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Film Notes

A MAN ESCAPED (Un Condamne a Mort S'est Echappe) France, 1957. Directed by Robert Bresson. Produced by Jean Thuillier and Alain Poire. Adapted by Robert Bresson from the true story by Andre Devigny.

Lieutenant Fontaine...	Francois Leterrier	Hebrard...	Jean-Paul Delhumeau
Jost...	Charles Le Clainche	Terry...	Roger Treherne
Blanchet...	Maurice Beerblock	Prisoner 110...	Jean-Phil. Delamare
The Pastor of Leiris...	Roland Monod	Prison Guard...	Jacques Oerlemans
Orsini...	Jacques Ertaud	Officer...	Klaus D. Grevenhorst
	Prisoner's Escort...	Leonhard Schmidt	

"Bresson himself states that he is recreating an actual event 'without embellishment.' However, Bresson's leanly-fibered art constitutes an embellishment of the highest order, and at least on two occasions--a blood-caked face peering our from under a blanket as light filters into a bare cell and the natural alignment of light and shadow darkening a man's face as he gazes upward--Bresson has created striking images of the human condition. The only background music, Mozart's Mass in C minor, is used sparingly, mainly in formal sequences at set intervals as when all the prisoners walk in single file to the prison yard to empty their slop-buckets. The religious music certainly 'embellishes' the solitary dignity which pervades this robot-like process.

Bresson's camera hovers about the central character, never seeing more of the visual world than is functionally necessary. The faces of the interrogators is never shown; the external spectacle of the walled prison can only be deduced from the hero's movement from within. There are no trick spinning effects to convey the Kafkaesque delusions of rectangular isolation. The walls and bars are solidly present without being theatrically obtrusive. Since the audience sees even less than the hero, its sense of hearing is intensified by recurring off-screen noises, some planted in the memory like the clanging of a guard's keys on the bars of the stair railing, some naturally contiguous to any unspecified location like the rumbling of an unseen train, and some frighteningly mysterious until explained, as in the climactic instance of the eerily squeaking traction of a sentry's bicycle. Bresson's emphasis on off-screen sounds and the limited range of his camera represents a new approach to the problems of the subjective cinema in the age of the talking film.

--Andrew Sarris, Film Culture

ZERO FOR CONDUCT (Zero de Conduite) France, 1933. Directed by Jean Vigo.

"It is clear that Vigo picked up a good deal from the German films of the early twenties, from Clair and Chaplin, and from the whole creative brew of the Paris of his time. On a foggy day, indeed, or with a prejudiced eye, it would be possible to confuse his work with the general sad run of avant-garde...But Vigo was no more a conventional avant-gardist than he was a Hollywood pimp; he was one of the very few originals who ever worked on film...Here is the little I know about him. He was the son of a Basque revolutionist, and learned to walk in the prison in which, as Vigo put it, his father was suicided...He began his career as an artist in a photographer's studio in Nice. He became an assistant movie cameraman, helped organize a film society, and made A propos de Nice, which was, I gather, a short and extremely sardonic film, nominally in the 'documentary' manner. In Paris he made Zero de Conduite in 1933 and L'Atalante in 1934. He planned several other films, including one about tennis (with Cochet) and one about the French penal colonies; but all arrangements for financing these schemes fell through. When Paris censors saw Zero they forbade its release; even at a press screening it caused a near-riot. He was luckier with the more conventional L'Atalante. The miseries of dying, of tuberculosis, at the age of twenty-nine, with most of his abilities still unused, were exacerbated in Vigo by his knowledge that now that he was helpless to interfere, movie tradesmen were making little improvements on the picture."

--James Agee