’s camera does nothing but capture this relationship closely and thoroughly, filming the fluctuations of the soul through concrete sensations and movements. Mouchette is made present at every instant. We see her inner freedom at work and glimpse an open present that is invariably directed to God — that which Bresson describes as “[t]he constant, the eternal beneath the accidental.”

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22. Bresson, Notes, 25 (italics in original).