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Taste test: Two more master classes in sound and image from a patient saint of cinema

Do this job long enough and you learn to accept certain realities. Some people will laugh at *Written on the Wind* and cry over *Sleepless in Seattle*—instead of vice versa. There are reviewers who find Godard boring and think Lukas Moodysson is a genius. And although it is tiresome to hear two-buck chuck extolled as Château Lafite

Rothschild, you realize that hey, this is America—everyone's got an opinion, and if it weren't for bad taste, many folks would have no taste at all. But I reach the edge of my tolerance in the case of Robert Bresson.

Bluntly put, to not get Bresson is to not get the idea of motion pictures—it's to have missed that train the Lumière brothers filmed arriving at Lyon station 110 years ago. The late French filmmaker made 13 features over the course of his 40-year career; each is a drama of faith so uncompromising as to border on the absurd. Bresson's actors do not act, they simply are; his favorite effect is the close-up. His movies may be cerebral, but their effect is primarily emotional—or physiological. They naturally induce a state of heightened awareness. Some might call it "grace."

One of two Bresson features revived in new prints this month at Film Forum, *Pickpocket* was shot during the summer of 1959—the same season as Godard's *Breathless*. Like *Breathless*, *Pickpocket* is the story of a petty criminal, and even more than Godard's first feature, it is designed to confound audience expectations. The opening title, "This film is not a thriller," has the effect of Magritte's famous surrealist painting *Ceci N'Est Pas une Pipe*.

Pickpocket was inspired by Dostoyevsky's *Crime and Punishment*, but all incidental anecdote and psychology has been stripped away. Employing few establishing shots and little camera movement,

STATES OF GRACE

BY J. HOBERMAN



Janus Films

Bresson distills narrative down to a particular essence of looks, gestures, and precisely placed audio effects. ("The noises must become music," he wrote in his notebooks.) His mise-en-scène is as understated as his montage is aggressive—creating performances out of reaction shots, using sound to signify offscreen events. Bresson refers to this method as cinematography, opposing it to "the terrible habit of theater."

PICKPOCKET
Written and directed by Robert Bresson
Janus, October 7 through 13, Film Forum

MOUCHETTE
Written and directed by Robert Bresson
Rialto, October 14 through 20, Film Forum

unstoppable blank-faced thieves descend like a plague upon the world. Ultimately inexplicable, this concentrated, elliptical, economical movie is an experience that never loses its strangeness.

Mouchette, made eight years later, is less celestial and more grounded, based on a novel by Georges Bernanos (who also provided the source for Bresson's 1951 *Diary of a Country Priest*). Bernanos is a Catholic writer, but in adapting his story of a wretched adolescent girl, Bresson evokes a world from which something—perhaps God—has withdrawn. "What will they become without me?" *Mouchette*'s mother asks the camera in a stark, pre-credit prologue.

The girl lives with her sick mother,

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drunk father, and squalling baby brother in a hovel by the highway somewhere in rural France. She's stubborn, sullen, and secretive; her thoughts are scattered. School is torment, home is worse. Midway through the 78-minute movie, Bresson allows *Mouchette* something approaching happiness—there's a scene, not in the novel, in which she's treated to a ride in a fairground bumper car. The unexpected collisions are a kind of setup for the unfortunate encounter, soon after, when *Mouchette* is lost and raped in the woods.

The film's final movement, following the heroine through her last morning, might be called "The Passion of *Mouchette*"—it ends on a note that is at once utterly inconsequential and irrevocably final. As always, Bresson signifies rather than dramatizes action. The filmmaker professed to hate theater, and yet in *Mouchette*, the world itself is a mystical stage. Like any genius, Bresson made rules in order to break them.

Fallen angel: Martin LaSalle

Indeed, *Pickpocket* might be described as a solemn carnival of souls. There's something almost medieval about it. The city is inhabited by angels—fallen and otherwise. In the movie's most elaborate scene, the antihero and his cohorts create an assembly line of theft at the Gare de Lyon. These