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Gilberto Pérez Guillermo

# JACQUES BECKER

Swiftly the years, beyond recall.
Solemn the stillness of this spring morning.
(From Arthur Waley's version of a Chinese poem.)

THE HUMAN MIND has two main scales on which to measure time. The large one takes the length of a human life as its unit, so that there is nothing to be done about life, it is of an animal dignity and simplicity, and must be regarded from a peaceable and fatalistic point of view. The small one takes as its unit the conscious moment, and it is from this that you consider the neighbouring space, an activity of the will, delicacies of social tone, and your personality. The scales are so far apart as almost to give the effect of defining two dimensions; they do not come into contact because what is too large to be conceived by the one is still too small to be conceived by the other. Thus, taking the units as a century and the quarter of a second, their ratio is ten to the tenth and their mean is the standard working day; or taking the smaller one as five minutes, their mean is the whole of summer. The repose and self-command given by the use of the first are contrasted with the speed at which it shows the years to be passing from you, and therefore with the fear of death; the fever and multiplicity of life, as known by the use of the second, are contrasted with the calm of the external space of which it gives consciousness, with the absolute or extra-temporal value attached to the brief moments of self-knowledge with which it is concerned, and with a sense of security in that it makes death so far off.

Both these time-scales and their contrasts are included by these two lines in a single act of apprehension, because of the words *swift* and *still*. Being contradictory as they stand, they demand to be conceived in different ways; we are enabled, therefore, to meet the open skies with an answering stability of self-knowledge; to meet the brevity of human life with an ironical sense that it is morning and springtime, that there is a whole summer before winter, a whole day before night.

WILLIAM EMPSON:
*Seven Types of Ambiguity.*

# TWO FILMS

We looked we loved, and therewith instantly
Death became terrible to you and me.
By love we disenthralled our natural terror
From every comfortable philosopher
Or tall, grey doctor of divinity:
Death stood at last in his true rank and
order.

ROBERT GRAVES: *Pure Death*

S & S SUM 1969

JACQUES BECKER, the late French film-maker, read in 1947 the newspaper report of an extraordinary escape attempt made by five prisoners who were awaiting trial at the Santé prison in Paris. The prisoners had succeeded, after much laborious digging, in making their way to the sewers; but they were betrayed by one of their group. Becker wrote at the time a rough draft for a film treatment of this episode. Some years later a novel was published on the same subject, and then—with the author of the novel as a collaborator on the screenplay, three of the original prisoners as technical advisers and one also as a leading actor—Becker made the film. He completed *Le Trou* shortly before he died in 1960 at the age of fifty-three.

In his earlier *Casque d'Or* the plot was derived as well from a newspaper police report, and the setting is also a low social milieu. *Casque d'Or* is a period film, with some of the decorative glare of Paris, 1900; yet it has much of the same solidity, and directness of concentrated energy, as *Le Trou*. Becker was for a long time assistant to Jean Renoir, and his re-creation of the past in *Casque d'Or* sometimes recalls the naturalness and charm of *Partie de Campagne*. But in Becker's film there is an intensity and fierceness quite alien to the gentle Renoir. "A suffocating film," wrote Vernon Young, "its barely contained passion exerted an unbearable pressure on the spectator." The plot of *Casque d'Or* is violent and melodramatic. It is a tortuous plot (unlike that of *Le Trou*), but its core is a simple story of love and death. Between Marie (Simone Signoret), a beautiful gigolette with a *casque* of golden hair, and the carpenter Manda (Serge Reggiani), a sexual passion is aroused when they first meet which develops into a deep and tender love. But a few days together in the country is all the lovers can enjoy. Manda kills two men—one in a knife-duel, the other in a furious act of revenge—and at the close of the film we witness, with Marie, his execution.

* * *

Jacques Becker was able to communicate with peculiar intensity a sense of the physical world. His declared master was Erich von Stroheim, but in fact his films are very different from Stroheim's (and much better). His films depend not on the gross accumulation but on the selection and heightening of physical detail; he could bring sensuously alive a drab and sparse prison setting. And with Becker the sensuous life of the physical environment is inseparable from the life of the characters. Objects, even when they are perceived as closely as are the tools that the prisoners use in their attempted escape in *Le Trou*, are with him always perceived in a context of human activity and human meaning.

Like that other great sensual director, Dovzhenko—who invested even the clouds in *Aerograd* with the solidity almost of marble—Becker could, by the power and poetry of his observation, lift an object, a gesture, out of time, and give the quarter of a second the authority of an eternity. He could capture by his selection and compression, as Stroheim with his lack of proper focus could not, the timeless immediacy of the moment.

There are no prolonged and explicit love scenes in *Casque d'Or*; there is, instead, that radiant quarter of a second in which Marie, surrounded by the almost tangible freshness of the early-morning countryside, takes the bowl of coffee that Manda offers her and drinks from it. Death and decay are at that moment inconceivable, we are so absorbed in the richness of life. The solidity of that moment is indestructible: we derive from it that sense of security and absoluteness which belongs, as Empson says, to the small time-scale.

More complex (though technically still simple) is another remarkable scene, the one of Manda's execution. This (set too in the early morning) is a scene of almost equal solidity and sensuous immediacy, in which we are as aware of the bulk and texture of things; and yet it is a scene of death. As Lindsay Anderson pointed out in his review of the film in SIGHT AND SOUND, Becker here, returning repeatedly to Marie as she watches all from a window, breaks down the event into a number of sharp discrete impressions. This gives the scene its peculiar quality. Continuous physical motion is our most common metaphor for the passage of time. If, for instance, Becker had chosen to follow Manda on the way to the guillotine in an unbroken travelling shot, the scene would

"CASQUE D'OR". SERGE REGGIANI IN THE EXECUTION SEQUENCE AND (LEFT) WITH SIMONE SIGNORET.

have become, almost of itself, a visual metaphor for the passing of Manda's life and the coming of his death. But what Becker gives us here is not the continuous but the quick, abrupt motion, the glimpse of the massive guillotine, of its bright descending blade: he makes us focus on the harsh isolated moment.

This being the moment of death, it yet brings to mind the large time-scale of which it is the end-point. So we get then. almost inevitably, that beautiful final shot of Marie and Manda dancing away in the riverside café where they first met, a shot which of course is, not least of all in its brevity, a metaphor for the passage of human life. Thus, as in the lines that Empson quotes from one of Arthur Waley's translations of Chinese poems, the two time-scales are here put side by side; and here, as in the poem, the two tend to merge into a single complex apprehension of the event.

In Waley's Chinese poem, however, the effect of those two lines is chiefly to induce in the reader an ironic self-awareness before the event. Our picture of the fine spring morning remains much what it would be otherwise; only, it is now mixed in our thoughts with a simultaneous awareness of the swiftness and brevity of our lives. Becker's film is different. Our picture of the actual event is here harsh and unexpected. The two time-scales are caused to merge by the very manner of our perception. For Becker puts before us the moment of death unyieldingly as a concrete conscious moment—when otherwise we should very probably follow the strong tendency to abstract it from its physical setting and view it as the conclusion toward which a whole life has been moving. Manda at the guillotine. Our perception of the event is pulled in opposite directions by the two incompatible time-scales: on one side the pattern and abstraction that we almost by instinct seek to impose; on the other side the fragmented immediacy of Becker's actual rendering. It is as if every image, every detail, every expression on a face were bound by invisible lines of force emanating from both these opposite pulls; a slight motion, a simple cut, sets up vibrations which inseparably engage both opposite ways of perceiving the event. The shot of Marie and Manda dancing, with its explicit embodying of the large time-scale, comes then as a brief final relaxation of the accumulated tightness.

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Only Jacques Becker has photographed the moment of death—and he has done it twice. It is not, of course, literally death that he photographs at the end of *Le Trou*, when all of a sudden seemingly the entire prison-guard force falls on the prisoners before they can escape; but it is the sort of moment which ends abruptly a pattern of life, and which in so doing inevitably brings to mind the whole pattern from its beginning.

Again Becker chooses to depict the immediate moment, again partly as a way of heightening the horror and brutality of the event, and again as the expression ultimately of a moral stand, of a passionate refusal to present death—or the sudden overturning of things—from a 'peaceable and fatalistic point of view'. This refusal, this stand, general as it is, requires for its full statement the utmost concreteness. With Becker, the vividness of concrete detail (or the apparent modesty of his aims: he likened himself to an entomologist) mustn't blind us to an informing idea, a general meaning. A general meaning, however, it should perhaps be stressed, is seldom with Becker a *social* meaning. His concern is not with the socially representative but with the private, with the quality and resonance that things take on in a special situation, with love, friendship, the small group of men. Before the guillotine in *Casque d'Or*, for all the hard public impersonality of an execution, we are made to sense the fearful privacy of death.

Society, as Lindsay Anderson says in his valuable review, is not blamed for Manda's death. Although the hardships and humiliations of prison life are not shirked in *Le Trou* (one need only remember the brutally mechanical cutting up, all done with one soiled knife, of the various foods in the parcels sent to the prisoners), surely the last thing one would want to call that film is an exposé of prison conditions. In blaming society for a given human situation, the situation's particularity, if approached at all, is approached only by way of social generality; whereas it is with the particular that Becker begins, and the particular, after it has been given its due, that generates with him the impulse to move toward the general.

There is in the Parisian Becker something of that love for the trivial which characterises what Ortega y Gasset has called the Mediterranean man. Love for the trivial, it should be emphasised, is not triviality or simple naturalism—though Becker may have at times succumbed to these. To embrace the trivial, the fleeting, the particular, against time's unarrested flow, and against both a wilful submission to that flow and a detachment from it by abstraction: this is surely not a trivial, but a brave and meaningful stand.

Near the end of *Le Trou*, when all is ready for the prisoners to escape that night, there is a quiet shot of Roland, their leader in the escape attempt, dusting his jacket. From this shot the scene fades to a view, now at night, of the prison corridor as seen through the toothbrush periscope that the prisoners have devised. Then we see the men in their eager final preparations to go: Roland polishing his shoes, Gaspard combing his hair, Manu tying Monseigneur's blanket-made tie. Outside, briefly glimpsed through the periscope, lies the prison corridor, unruffled yet menacing, likely at any time to intrude upon the prisoners' lives. (Twice during the film guards have come to the cell without warning.) Taken in themselves, those last-minute doings are trivial, utterly unimportant; and yet, at the dramatic high point of his film, Becker gives them persistent and affectionate attention. Roland dusting his jacket, a man engrossed in the privacy of an inconsequential act, is pitted against the constraining outside corridor.

At the end, the private and the trivial, the private as expressed in its giving resonance to the trivial, are suddenly overwhelmed. The prisoners are seized; Gaspard, a latecomer to their group whom they never quite trusted, has betrayed them. *Le Trou* closes with the image of a near-empty corridor, restored after the commotion to its regimenting normality. This image is not, for all its quietude, peaceable and fatalistic. Like the last shot in *Casque d'Or*, though in a different way, this is above all an image of loss: a loss which one may, in terms of the large time-scale, accept as inevitable, but which Becker sees as brutal and arbitrary. In *Casque d'Or* the loss is not only of Manda's life but of Marie's and Manda's life together. In *Le Trou* the loss is more than anything of a humanity which the concentrated effort to escape has affirmed and helped define; it is a loss of friendship and intimacy, of the men's energy and joint impetus which had managed a remarkable degree of control over the intolerably restrictive environment; it is a loss of the trivial and unique.

Yet each of these closing shots, after the immediacy and concentration of what has just preceded it, comes almost as a relief. Each is a little abstract and ambiguous, a reflection upon an already past event, full of anger and sadness yet at the same time hinting at the possibility of quiet resignation. A hint of such possibility, at the close of either *Casque d'Or* or *Le Trou*, serves to make us reject it all the more openly. But our rejection must now be wilful. Now we are removed irrevocably from the harsh material presence of the event. Things look hazy to a backward glance, the large-scale view imposes itself—and with it comes, almost unavoidably, a peaceable fatalism. Our resisting this fatalism, yet no longer being able, as we cast a backward glance over the entire film, to get a firm grip on any of those moments which had seemed solid and indestructible, gives the close of each film much of its peculiar poignancy of loss.

## II

FRANCE IS THE ONLY country with a richly continuous and still living Great Tradition of film. I refer not to the French tradition of style and formal polish—of Clair, Bresson and Resnais—but to a parallel and in my opinion much more important French tradition, what I should like to call the tradition of poetry—of Vigo, Renoir, Becker and Truffaut.

Becker I rank with the best French directors on the strength of only two of his thirteen films: *Casque d'Or* and *Le Trou* are the only films of his I know. The others are probably not so

"CASQUE D'OR": THE RADIANT QUARTER OF A SECOND.

good as these two; some may even be mediocre. But it is in his best works that an artist lives, not in his worst or in some auteur-theory composite of all.

The tradition of poetry: I use here the word 'poetry' not loosely but in a sense I shall attempt, if not to define, at least to restrict. Robert Graves, in the preface to a reading of his own poems at the University of Michigan, gives two minimum requirements which he believes poetry must satisfy if it is not to turn into something else. One requirement is a recognisable metre; the other, that every word must be given its full meaning, must be treated as a living thing. Now, if the word 'poetry' is to be used when speaking of film, as I think there is sometimes good reason to use it, it should be used only when film satisfies at least one minimum requirement: images must be treated as living things.

For the avant-gardist, who so often claims the word for himself, 'poetry' is to be found in abstract or nearly abstract films, 'purely visual' patterns of images. This reflects an ignorance of both poetry and film. "The poet is the least abstract of men," wrote T. S. Eliot, "because he is the most bound by his own language." The more concrete, the more vividly particularised a film image is, the more poetic it can become. The more bound a film-maker is by the material world, by the special way things look and sound and feel, the more likely he is to be a poet.

A 'purely visual' film image hasn't much life, like a word used in a poem only for the sound. An image is alive, like a word, largely in the interactive meanings and associations that from our experience it has for us. Empson speaks of a word almost as a solid object, having "a body of meaning continuous in several dimensions." By use in a particular context this meaning can be stretched, but only slightly; a word is in a poem as much a hard external fact as is, in a film, a tree or an upstairs window that comes within view of the camera. That tree and that window, I submit, will be treated poetically only if they are allowed the dignity of hard external facts, only if they are not stripped, for the sake of abstract visual patterns or whatever, of their particular qualities and meanings as objects in a recognisably real world.*

In film, as in literature, the sensual impact of the medium itself is relatively weak. Film must derive its force, to a much greater degree than music or the plastic arts, from an external reality. Music, being stronger sensually, can be more abstract; film needs the close support of a material world (as poetry needs that of a spoken language) with its complex ramifications of human meaning. What an object or an image means to us, what it brings to our minds, can depend crucially on a slight detail. A generalised image or object, as we place it mentally in a series of possible concrete situations, can mean almost anything, and therefore means, in effect, next to nothing. Plot, in helping establish a concrete human situation, is important. But plot mustn't dictate meaning if one is to have film poetry: the meaning of an object or an image must still be its own, modified and made unique by plot and structure and point of view, an unexpected facet or latent resonance perhaps emphasised.

In *Nosferatu*, a great film poem, the streets and houses of a town struck by pestilence are made to seem sinister and vertiginous, yet all the while retain their reality as streets and houses, even their ordinariness. For another example take *October*, that mixture of the truly poetic and the aggressively unpoetic. Eisenstein, ridiculing Kerensky, at one point shows him intercut with shots of a bust of Napoleon. It could be almost any bust of Napoleon, seen against a featureless background; it is as much as possible an abstract bust of Napoleon; it carries no meaning beyond the most obvious one, and no poetry at all. Perhaps the effect is similarly crude when, in another scene, Eisenstein cuts back and forth from Kerensky entering the Czar's apartment to a gold peacock that gyrates and displays its feathers, at the top of the door, as the door opens. Yet what we get there is not a generalised but a particular gold peacock gyrating before us, solid and made almost tangible by the sculptural editing technique, its ostentatious motion linked organically to Kerensky going through the door. There Eisenstein at least approaches a genuine poetry of objects.

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*Le Trou* has often been compared with Bresson's *Un Condamné à Mort s'est Echappé*. Superficially there are of course obvious similarities between the two films, both reconstructions of actual laborious attempts to escape from prison. Maybe, as some have argued, the similarities go deeper. But the differences, I think, go deeper still.

It would be wrong to contrast the two films by saying that *Un Condamné à Mort* is allegorical while *Le Trou* is literal and realistic. True, there is in Becker's film none of that sense we get in Bresson's of a foreordained pattern, with the outcome given away already in the title; and there is no music, certainly no Mozart Mass as in Bresson's film, only natural sounds until the credit titles at the end. Nevertheless, at bottom, *Le Trou* is not naturalistic but as metaphorical in many ways as *Un Condamné à Mort*. And more than metaphorical, it is what Bresson's film is not: poetic.

Bresson's allegorical aim, the rigorous order he imposes, requires that his images be stripped of most of their independent life. Each of his shots is a mercilessly empty vessel designed for carrying the pattern and meaning of the whole. In his purity and austerity I see less a search for essentials (or as Susan Sontag wrote, a "discovery of what is necessary") than a wilful retreat into a self-contained, subjective world, in which the Catholic metaphysics he adheres to can apply. Much has been made by critics of the way in which, without recourse to expressionism, Bresson's style transforms ordinary objects. One may admire the beauty and precision of the style. But the drab naturalism of the objects shuns their potential intensity, makes them docile to manipulation; Bresson's alleged real toads are in fact pliable material for the building of his imaginary gardens.†

Fontaine, the *condamné à mort* of Bresson's film, surrenders all to his obsession of escape; and around him things exist only as instruments of his obsession. In *Le Trou* there is a similar bending of things toward an ultimate purpose. Tools are made from parts of an iron bedstead or of a scrapped window-frame; a periscope is made with a toothbrush, an hourglass with two small bottles stolen from the infirmary. And the prisoners display in their escape effort some of Fontaine's ruthless efficiency. "First things first," says Roland, and puts away the pieces of a broken mirror, as it turns out barely in time to escape detection. Later on, when Roland and Manu have made their way to the basement, Roland's making of a passkey is interrupted by guards coming; the two prisoners, one standing on the other's shoulders, hide behind a column and move around it as the guards walk by; and just

*A real world, I should stress, not *the* real world, to be known, after William Pechter, as the Kracauer Fallacy.

†Eric Rhode makes use of Marianne Moore's phrase in his study of Bresson in *Tower of Babel*.

as soon as the guards are gone, without a second wasted, without Manu or Roland saying anything, we return to a close shot of hands working on the passkey. Roland in particular has much of Fontaine's meticulous zeal.

Yet in Roland this zeal is not simply absorption in a project, but also a matter of personal dignity. He is the leader of the group; has made in the past three successful escape attempts; the others admire him. His perfectionist attention to details is meant to satisfy not only the demands of the project but those he makes of himself. For the others, too—including Geo, who does his share of the work not intending to escape himself—the project takes on a personal significance. Their joint effort is more than the bending of human beings toward an ultimate purpose: it is an assertion of their humanity.

The human beings are not attenuated in *Le Trou*: and neither are the objects. The objects too assert themselves. Perhaps most striking is their proud noise. In no other film—certainly in no other prison-break film, where digging is usually done in convenient near-silence—is the noise of objects so plain and vivid. A cement floor is to be broken through, and the prisoners soon find out that they must hit it hard with a heavy piece of metal; and hitting it hard makes a loud noise. This may bring the guards, but the floor of the prison cell won't give any other way. Filing through an iron bar makes a shrill sound; all Manu and Roland can do is stop every twenty motions and listen for somebody coming. And the sound of objects is only a part of their conveyed sensual presence. Mere rocks and dust, palpable before us in a long-held shot of the hole being dug through the cement floor, come to appear rich and intense. The filing of the iron bar is shot in tight close-ups; of hands and the file cutting through the iron bar, of Manu's or Roland's face when he stops and listens. Becker's camera seeks to rest on, to grasp hold of, solid things, and moves swiftly when it goes from one to another. Objects, bent by the strain put on them, by the special human purpose which they are made to serve, are yet not bent out of shape; bent, they reveal a fresh aspect which is still peculiarly their own. A meaning is not imposed on them from outside: it is rather, poetically, brought out from within.

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*Le Trou* has been justly praised for its affirmation of human dignity, its (as Vernon Young wrote) "reverence for life in a setting constituted for nothing but imminent death." One should also stress its complementary sense of the dignity of *things*, of their value and service to man, of man's ability to come to terms with them. How remarkable to find, amidst the oppressive circumstances of *Le Trou*, that glorious Mediterranean confidence in the material world, in the possibility of harmony between men and things.

At one point in the film Manu and Roland walk down a dark underground corridor, searching for the door that, from the prison basement, leads to the sewers. First we see a stationary long shot of the two men walking away: they appear as little figures, cramped and forlorn, the ceiling low above their heads, the light that they carry tracing out in the darkness not a path that they could choose but the narrow shape of the corridor. Then we move closer. Manu stops and asks Roland where they are. Roland draws on the dirt-floor a map of the prison, explains where they can expect to find the door (or doors) to the sewers. The prisoners, we discern, know where they stand, they accept as given the cumbrous and restrictive environment and are able manfully to come to terms with it. When they resume walking we follow them in a brief, exhilarating travelling shot; a shot which expresses their resilience, their remarkable control over the situation, their freedom attained in the recognition of necessity.

That is essentially a subjective shot: the camera becomes, as it were, one more of the men. We get a similar—and similarly striking—shot earlier in the film, when the prisoners have finished digging through the floor of their cell. While the digging goes on the camera watches from one side; then we get a shot from above of the dug hole, as a lit piece of cardboard is being dropped through it. But there isn't much time for the prisoners (and for us with them) to relish that downward view of their attained first objective; the hole must be covered up.

There is another hole—or more precisely a tunnel—that the prisoners dig. When they get to the sewers they find the passageway sealed up with hard concrete. Taking advantage of a bend in the sewer, they dig a tunnel through the relatively soft wall and bypass the concrete. This takes several days (or rather nights: the prisoners, two at a time, work during the night). At the point of breakthrough to the other side we get a shot of the hole flat on, reminiscent of the shot, flat on from above, of the earlier hole. Here, however, we see the hole from the other side, taking shape in the wall while the man digging remains in the background, slightly out of focus. The earlier shot was subjective: things seen from the point of view of the men. In this shot we see the men—the human effort—from what could be described as the point of view of things. These two linked shots—linked not only by a geometric similarity but by the sense which they both convey of an attained objective—suggest the complementary nature of these two points of view, their coming together, so to speak, in the shape of the hole.

One shot is from inside the prison cell; the other is from the sewers, beyond all obstacles to reaching the street. These are shots of two different holes, at opposite ends of the tortuous escape route. Yet, linked, they seem to be shots of the two ends of one hole. We are thus induced to look upon the entire escape route, upon the two dug holes and everything in between, as one continuous hole. For everything in between is somehow hole-like: the underground corridor, the door to the sewers, the sewers themselves. This long hole could be taken to extend even further: from the peephole in the cell door, through which the prisoners can see outside with their toothbrush periscope, to the manhole in the street which Manu and Gaspard reach and through which they see the prison building, ghostly across a quiet night street. This hole leads out of a massive prison, winding its way along paths and interstices and forcing its way where it must; its shape depends upon and is narrowly determined by the material surroundings, yet serves a special human purpose, and could not have been realised but by human ingenuity and exertion. Men and things come together in the shape of the hole.

At the end, a cruel and arbitrary reversal. From both sides of this hole guards come and overwhelm the prisoners before they can escape. First it is a visual irruption, through the peephole: Geo, keeping watch, suddenly sees in the corridor a large number of guards. Then the cell is invaded both through the door and through the hole in the floor. Guards, one supposes, are all along the escape-hole, to the street. The men have been betrayed; yet not by things, but by Gaspard.

"CASQUE D'OR": MANDA AND MARIE.