



# Notes On Cinematography

BY ROBERT BRESSON



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# **Notes on Cinematography Robert Bresson**

Translated by Jonathan Griffin

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**1950-1958**

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Rid myself of the accumulated errors and untruths. Get to know my resources, make sure of them.

□

The faculty of using my resources well diminishes when their number grows.

□

Master precision. Be a precision instrument myself.

1

□

Not have the soul of an executant (of my own projects). Find, for each shot, a new pungency over and above what I had imagined. Invention (re-invention) on the spot.

□

*Metteur-en-scène*, director. The point is not to direct someone, but to direct oneself.

□

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).

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HUMAN MODELS:

Movement from the exterior to the interior.  
(Actors: movement from the interior to the exterior.)

The thing that matters is not what they show me  
but what they hide from me and, above all, *what  
they do not suspect is in them.*

Between them and me: telepathic exchanges,  
divination.

□

(1925 ?) The TALKIE opens its doors to theater,  
which occupies the place and surrounds it with  
barbed wire.

□

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

□

The terrible habit of theater.

□

CINEMATOGRAPHY\* IS A WRITING WITH IMAGES IN  
MOVEMENT AND WITH SOUNDS.

□

\* As will become clear, "cinematography" for Bresson has  
the special meaning of creative film making which  
thoroughly exploits the nature of film as such. It should not  
be confused with the work of a cameraman.

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A film cannot be a stage show, because a stage show requires flesh-and-blood presence. But it can be, as photographed theater or CINEMA is, the photographic reproduction of a stage show. The photographic reproduction of a stage show is comparable to the photographic reproduction of a painting or of a sculpture. But a photographic reproduction of Donatello's *Saint John the Baptist* or of Vermeer's *Young Woman with Necklace* has not the power, the value or the price of that sculpture or that painting. It does not create it. Does not create anything.

3

□

CINEMA films are historical documents whose place is in the archives: how a play was acted in 19 . . . by Mr. X, Miss Y.

□

An actor in cinematography might as well be in a foreign country. He does not speak its language.

□

The photographed theater or CINEMA requires a *metteur-en-scène* or director to make some actors perform a play and to photograph these actors performing the play; afterwards he lines up the images. Bastard theater lacking what makes theater: material presence of living actors, direct action of the audience on the actors.

□

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... without lacking naturalness, they lack nature. \*

—Chateaubriand.

Nature: what the dramatic art suppresses in favor of a naturalness that is learned and maintained by exercises.

□

Nothing rings more false in a film than that natural tone of the theater copying life and traced over studied sentiments.

□

To think it more natural for a movement to be made or a phrase said like this than like that is absurd, is meaningless in cinematography.

□

No possible relations between an actor and a tree. The two belong to different worlds. (A stage tree *simulates* a real tree.)

□

Respect man's nature without wishing it more palpable than it is.

□

No marriage of theater and cinematography without both being exterminated.

□

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\* ... sans manquer de naturel, manquent de nature.

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Cinematographic film, where expression is obtained by relations of images and of sounds, and not by a mimicry done with gestures and intonations of voice (whether actors' or non-actors'). One that does not analyze or explain. That *re-composes*.

□

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.

5

□

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.)

□

Cinematographic film, where the images, like the words in a dictionary, have no power and value except through their position and relation.

□

If an image, looked at by itself, expresses something sharply, if it involves an interpretation, it will not be transformed on contact with other images. The other images will have no power over it, and it will have no power over the other images. Neither action, nor reaction. It is definitive and unusable in the cinematographer's system. (A system does not regulate everything. It is a bait for something.)

□

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Apply myself to insignificant (non-significant) images.

Flatten my images (as if ironing them), *without attenuating them*.

*On the choice of models.*

6 His voice draws for me his mouth, his eyes, his face, makes for me his complete portrait, outer and inner, better than if he were in front of me. The best deciphering got by the ear alone.

## ON LOOKS

Who said: "A single look lets loose a passion, a murder, a war"?

The ejaculatory force of the eye.

To set up a film is to bind persons to each other and to objects by looks.

Two persons, looking each other in the eye, see not their eyes but their looks. (The reason why we get the color of a person's eyes wrong?)

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*On two deaths and three births.*

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 onto a screen, come to life again like flowers in water.\*

□

To admit that X may be by turns Attila, Mahomet, a bank clerk, a lumberman, is to admit that the movies in which he acts smack of the stage. Not to admit that X acts is to admit that Attila = Mahomet = a bank clerk = a lumberman, which is absurd.

7

□

Applause during X's film. The impression of "theater" irresistible.

□

A model. Enclosed in his mysterious appearance. He has brought home to him all of him that was outside. He is there, behind that forehead, those cheeks.

□

"Visible parlance" of bodies, objects, houses, roads, trees, fields.

□

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*.

□

*\* To "cinematograph" someone is not to give him life. It is because they are living that actors make a stage play alive.*

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Radically suppress *intentions* in your models.

□

To your models: "Don't think what you're saying, don't think what you're doing." And also: "Don't think *about* what you say, don't think *about* what you do."

□

8

Your imagination will aim less at events than at feelings while wanting these latter to be as *documentary* as possible.

□

You will guide your models according to your rules, with them letting you act in them, and you letting them act in you.

□

One single mystery of persons and objects.

□

Not to use two violins when one is enough.\*

□

Shooting. Put oneself into a state of intense ignorance and curiosity, and yet see things *in advance*.

□

\* *Ti avverto se in qualche concerto troverai scritto solo dovrà essere suonato da un solo violino. [Note that if in any concerto the word solo is written it should be played by one violin only. ] (Vivaldi).*

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One recognizes the true by its efficacy, by its power.

Passionate for the appropriate.

Expressive face of the actor on which the slightest crease, controlled by him and magnified by the lens, suggests the exaggerations of the *kabuki*.

9

Counter the high relief of theater with the smoothness of cinematography.

The greater the success, the closer it verges upon failure (as a masterpiece of painting approaches the color repro).

What happens in the junctures. "The great battles," General de M . . . used to say: "are nearly always waged at the points of intersection of the staff maps."

Cinematography, a military art. Prepare a film like a battle.\*

\* At Hedin we all stayed at the Hôtel de France. During the night I was haunted by Napoleon's saying: "I make my battle plans from the spirit of my sleeping soldiers." [*"Je fais mes plans de bataille avec l'esprit de mes soldats endormis."*]

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A whole made of good images can be detestable.

### ON TRUE AND FALSE

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 in the actor, nor in the ship nor in the storm.

### OF MUSIC

No music as accompaniment, support or reinforcement. *No music at all.\**

□

The noises must become music.

□

Shooting. No part of the unexpected which is not secretly expected by you.

□

Dig deep where you are. Don't slip off elsewhere. Double, triple bottom to things.

□

\* Except, of course, the music played by visible instruments.

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Be sure of having used to the full all that is communicated by immobility and silence.

□

Draw from your models the proof that they exist with their oddities and their enigmas.

□

You shall call a fine film the one that makes you think highly of cinematography.

11

□

No absolute value in an image.

Images and sounds will owe their value and their power solely to the use to which you destine them.

□

Model. Questioned (by the gestures you make him make, the words you make him say). Respond (even when it's only a refusal to respond) to something which often you do not perceive but your camera records. Submitted *later* to study by you.

#### ON AUTOMATISM

Nine-tenths of our movements obey habit and automatism. It is anti-nature to subordinate them to will and to thought.

□

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Models who have become automatic (everything weighed, measured, timed, repeated ten, twenty times) and are then dropped in the middle of the events of your film — their relations with the objects and persons around them will be *right*, because they will not be *thought*.

□

Models *automatically* inspired, inventive.

□

Your film — let people feel the soul and the heart there, but let it be made like a work of hands.

□

CINEMA draws on a common fund. The cinematographer is making a voyage of discovery on an unknown planet.

□

Where not everything is present, but each word, each look, each movement has things underlying.

□

Significant that X's film, shot at the seaside, on a beach, breathes the characteristic smell of the stage.

□

To shoot *ex tempore*, with unknown models, in unforeseen places of the right kind for keeping me in a tense state of alert.

□

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Let it be the intimate union of the images that charges them with emotion.

Catch instants. Spontaneity, freshness.

How hide from oneself the fact that it all winds up on a rectangle of white fabric hung on a wall? (See your film as a surface to cover.)

13

X is imitating Napoleon, whose nature was not to imitate.

In \* \* \*, a film that smacks of the theater, this great English actor keeps fluffing to make us believe that he is inventing his lines as he goes along. His efforts to render himself more alive do just the opposite.

A too-expected image (cliché) will never seem right, even if it is.

Set up your film while shooting. It forms for itself knots (of force, of security) to which all the rest clings.

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What no human eye is capable of catching, no pencil, brush, pen of pinning down, your camera catches without knowing what it is, and pins its down with a machine's scrupulous indifference.

□

Immobility of X's film, whose camera runs, flies.

□

A sigh, a silence, a word, a sentence, a din, a hand, the whole of your model, his face, in repose, in movement, in profile, full face, an immense view, a restricted space. . . . Each thing exactly in its place: your only resources.

□

A flood of words does a film no harm. A matter of kind, not quantity.

□

It would not be ridiculous to say to your models: "I am inventing you as you are."

□

The insensible bond connecting your images which are furthest apart and most different is your vision.

□

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

□

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X, an actor, uncertain like an uncertain color  
made from two tones superimposed.

□

On the boards, acting adds to real presence, in-  
tensifies it. In films, acting does away with even  
the semblance of real presence, kills the illusion  
created by the photography.

□

15

(1954 ?) The GRANDS PRIX lunch. One-eyed man  
in the kingdom of the wilfully blind.

*Where is my judgement fled  
That censures falsely what they see aright?*

□

Let it be the feelings that bring about the events.  
Not the other way.

□

Cinematography: new way of writing, therefore  
of feeling.

□

Model. Two mobile eyes in a mobile head, itself  
on a mobile body.

□

Don't let your backgrounds (avenues, squares,  
public gardens, subway) absorb the faces you  
are applying to them.

□

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Model. Thrown into the physical action, his voice, starting from even syllables, takes on automatically the inflexions and modulations proper to his true nature.

□

In every art there is a diabolical principle which acts against it and tries to demolish it. An analogous principle is perhaps not altogether unfavorable to cinematography.

□

Forms that resemble ideas. Treat them as actual ideas.

□

Model. "All face."\*

□

\*A certain man demanded of one of our loytring rogues, whom in the deep of frosty Winter, he saw wandring up and downe with nothing but his shirt about him, and yet as blithe and lusty as an other who keepes himselfe muffled and wrapt in warme furies up to the ears, how he could have patience to go so. *And have not you, good Sir, (answered he) your face all bare? Imagine I am all face.* (Montaigne, *Essays*, I, chapter XXI; John Florio's translation). [*Je ne sais qui demandait à un de nos gueux qu'il voyait en chemise en plain hyver aussi scarrebillat que tel qui se tient ammitonné dans les martres jusques aux oreilles, comme il pouvait avoir patience: : "Et vous, Monsieur, répondit-il, vous avez bien la face découverte : or moy, je suis tout face."*]

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*Shooting.*

Wonderful chances, those that act with precision.\* Way of putting aside the bad ones, to attract the good ones. To reserve for them, in advance, a place in your composition.

□

Actors, costumes, sets and stage furniture are bound to make one think at once of the stage. Take care that the persons and objects in my film may not make people think at once of the cinematographer.

17

□

Someone who can work with the minimum can work with the most. One who can with the most cannot, inevitably, with the minimum.

□

Shooting. Stick exclusively to impressions, to sensations. No intervention of intelligence which is foreign to these impressions and sensations.

□

The power your (flattened) images have of being other than they are. The same image brought in by ten different routes will be a different image ten times.

□

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\* "I often paint bouquets on the side where I have not planned them." (Auguste Renoir to Matisse. Quoted from memory.) [*"Je peins souvent les bouquets du côté où je ne les ai pas préparés"*]

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NEITHER DIRECTOR NOR SCENARIO-WRITER. FORGET  
YOU ARE MAKING A FILM.

□

Actor. The to-and-fro of the character in front  
of his nature forces the public to look for talent  
on his face, instead of the enigma peculiar to  
each living creature.

□

18

No intellectual or cerebral mechanism. Simply a  
mechanism.

□

If, on the screen, the mechanism disappears and  
the phrases you have made them say, the  
gestures you have made them make, have  
become one with your models, with your film,  
with you – then a miracle.

□

Unbalance so as to re-balance.

□

Hide the ideas, but so that people find them. The  
most important will be the most hidden.

□

Acting, which seems to have an existence of its  
own, apart, outside the actor; to be palpable.

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## ON POVERTY

Letter of Mozart's, about some of his own concertos (K. 413, K. 414, K. 415): "They hold the happy mean between the too difficult and the too easy. They are brilliant . . . , but they miss poverty."

□

Montaigne: *The movements of the soul were born with the same progression as those of the body.*\*

19

□

Unusual approach to bodies.

On the watch for the most imperceptible, the most inward movements.

□

Not artful, but agile.

□

Sudden rise of my film when I improvise, fall when I execute.

□

CINEMA seeks *immediate* and *definitive* expression through mimicry, gestures, intonations of voice. This system inevitably excludes expression through contacts and exchanges of images and of sounds and the transformations that result from them.

□

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\* *Les mouvements de l'âme naissaient avec même progrès que ceux du corps.*

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What has passed through one art and is still marked by it can no longer enter another.\*

Impossible to express something strongly by the coupled resources of two arts. It is all the one or all the other.

20

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.

Images and sounds like people who make acquaintance on a journey and afterwards cannot separate.

Nothing too much, nothing deficient.

X's film. Two wicked eyes, trying to be good; a bitter mouth made for silence, which never stops talking and contradicting the words as soon as said: *Star-system* in which men and women have a factual existence (as phantoms).

\* CINEMA and theater stick together for convenience. Mixing them up is a practical interest.

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Charm of X's film made of bric-a-brac.

To be as intended, CINEMA films can only use actors, *cinematography* films models only.

Music takes up all the room and gives no increased value to the image to which it is added.

21

THE SOUNDTRACK INVENTED SILENCE.

Absolute silence and silence obtained by a *pianissimo* of noises.

X's film. Vociferations, roarings, as in the theater.

Model. What you make known of yourself by coincidence with him.

Let each image, each sound exert its weight not only upon your film and your models, but upon you.

*Draw* the attention of the public (as we say that a chimney draws).

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