

NOTES ON BRESSON

July, 2025

Pickpocket (1959), the notorious film by Robert Bresson, follows the protagonist in his (failed) attempt to narrate a coherent confession. The lack of motivation to both commit the crimes and to write a confession is accompanied by a breakdown of causality. Overall echoing Fyodor Dostoyevsky's *Crime and Punishment* (1866), the centrality of the "confession" as a narrative artifice could lead to two developments: (I) the idea of pairing the apparent crude honesty of the confession with parafictions and (II) to think about *confession as a genre*.

The pickpocket general disinterest (reflecting or embodying Bresson's directing style, which renders his actors a nonchalant semblant) provides minimal information about anything.¹ Thus, whether the character is telling the truth or not (maybe he doesn't even know), can't really be verified within this play with a supposedly transparent narrative form – the confession – and the opacity of the character.²

If Bresson's first interest in *Pickpocket* was 'the extraordinary abilities of hands, their intelligence' and some kind of magic in the tricks, the imagery of this film made of 'hands, glances, objects', was further developed with *L'Argent* (1983).

¹ "His idea is for the actors not to act out their lines, but simply to say them with as little expression as possible." Susan Sontag, 'Spiritual Style in the Films of Robert Bresson', in *Against Interpretation, and Other Essays* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1966), p. 184.

² "Having established the problems of narrating a satisfactory confession, Bresson presents a solution that is embedded in Michel's criminal acts. By picking his victims' pockets, Michel forces them to experience the same breakdown in causality that makes it impossible for him to explain his motives. For example, in one scene Michel steals from a woman who is standing in line with her purse tucked under her elbow. He eases the purse out from under her arm and replaces it with a rolled-up newspaper of approximately the same size. The woman feels nothing. The audience does not witness her eventual discovery of the crime, but she surely perceives it as the work of a magician: The purse, which she has held firmly this whole time, has been transformed into a worthless scrap of paper. It is an effect without any possible cause. Confronted with the breakdown of causality, she must experience a disorientation very close to Michel's confusion about his own actions. The merging of crime and confession suggests that Michel's choice of crime is motivated in part by his need to confess, and that his desire to confess is not a straightforward result of having committed a crime." S. Ceilidh Orr, *Stealing the Scene: Crime as Confession in Robert Bresson's Pickpocket*, in *Border Crossing: Russian Literature into Film* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016), p. 96.

The formal relation between the two films made out of close shots³ - as if following, in a “biography of the object”, the movements of money - echoes the director’s idea that cinema must not ‘show things in their ordinary relationships, in their ordinary relation to life, but to take the parts of a whole, isolate them, and put them back together in a certain order.’⁴ For this reason, editing is a key component of filmmaking for Bresson – after all, ‘[a] film is not made of images, it’s made of relationships between images.’⁵

In an interview, Robert Bresson stated that ‘[c]ertain passages in the film will give the audience the pleasure of precision. Which is also that of simplicity and clarity.’⁶ Because of those qualities, the director imagined that the film would be appreciated in Japan, ‘because of its precision.’

In the reduction of drama – ‘the drama is that there is no drama’⁷ – and with the danger of saying too little, Bresson’s films ‘express with silence what other films express with words’.⁸ Ultimately, his editing procedure is trying to avoid profusion and disorder. The director believes that ‘to create is first of all to prune, to eliminate.’⁹ He is searching for ‘[v]igor by way of precision. Precision can also be poetry.’¹⁰

³ Bresson understands that he’s ‘dangerously close to the limit of saying too little’, his stylistic elegance, should be noted, works for both images and sounds. ‘It is often necessary to “isolate” before “capturing” and “putting in order.” Robert Bresson, *Bresson on Bresson: Interviews 1943–1983* (New York: New York Review Books, 2016), p. 65.

⁴ Bresson, *Bresson on Bresson*, p.74

⁵ Bresson, *Bresson on Bresson*, p. 76

⁶ Bresson, *Bresson on Bresson*, p. 67

⁷ Bresson, *Bresson on Bresson*, p. 83

⁸ Bresson, *Bresson on Bresson*, p.79

⁹ Bresson, *Bresson on Bresson*, p.81

¹⁰ Bresson, *Bresson on Bresson*, p. 273