Robert Bresson, by Joseph Cunneen

reviewed by James M. Wall in the July 26, 2003 issue

While reading Joseph Cunneen's book I heeded his counsel and looked again at some of Robert Bresson's 14 feature films made in France between 1943 and 1983. It was a rewarding and yet disturbing exercise, for, as Cunneen is quick to note, Bresson's work lends itself neither to easy plot description nor easy comparison to other filmmakers. Bresson is unique. He is, however, a measure of what film can be at its finest. Bresson is an artist with a precise style and a consistent vision which, as Cunneen writes, "celebrates the heroism of the unending, never completely successful struggle for freedom."

Bresson's sparse output and stringent style--an average of one film every three years portraying characters who find grace the hard way--created an artistic legacy but also left him largely unknown to the average filmgoer. Cunneen writes that to critics and his fellow directors, Bresson is "one of the greatest filmmakers of the 20th century." Jean-Luc Godard, not normally given to extravagant language, wrote of him, "Bresson is to French film what Dostoevsky is to the Russian novel, what Mozart is to German music."

Martin Scorsese praised Bresson in uniquely American terms: "Elvis Costello said that whenever he's writing a song he asks himself, is it as tough as Hank Williams? Meaning--is it as ruthlessly pared down, as direct, as unflinching in its gaze at aspects of life I might feel more comfortable ignoring? Young filmmakers might well ask themselves, 'Is it as tough as Bresson?'"

I found in looking at particular titles I had not seen for decades that there is a tension inherent in Bresson's toughness because you know from the opening credits that danger lurks in every frame but that grace may also await. What makes his films so evocative of anxiety is the manner in which Bresson takes the viewer deep into the reality he depicts. He pares down his material to its absolute essence, allowing no time for viewers to distance themselves from the often self-inflicted suffering of what Bresson called his "models"--not "actors." And they, in David Kehr's words, "read their lines with as little interpretive inflection as possible."

Cunneen says that Bresson failed to reach a larger audience "because of his unwillingness to offer comforting illusions." And yet it was the pared-down images, the revealing off-camera sounds and the sharp focus on the behavior of his models in their ordinary contexts that enabled Bresson to give an enormous gift to his audience. That gift, in Cunneen's judgment, comes from Bresson's ability to examine the darker aspects of contemporary life and still allow viewers to leave the theater "cleansed and strengthened."

Bresson's consistent adherence to a unique style faithful to his vision sets him apart from the ordinary director. What he leaves out of, rather than what he puts into, a film distinguishes his work, indicating a willingness to trust viewers to know, at a deeper level, what is happening between the facts that he does reveal. Bresson does not tell stories from a distance. Instead, he strips his work down to a myriad of close-ups of hands, feet, the bottom of legs, a coffee cup or a door through which someone has just passed on the way to making yet another serious mistake.

In the U.S., Bresson is perhaps best known for his adaptation of Georges Bernanos's novel *Diary of a Country Priest*, made in 1950. Cunneen gives us a helpful summary of this film's plot--as he does of all of the 14 films--but he also notes that Bresson's style demands that the viewer slow down and experience the action of his "models . . . as if for the first time."

In *Diary* a young Catholic priest is struggling in his first parish, a congregation very much like any small church in a small village in which the local rich family has too much power and too little insight into its spiritual needs. The film opens with a passage that could also serve as an introduction to all of Bresson's films. The words are from Bernanos's novel, and they are read by the priest, the curé of Ambricourt: "I don't think I am doing wrong in jotting down, day after day, with absolute frankness the very simple trivial secrets of a very ordinary kind of life."

The curé is suffering from stomach cancer, which he tries to treat with stale bread soaked in wine. A shepherd who carries his own burden of doubt, he has a young man's sense of inadequacy. The noted French critic and scholar André Bazin gave the film this accolade: "Probably for the first time, the cinema gives us a film in which the only genuine incidents, the only perceptible movements, are those of the life of the spirit." Not much out of the ordinary appears to happen in the curé's first parish, but the viewer is taken on a journey which ends, fittingly, with the words spoken by the dying curé, "What does it matter? All is grace."

The curé doesn't know it, but he has courage. Courage is also paramount in Bresson's 1956 *A Man Escaped*, which is based on the true story of a condemned man's escape from a German prison set up in Lyons, France, in 1943. We know little about André Fontaine's past, but in the film we learn a great deal about his creativity, his adaptability and his determination to regain his freedom. Again, Bresson focuses tightly on objects that fall easily into our sight. We see André's hands carefully fashioning a spoon into a tool he can use to remove a panel from his prison door. And we see the slow shuffling of prisoners moving from cell to washroom to dining area, reaching out to one another, desperate for communication. And always there is André's determination to escape.

The film is enriched by off-camera sounds--doors slamming, keys against the bars, handcuffs clicked shut, cars careening down a street and, at crucial points, Mozart's *Mass in C Minor.* The music sounds at moments of grace, as when André decides to trust his cellmate to help in the escape; when he is given an extra blanket which he uses to form a rope; and, finally, "at the end, when Fontaine jumps to safety from the outer wall." What one critic termed the best prison-escape film ever made is a film about courage, the quest for freedom and the gifts of grace.

Bresson's final film, *L'Argent* (Money), released in 1983, was a loose adaptation of Tolstoy's "The False Coupon." Bresson was 82 when he made this film, a statement by an artist who grieves for a younger generation that shows little concern for moral standards. Greed is what troubles Bresson here, the willingness to put all else, including human life, at the service of acquiring money. *L'Argent* also demonstrates another Bresson conviction--that while life, as a series of accidental encounters, is not fair, those encounters are our only locale for receiving grace.

Bresson's other films include *Pickpocket* (1959), a painful examination of a young man who finds erotic joy in skillfully slipping his hand into pockets and handbags. He discovers that true happiness comes to him only when, through the bars, he kisses the forehead of a faithful young woman who visits him in prison. In Pickpocket, and in subsequent works like *Au Hasard Balthasar* (1966) and *Mouchette* (1967), Bresson stays with the simple and the suffering, finding hope only in God's steady presence in the ordinary.

Bresson's work remains uplifting because he looks so closely at reality, the stage on which life is to be endured--a look that invites us to receive the mystery of the God who remains forever a mystery, except in those moments when grace rushes upon

us "between the facts."

Anyone who cherishes the connection between faith and film needs to revisit Bresson and take Cunneen along as a spiritual companion. Cunneen's Catholic sensibility and previous studies of Krystof Kieslowski, Eric Rohmer and Andrei Tarkovsky show him to be a trustworthy and knowledgeable guide. And because watching Bresson's films unaccompanied can be difficult and at times confusing, Cunneen's book is just what the serious film student needs for the journey.