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Touching the world: a way of making meaning in film

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ABSTRACT

This thesis explores different aspects of touch and the role of the body in three works by Robert Bresson: *Un condamné à mort s'est échappé* (1956), *Pickpocket* (1959) and *Une Femme Douce* (1969). It intends to show how affective qualities can complement our understanding of the director's meanings. Drawing from recent phenomenological scholarship it focuses on the experiential elements of Bresson's works and the thematic threads linked to them. By exploring touch, the unusual treatment of bodies and other material elements that Bresson incorporates in different kinds of visual, audible and haptic juxtapositions, it exhibits the director's imaginative meanings grounded in physicality and materiality.

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INTRODUCTION

This thesis explores the role of touch and the body in three works by Robert Bresson: *A Man Escaped* (1956) (original title: *Un condamné à mort s'est échappé), Pickpocket* (1959) and *A Gentle Woman* (1969) (original title: *Une Femme Douce*). The thesis investigates the way bodily meaning are expressed, as part of the director's stylistic choices and as a complement of the films' form, rather than as mere representations. It focuses on the generation of meaning through touch and bodies that Bresson incorporates in different kinds of juxtapositions. At the same time, it aims to examine the synesthetic effects in the three films, to explore how the director creates additional meanings through the effects of films on the viewer's body and senses, drawing from notions by Vivian Sobchack, Jennifer Barker, Laura Marks and Laura McMahon.

The role of the body in the film, as well as its effect on the viewer's body, become a source of artistic meanings. Yet, a lot of film critics have neglected Bresson's unusual approach to bodies and his dense materiality that affects the senses. Instead, they often approach his films as allegories or examples of transcendental style. The analysis of touch and movement, the tactility of the sound, the objects embodied and the way a body is fragmented, as well as the bodily effect of the film to the viewer can help to reveal the meanings in Bresson's films, which is what this project aims to accomplish.

The film engages our senses and depends on our bodily perception to reveal its meanings. As a result, the visible, audible and haptic elements[1] of a film are integral parts

[1] Vivian Sobchack, *The Address of the Eye: A Phenomenology of Film Experience* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 9.

both of the cinematic experience and our understanding of it. Sobchack, Marks, Barker and McMahon discuss the ways in which the cinematic style and form connect to corporeality. They highlight the need to focus on the senses within the cinematic body as well as on the viewer's bodily experience. This foundational framework becomes of great importance due to the tight bond between form, style and the creation of meaning and thus needs to be considered when films, which are considered artworks, are discussed.

In "The Origin of the Work of Art", Martin Heidegger calls the reader's attention to the materiality of a work of art. Matter and form are integral parts of a work of art that constitute the source of its "sensory impact". 'Form' is the way matter is arranged and tied together — in Heidegger's words "a thing is formed matter"[2]. The significance of approaching artwork as "formed matter", in art criticism, derives from the need to understand the work of art as a whole, without breaking it to pieces during the interpretation process. The same need holds when the work of art in question is a film.

Yet, the viewer's sensory experience in film criticism is often left out or taken for granted[3], as Susan Sontag argues in her essay "Against Interpretation". Instead, it is replaced by interpretation and there is a dichotomy between 'form' and 'content'[4]. In her essay, Sontag urges the critic to show "*how* [an artwork] *is what it is, even that it is what*

[2] Martin Heidegger, "The Origin of the Work of Art" in *Off the Beaten Track*, trans. by Julian Young and Kenneth Haynes (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 8.

[3] Susan Sontag, "Against Interpretation" in *Against Interpretation and Other Essays* (United States: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2013), 23.

[4] Susan Sontag, "Against Interpretation", 21.

it is, rather than to show *what it means*" [5], by being attentive to the immediacy of form[6] . In "The Place of Touch in the Arts", Christopher Perricone illustrates the significance of the senses in art criticism, drawing our attention to the — frequently overlooked — sense of touch; "The well-formed visual and auditory sensations we gain from the arts are, as it were the melody of those experiences"[7] he writes. Perricone, as other writers and thinkers, stresses that the arts not only educate our senses[8], but also create meaning by representing[9] and heightening[10] the observer's senses. How could one experience a Lucian Freud painting if they overlook the "fleshiness" coming from the thickness of the paint and the embossed brushstrokes which create its carnal effects? Or Pina Bausch's dance performances without experiencing the different kinds of touch between objects, bodies, and the ground that affect us viscerally?

Art cinema, similarly, often explores the senses on-screen and the effect on the viewer's body to create imaginative and artistic meanings. For the purpose of this project, art cinema (or art film) does not solely refer to experimental filmmaking, but rather to an

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[5] Susan Sontag, "Against Interpretation" 23.

[6] Susan Sontag, "Against Interpretation" 22.

[7] Christopher Perricone, "The Place of Touch in the Arts", *Journal of Aesthetic Education* 41, no. 1 (2007): 91.

[8] Christopher Perricone, "The Place of Touch in the Arts", 90.

[9] Christopher Perricone, "The Place of Touch in the Arts", 93.

[10] Christopher Perricone, "The Place of Touch in the Arts", 97.

independent, non-commercial film production that can "afford an aesthetic stance"[11], according to Prinz's definition in "When is film Art?". Bolton notes that:

> "Laura Marks's discussions of haptic visuality, has enabled a new vocabulary of film interpretation and understanding (Marks 1999, 2002; Sobchack 1992, 2004). Emotional and bodily affect is an integral part of the film experience, and indeed filmmakers appeal to these elements as significant conveyers of meaning, sometimes replacing dialogue and action"[12]

Recent scholarship in film theory such as Laura Marks' *The Skin of the Film*, Jennifer Barker's *Tactile Eye,* Vivian Sobchack's *The Address of the Eye* and *Carnal Thoughts*, as well as Laura McMahon's *Cinema and Contact,* discuss the idea of corporeality in cinema, drawing attention to haptic elements, embodiments and the physical effects the viewer experiences as part of a film's formed matter.

The phenomenological approaches can describe the artwork as a "thing in itself"[13] instead of analyzing its content by means of symbolism and metaphors, which disregard its formal elements and thus often fail to capture the essence of the work. "Phenomenology's conceptual location might be described as the place where the sensing subject and the thinking subject meet"[14]; it has the advantage "of formalizing the process of discovery, the intuitional "seeing" which is natural to trained artists and

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[11] Jesse J. Prinz, "When Is Film Art?" *Revue Internationale De Philosophie* 64, no. 254 (4) (2010): 48.

[12] Lucy Bolton, "Film as Art, and Cinema as a Hall of Reflection" in *Contemporary Cinema and the Philosophy of Iris Murdoch,* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2019), 25.

[13] Susan Sontag, "Against Interpretation", 23.

[14] Jenny Chamarette, "Embodied Worlds and Situated Bodies: Feminism, Phenomenology, Film Theory," *Signs* 40, no. 2 (2015): 290.

philosophes"[15]. Phenomenology as an applied method, invites us to examine a work of art as an experience, "[i]t interrogates experience as irreducible relations of bodies engaged in, and with, worlds in the making."[16] It thus becomes useful when examining the pragmatic relationships in a film and the embodied ways of knowing. As Sobchack writes, "phenomenological reflection has recovered for us what was there all along but theoretically neglected: the film's lived-body and the spectator's uniquely situated and embodied consciousness."[17]

Interestingly enough, Barker and McMahon begin their introductions, in *Tactile Eye* and *Cinema and Contact* respectively, in a similar way. McMahon begins by discussing the opening of Ingmar Bergman's *Persona,* while Jennifer Barker begins by discussing the opening of Andrei Tarkovsky's *Mirror*. The cinematic sequences they choose to discuss interrelate and complement each other in a profound way. The opening of Bergman's *Persona* and the beginning of Tarkovsky's *Mirror* are both preludes to the films. They each precede the opening titles and they could work as independent short films.

Persona begins with a white square in the black screen accompanied by a piercing, gradually intensified, mechanical sound. As the scene lights up, a film projector is revealed as the source of light, and soon the entire screen is filled with white light. The

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[15] Patrick Peritore, "Descriptive Phenomenology and Film: An Introduction," *Journal of the University Film Association* 29, no. 1 (1977): 3.

[16] Kevin E. McHugh, "Touch at a Distance: Toward a Phenomenology of Film," *GeoJournal* 80, no. 6 (2015): 846.

[17] Vivian Sobchack, *The Address of the Eye,* 308.

clicking sound of the projector is heard while close-ups of a series of images intercut with close-ups of the projector. These images include fast-moving hands, a slow-moving tarantula, a close-up of a lamb whose throat is being cut, a shot of entrails. In *Cinema and Contact* McMahon explains the two levels in which touch appears in *Persona*. The first one involves the presentation of visual images per se, such as the ones depicting hands and other body parts or the image of the hairy texture of the tarantula. The second one refers to the tactility that the images and sounds express, which emanate from the director's stylistic choices. McMahon quotes Michel Chion who writes, "[tactility is] foregrounded by extreme close-ups of body parts and […] the 'microtexture' of the sound of the projector and of quivering tremolo strings"[18]. Tactile structures can be used independently or can be combined, as Barker shows in her analysis of the *Mirror's* opening.

The *Mirror* begins with a young boy turning on a television. When the TV is turned on, the screen gradually turns into a bright blue color while a quivering sound accompanies the shot. The sequence which follows is in black and white and presents the interaction of a hypnotherapist and a stuttering boy, named Yuri. At first, the therapist draws Yuri's attention to her hands without touching him. She, then, touches his head, and afterwards she pulls him back without coming in direct contact. In this case, touch is not expressed solely by means of the images shown. Certainly, one of the topics in the

[18] Michel Chion, *Audio-vision: Sound on Screen*, ed. and trans. by Claudia Gorbman (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), pp. 212–13 **quoted in** Laura McMahon. *Cinema and Contact: The Withdrawal of Touch in Nancy, Bresson, Duras and Denis* (London: Legenda: 2012), 1.

introductory scene is the effect of touch. The film's characters experience touch through direct and indirect contact. The bodily effect on Yuri ends up curing his stammering speech. Yet, Barker exhibits that there is an additional way that touch is explored in the film, namely through form[19], which is perceived by the viewer in a bodily way[20]. She implies that there is a reflexive aspect in the film coming from the tactile relationship between Yuri and the hypnotherapist that mirrors the relationship between the viewer and the film[21]. From Barker's analysis we can see that the "material link between mind and body" exists in two levels: the first one refers to what the characters experience and the second to the cinematic effect that both the characters' interactions and the tactility of the images have on the viewer. Still, these two levels are not always mutually exclusive; characters' interactions can be treated as part of the film's form. Taking gestures as an example, we can see that they affect characters in the film in a physical way. At the same time the *type* of gesture becomes part of the style, affecting the mind and the body of the viewer. Barker considers gestures as part of the "muscular form of speech"[22] and argues that the film materializes an additional set of gestures through its cinematic techniques[23]. The fact that the embodied experience is shared by the characters and the viewers[24] plays

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[19] Jennifer Barker, *The Tactile Eye: Touch and the Cinematic Experience* (London: University of California: 2009), 78.

[20] Jennifer Barker, *The Tactile Eye*, 1.

[21] Jennifer Barker, *The Tactile Eye*, 5–6.

[22] Jennifer Barker, *The Tactile Eye*, 78.

[23] Jennifer Barker, *The Tactile Eye*, 78.

[24] Jennifer Barker, *The Tactile Eye*, 1.

an important role in the process of meaning-making, it leads the viewer to empathetic and synesthetic perceptions, thus, the perception we end up having adds to our understanding of the film.

Emotion is embodied in movement and materiality in Tarkovsky's film[25]. Barker explains that the tactile experience might begin from the surface of the body and end up involving the entire body[26], from surface to depth, from haptic areas to the regions of musculature and viscera[27]. Barker's argument that in *Mirror*, "Love, desire, loss, nostalgia, and joy are perceived and expressed in fundamentally tactile ways"[28] resonates with McMahon's words about *Persona*, "the idea of touching, of tactility, appears obsessively throughout the sequence"[29]. They both exhibit the synesthesia experienced by the viewer – haptic qualities such as textures that are perceived through visuals – which allows the viewer to see and feel the ideas embodied in tactile structures, such as the idea of touching or the idea of love. As mentioned earlier, the two opening sequences are not directly connected to the rest of the films narratively[30]. Yet, the haptic elements and touch in the two preludes directly relate to the films' thematic threads[31], which indirectly

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[25] Jennifer Barker, *The Tactile Eye*, 1.

[26] Jennifer Barker, *The Tactile Eye*, 2.

[27] Jennifer Barker, *The Tactile Eye*, 2.

[28] Jennifer Barker, *The Tactile Eye*, 1.

[29] Laura McMahon. *Cinema and Contact: The Withdrawal of Touch in Nancy, Bresson, Duras and Denis* (London: Legenda: 2012), 1.

[30] Jennifer Barker, *The Tactile Eye*, 11.

[31] Jennifer Barker, *The Tactile Eye*, 11.

comment on the haptic relationship between the viewer and the film[32]. For Barker, the cinematic form presents embodied structures in the opening scene of the *Mirror* that directly connect to the thematic thread "of lost time, lost places, and lost love forever out of reach"[33], explored in the rest of the film, "[j]ust as characters slip of the edges of frames […] memory slips into dream"[34].

McMahon illustrates the way tactility reveals itself through the impact of the film on the viewer that resonates with Sobchack's idea about the film as a body that the viewer perceives[35]. McMahon states that "[i]n trembling ode to the tactility of bodies, film image and sound, *Persona's* opening appears to test out the limits of the audiovisual, squeezing a sense of touch from the filmic medium, creating textural, epidermal tensions upon the very surface of the film"[36]. This idea resonates with Sobchack's view in *The Address of the Eye: A Phenomenology of Film Experience* and in *Carnal Thoughts*, in which she discusses the strong bond between the viewer and the film "as a communicative system based on bodily perception"[37]. Specifically, Sobchack elaborates on Merleau-Ponty's idea of the 'embodied subject', by arguing that the way viewers

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[32] Jennifer Barker, *The Tactile Eye*, 10.

[33] Jennifer Barker, *The Tactile Eye*, 11.

[34] Jennifer Barker, *The Tactile Eye*, 11.

[35] Joerg Sternagel, "The Tactile Eye: Touch and the Cinematic Experience," *Film Criticism* 34, no. 1 (2009): 80.

[36] Laura McMahon, *Cinema and Contact*, 1.

[37] Emad Moadab, at al., "Audience Embodiment in Haptic Space of Film", *European Online Journal of Natural and Social Sciences* 1, no 4 (2014): 62.

experience a film depends on their bodily engagement with it[38]. Sobchack highlights that the film becomes "*sensuously* available to the viewer"[39] and emphasizes the importance of incorporating the viewer's senses when conducting a film analysis.

How Can a Film Become Haptic?

The experience of a film through touch might not be as easily understood as its experience through sight and hearing, since we often associate the sense of touch with contact, yet we never literally touch the screen. However, Sobchack, Marks, Barker, and McMahon present how touch is an equally important element of our experience in film art even though we do not have direct physical contact with the screen. Merleau Ponty elucidates that the "[t]he senses translate each other without any need of an interpreter, and are mutually comprehensible without the intervention of any idea"[40]. Sobchack further builds on this idea; she writes that the sense of sight is a "modality of perception" which connects to the rest of the senses and vice-versa: "sight is never only sight – it sees what my ear can hear, my hand can touch, my nose can smell and my tongue can taste. My entire bodily existence is implicated in my vision"[41] and thus, we often use terms such as 'visual tactility' or 'audible tactility'. Vision and hearing seem to have

[38] Emad Moadab, et al., "Audience Embodiment in Haptic Space of Film", 62.

[39] Vivian Sobchack, *The Address of the Eye,* 8.

[40] Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception* (London: Routledge, 1962) **quoted in** Vivian Sobchack, *The Address of the Eye*, 234–235.

[41] Vivian Sobchack, *The Address of the Eye*, 78.

synesthetic qualities that affect our experience of a film in a tangible way.

Set, lighting, camera movement and framing, as well as other cinematic elements, can create embodied spectatorship[42]. Emma Widdis in "Material Sensations" also turns our attention to the "the actual material – objects, textiles, walls"[43]. Barker categorizes cinematic tactility by considering three modes of touch: the haptic, the kinesthetic/muscular, and the visceral. The haptic is experienced as a result of tactile surfaces and haptic imagery[44]; the kinesthetic and muscular refer to the responses to camera movement and actions on screen[45]. The visceral tactility results from the rhythms of cinema[46] and associate with the viewer's involuntary responses[47]. For Barker, visceral reactions become a form of touch[48]; she writes that, "[a]lthough visceral reactions are beyond conscious control, the inner organs of the body are involved in perception, action, and reaction as much as the external senses and voluntary muscular movements"[49].

Both Barker and Marks analyze extensively how elements of form and style

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[42] Emma Widdis, "Material Sensations" in *Socialist Senses: Film, Feeling, and the Soviet Subject, 1917–1940* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2017), 51.

[43] Emma Widdis, "Material Sensations", 51.

[44] Jane Stadler, "Phenomenology Goes to the Movies," *Projections* 5, no. 1: 91.

[45] Jane Stadler, "Phenomenology Goes to the Movies," 91.

[46] Jennifer Barker, *The Tactile Eye*, page 3.

[47] Jane Stadler, "Phenomenology Goes to the Movies," 91.

[48] Jane Stadler, "Phenomenology Goes to the Movies," 94.

[49] Jane Stadler, "Phenomenology Goes to the Movies," 94.

become tactile. Marks comments on the focal changes, graininess, degrees of exposure and film effects such as scratching and close-ups[50]. Yet, Barker's descriptions connect the tactility, which comes from what we consider 'content', to the film's material form. For example, the blowing wind in an early scene of the *Mirror*, creates meaning by becoming more powerful than the form[51]. Barker argues that Tarkovsky creates meaning in the film by making the tactility of the wind so powerful that it surpasses the editing: "the wind […] not only moves through the spaces marked by [the characters' bodies] or by field and fence, but between the shots themselves, and between film and viewer"[52].

Barker illustrates how the cinematic body and the spectator can co-create meaning providing a formal analysis of this interconnection. According to Barker, in the opening of the *Mirror*, the two characters are presented to be pushed and pulled while at the same time the film "pulls and pushes" the viewers towards and away from the content of the screen[53]. As Barker concludes, the relationship between the characters and the settings as well as between the viewers and the screen, evokes a ghostly element in Tarkovsky's *Mirror*[54] while the emphasis on embodied behaviors expresses the film's themes.

Drawing on the philosophy of Jean-Luc Nancy, McMahon also refers to the

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[50] Donato Totaro, *Revue Canadienne D'Études Cinématographiques / Canadian Journal of Film Studies* vol. 10, no. 1 (2001): 108.

[51] Jennifer Barker, *The Tactile Eye*, 152.

[52] Jennifer Barker, *The Tactile Eye*, 152.

[53] Jennifer Barker, *The Tactile Eye*, 1.

[54] Jennifer Barker, *The Tactile Eye*, 10–11.

function of touch as withdrawal[55]. McMahon argues that this kind of "touch-in-separation"[56] is the result of the contrast created when tactile images are presented on screen but at the same time remain untouchable[57]. Yet, there is a vital difference between the two descriptions of touch as withdrawal. McMahon believes that such a dichotomy is static, while Barker concentrates on the degree of the viewer's withdrawal, which does not only stem from the nature of viewing (due to the gap that exists between the viewer and the screen), but also from the film's stylistic elements, such as zooming-in and out.

As a result, touch exists in films in various ways becoming part of the cinematic form and style. Sobchack writes:

> "The cinema uses *modes of embodied existence* (seeing, hearing, physical and reflective movement) as the vehicle, the "stuff", the substance of its language. It also uses the *structures of direct experience* (the "centering" and bodily situating of existence in relation to the world of objects and others)"[58]

Embodiment, like other aspects of style, becomes a way of expression and a means to perceive the world[59]. The body is a powerful communication tool and thus a source of a special kind of meaning in films, inviting both a cognitive and an embodied understanding[60]. As Barker indicates in the introduction, experience through embodiment

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[55] Laura McMahon, *Cinema and Contact*, 2.

[56] Laura McMahon, *Cinema and Contact*, 2.

[57] Laura McMahon, *Cinema and Contact*, 2.

[58] Vivian Sobchack, *The Address of the Eye*, 4–5.

[59] Emad Moadab, et al., "Audience Embodiment in Haptic Space of Film", 62–63.

[60] Emad Moadab, et al., "Audience Embodiment in Haptic Space of Film", 62–63.

does not exist only between the spectator and the film but it is also a way film characters experience body and space. Barker responds to Sobchack's argument, that meaning is communicated through different modes of embodied existence[61], by explaining that both film and viewer can engage in a perceptive role, sharing ways of being[62], of expression and perception[63].

Robert Bresson: The Body and the Senses in Art Film

In anti-representational cinema, style and form often replace or complement the narrative of a film and thus inspire a different kind of viewing than narrative films do[64]. Specifically, as Beugnet writes, anti-representational films inspire "[a kind of viewing] that engages with the materiality of the works, with film as an event in itself (rather than as a derived form of representation)"[65]. Therefore, he suggests an experiential approach when viewing these types of films.

Touch in film is both part of the character's experience and part of the film's form. Reading touch as an element of the frame and, of course, as part of the acting and position of the actors contributes to the composition of the frame, not only by progressing

[61] Vivian Sobchack, *The Address of the Eye*, 4–5.

[62] Jennifer Barker, *The Tactile Eye*, 8.

[63] Jennifer Barker, *The Tactile Eye*, 3.

[64] Martine Beugnet, "Cinema and Sensation: Contemporary French Film and Cinematic Corporeality," *Paragraph* 31, no. 2 (2008): 175.

[65] Martine Beugnet, "Cinema and Sensation: Contemporary French Film and Cinematic Corporeality," 175.

the action but also by revealing the emotional and mental processes of the characters showing the kind of experience they are having.

What is even more interesting is the way each director incorporates these elements to create effects and meaning through a bodily experience. In art cinema there is no prescriptive way that tactile structures work, or more generally, there is no standard way the cinematic language works, since there are as many art-languages as auteurs[66]. Every auteur can create new ways of feeling and thinking through their unique ways of using cinematic form and style.

The works of Robert Bresson organize new realities through the material elements of the films' form and style. The way Bresson uses the body in his films, through framing and editing, becomes a fundamental aspect of his style. The body, touch and the effect on the viewer become important sources of meaning. Yet, many critics neglect the materiality in his films and thus the meanings grounded in it.

Paul Schrader in *Transcendental Film Style: Ozu, Dreyer, Bresson* argues that, "[In] Bresson's films, as in Christian theology, transcendence is an escape from the prison of the body, an 'escape' which makes one simultaneously 'free from sin' and a 'prisoner of the lord'"[67]. A principal problem, as suggested by Stuart Liebman in his review of Schrader's book, is that "Schrader's notion of the transcendental style is

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[66] Platon Rivellis, Η φανερή και η κρυφή συγκίνηση του κινηματογράφου [The Undisguised Charm and the Hidden Emotion of Cinema], (Athens: Fotohoros, 2008), 22.

[67] Paul Schrader, *Transcendental Film Style: Ozu, Dreyer, Bresson* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972), 93 **quoted in** Brian Price, *Neither Master nor God* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), 15.

permeated by a series of conspicuously Western dualisms and oppositions"[68] such as the "physical-spiritual" [69]one. Even though Schrader seems to comment on form and style, he uses it as a basis for "extended metaphorical comparisons"[70] instead of explaining how elements of style and form "develop and what they mean in context"[71].

James Quandt in the Introduction of *Robert Bresson* explains that:

> "[a]gainst this transcendentalist approach, several critics cite Bresson as a clear and supreme example of a materialist filmmaker, one whose images are solid and ineluctable as facts, whose use of sound places us in a dense, *material* world, and whose editing is based on principles of the relations between things, not abstractions"[72]

Reading Bresson's films as transcendental does not take into consideration the material details and physicality in Bresson's style, but lends weight to associating ideologies with his films. Nevertheless, his engagement with the materiality of the film[73] not only exhibits that Bresson's work is not so much transcendental but also that its meanings are grounded in the corporeal.

René Prédal explains the materiality in Bresson's films through the use of objects, looks and hands. Prédal emphasizes the way these elements work in his films "as links

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[68] Stuart Liebman, "Books," *Film Comment* 9, no. 6 (1973): 56.

[69] Stuart Liebman, 56.

[70] Stuart Liebman, 57.

[71] Stuart Liebman, 57.

[72] James Quandt, *Robert Bresson* (Toronto: TIFF Cinematheque, 1998), 10.

[73] Martine Beugnet, "Cinema and Sensation: Contemporary French Film and Cinematic Corporeality," 175.

for the web of relationships they command: objects are immobile, hands are mobile, and looks indicate movement"[74]. In *A Man Escaped* and in *Pickpocket* "hands […] furnish the link"[75]. Bresson, re-explores the relationships of hands to the world in *Pickpocket,* three years after *A Man Escape.* Prédal quotes Bresson, "With theft, I entered … BACKWARDS into the rule of morality"[76] and emphasizes the physical notion in his idea of entering backwards into an ideological notion (morality)[77]. Adams Sitney, suggests that the physicality found in Bresson's films comes from Bresson's emptying "the projection of intention, conflict, and other signs of interiority that would require interpretation"[78]. In "Framing the Hand", Prédal emphasizes the Bressonian meanings, like the ambiguous sexuality in *Pickpocket* and *A Gentle Woman*, which source from accentually recorded physical actions, such as exchanging objects with money[79].

Quandt summarizes the basic elements of Bresson's style in *Robert Bresson.* He describes Bresson's images as "starkly composed, flattened, […] [stressing] frontality"[80]. Embodiment in Bresson's films rises from "charged images of gestures and glances, of

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[74] René Prédal, "Robert Bresson: L'Aventure intérieure" in *Robert Bresson*, ed. James Quandt (Toronto: TIFF Cinematheque, 1998), *99.*

[75] René Prédal, "Robert Bresson: L'Aventure intérieure", 100.

[76] René Prédal, "Robert Bresson: L'Aventure intérieure", 100.

[77] René Prédal, "Robert Bresson: L'Aventure intérieure", 100.

[78] Adams P. Sitney, "Cinematography vs. the Cinema: Bresson's Figures" in *Robert Bresson*, ed. James Quandt (Toronto: TIFF Cinematheque, 1998), 151.

[79] P. Adams Sitney, *Cinematography vs. the Cinema: Bresson's Figures*, 151.

[80] James Quandt, *Robert Bresson*, 3.

isolated objects and empty spaces, of parts of the body (hands and feet especially) and the oft-remarked doors"[81]. The fixation on the bodies and objects connect the materiality with the filmmaker's unique style. Furthermore, Bresson often replaces or supplements images with sound[82] and Quandt explains that Bresson's aesthetic is connected to sensory intuition[83]. Finally, Bresson uses "models", as he calls them, rather than actors, who are usually "non-professional actors trained in neutral line readings, automatic gestures, and emotional inexpressiveness"[84]. By removing the performative aspects of actors, Bresson's choice exhibits a certain reduction of characters to their essence. Thus, Bresson exhibits the thin line between the abstraction of essence and the materiality of his characters, which is the main element that they are composed of.

The filmmaker Kogonada has made a visual analysis named "Hands of Bresson" that edits together many of the director's hand close-ups. Still, even though many writers or artists remark the use of bodies and the importance of touch in Bresson's style as a way to understand his films, very few, Laura McMahon being an example, focus on studying touch and its meanings.

Exploring Bresson's uses of the interaction of bodies with the world becomes one of the most fundamental sources for understanding his films. While Bresson's films

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[81] James Quandt, *Robert Bresson*, 4.

[82] James Quandt, *Robert Bresson*, 4.

[83] James Quandt, *Robert Bresson*, 4.

[84] James Quandt, *Robert Bresson*, 5.

depict the body as if it has nothing to express[85], its relationship to other objects and to the world becomes part of the director's art language and, thus, is of special importance to the process of creating meaning. Fragmentation of the body through close-ups comes in contrast with the body as a whole in the wider shots, suggesting different kinds of dichotomies. The ways the body relates to the rest of the physical world reveal the character's state of mind. Bresson uses fragmentation constantly, especially in *A Man Escaped* and *Pickpocket*. Brian Price quotes Steven Shaviro, in *The Cinematic Body*, who discusses how the bodies on screen work together with the viewers' bodies through the particular fragmentation[86]:

> "The human body is never an organic whole in Bresson's films, but rather a repertory of disconnected, autonomic functions. And this fragmented body does not exist in a pregiven milieu; cinematic space and time are themselves articulated as extensions or constraints of bodily rest and motion. The relative paucity of establishing shots forces us to enter into the spaces of the films, to explore them only as characters do by physically traversing them, in accordance with the rhythms of Bresson's editing." [87]

The viewers experience the world, the spaces and the objects, on screen in a way that allows them to often share the characters' subjectivities. As Price states, the viewer is asked to imitate the characters' actions on screen[88] and thus share the characters' subjectivities in a distinctive way.

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[85] Brian Price, *Neither Master nor God* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), 5.

[86] Brian Price, *Neither Master nor God*, 22.

[87] Steven Shaviro, *The Cinematic Body* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 249 **quoted in** Brian Price, *Neither Master nor God* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), 22.

[88] Brian Price, *Neither Master nor God*, 21.

The following pages explore the experiential and pragmatic relationships encountered in Bresson's films through the analysis of the role of touch and the body. Moreover, the relationships between characters and objects, as well as between the viewer and the film are examined, by looking at specific scenes of the films and at juxtapositions created throughout larger units of the films. The chapters follow the chronological order the films were directed, to review a possible evolvement in Bresson's filmmaking through the changes that appear from film to film, regarding the ways the director uses haptic elements and bodies. Chapter One ("*A Man Escaped:* Hands Carving the Way to Freedom") reviews the body as a device, and its connection to an experiential view of life that rises as a thematic thread in *A Man Escaped,* through the touch presented on-screen and through the bodily effects on the viewer. It tracks the ways Bresson uses an attentive sensory experience to compare an experiential view of life to a less sensorially attentive one; such an experiential view leads the main character towards his freedom.

Chapter Two ("*Pickpocket:* The World Upside Down) explores *Pickpocket,* the reversed world of *A Man Escaped,* where the distortion in the experiential interaction of the main character leads him behind bars instead of freedom. Even if the main character is attentive to the sensory input of his setting, his haptic interaction with the world becomes problematic.

Finally, Chapter Three ("Bodily Inconsistencies in *A Gentle Woman*") studies, the physical reality that Bresson creates in *A Gentle Woman.* The reality of the film becomes even more complex as physical elements from *A Man Escaped* and *Pickpocket* reappear and are re-explored, in a marriage of a man and a woman. Bresson explores materialism

through physicality and juxtaposes the man's unawareness of his surroundings with the woman's acute sensory perception.

CHAPTER ONE

A Man Escaped: Hands Carving the Way to Freedom

In *Phenomenology of Perception*, Maurice Merleau-Ponty suggests that we become "conscious of the world through the medium of [our] body"[89]. This immediate linkage between the materiality of our being and perception is central to the first section of this thesis. In *A Man Escaped* (1956), Robert Bresson uses the body as the medium through which the characters access the world. Thus, the way Bresson challenges conventional narrative structures by contrasting different ways the body interacts with the elements that surround it is significant to our reading of the film.

Bresson's fourth feature film, *A Man Escaped*, follows Fontaine's restless planning to escape from the prison he is put in by the Nazis for being a member of the French Resistance. Progressively, the act of touching becomes an important part of the film's imagery creating contrasts between Fontaine – who demonstrates an excessive use of his hands – and other characters who disregard haptic elements and sensory experiences. Through the observation of such antithetical relationships, we can derive some of the meanings the director creates. According to Bresson, "cinema must express itself not with images, but with relationship between images"[90]. Touch and haptic interaction acquire relative meaning through contrast. Bresson creates contrasts between

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[89] Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception* (London: Routledge: 1962), 94–95.

[90] Robert Bresson, ed. Mylène Bresson, trans. Anna Moschovakis, *Bresson on Bresson: Interviews, 1943–1983* (New York: The New York Review of Books: 2016), 48.

the ways different characters engage with the world: physically, experientially, theoretically, mechanically. He differentiates Fontaine's use of touch from secondary characters, by comparing his experiential mode to other modes. At the same time, formal elements such as camera movement, framing and sound design, demonstrate the power of Fontaine's haptic experience, while juxtaposing it to different ways of perceiving life. Thus, the film's tactile forms of Fontaine's actions reach the viewer through textures and sounds, while Bresson explores how the sense of touch develops between on-screen bodies as well as between the viewer and the screen[91]. However, the viewer does not experience so much the indexical part of cinema[92], but rather the film "[calls] upon the viewer's sense of touch"[93]. Still, interaction is not limited to touch through contact but extends to touch, as extensively considered by Sobchack, Barker, Marks and McMahon, through the contactless bodily effects.

In *A Man Escaped*, contact becomes the starting point of Fontaine's interaction with the world. Barker notes, "The skin is a meeting place for exchange and traversal because it connects the inside with the outside, the self with the other"[94]. Bergson stresses the significance of this limit as "[it] is the only portion of space which is both perceived and felt"[95]. The epidermis lies in the dichotomy that Bresson creates between one's body

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[91] Laura McMahon, *Cinema and Contact,* 2.

[92] Laura McMahon, *Cinema and contact*, 9.

[93] Laura McMahon, *Cinema and contact*, 9.

[94] Jennifer Barker, *The Tactile Eye,* 27.

[95] Henri Bergson, *Matter and Memory* (New York: Cosimo Classics, 2007), 57.

and the world; yet the film explores how our bodily awareness and perception through the surface of the body reveal Fontaine's mind. The body does not just include the character's flesh but also his perspectives and the identity At the same time, through Fontaine we become aware that the world does not only comprise space but also settings and the situations. In this context, the following pages will be exploring the opening scene of *A Man Escaped* and then extend to larger parts of the film, to examine the way the body and the ability to touch become the main devices of perception.

Gaze, Touch and Mechanical Contact

The importance of the body as a device of perception becomes obvious from the very beginning of *A Man Escaped*. In the opening shot of *A Man Escaped* Fontaine is found sitting in the backseat of a car. The camera focuses on his hands; His palms are slowly directed upwards then downwards. His left hand slips – with the little finger pointing up towards the car's door handle – puts pressure downward and unlocks the door. Fontaine then brings his hand closer to his body. The camera follows his movement and moves slightly upward revealing his face as well as the face of prisoner sitting next to him. Fontaine's gaze is directed towards him, while the prisoner's gaze is directed towards the door handle. Afterwards, both of their gazes turn to the front. The prisoner's look lowers and the camera follows showing his hand handcuffed onto another man's hand sitting on his right (this calls our attention to the fact that Fontaine's hands are not handcuffed). The camera then returns to Fontaine who gazes at the front.

Initially, Bresson establishes a contrast between Fontaine and the prisoner on his

right. The valuable information derived from this contrast is that one character is handcuffed whereas the other is not. But the question that rises is: how does the physical restraint affect the prisoner's mind compared to Fontaine's? Bresson gradually reveals the two different types of consciousness by juxtaposing movement to stillness, and silence to sound. The camera lingers on Fontaine; it seems sensitive towards his movements as it reveals the kind of touch the man exercises. At the same time, the undisrupted flow of the camera movement reflects the qualities of Fontaine's movement. For instance, his finger's alignment with the door demonstrates a geometric precision and the physical character of his strategy to escape. Still, the geometric aspects in the film do not just express the kind of touch Fontaine exercises, but also the strange relationship he and other characters develop with the world.

As early as the opening scene, Bresson situates the dichotomy between the body and the world. When Fontaine stops having physical contact with the world by removing his hand from the door handle, he pulls his hand back, parallel to the car's door, all the way back to his body, and rests it on his leg. The strangeness of this movement reveals how conscious Fontaine is of the limit between his body and the outside world. His uninterrupted movement exhibits a delicate unrestricted quality in his overall gesture; once he turns his head to the left, he demonstrates a certain stiff and rigid attribute due to the narrowness of the frame that makes his body seem tied down to his seat. As a result, it appears that his hand has a different kind of freedom compared to the rest of his body.

Furthermore, Bresson introduces different kinds of consciousness as he juxtaposes Fontaine's behavior with the prisoner's behavior, who is sitting in the middle of the

backseat and remains almost entirely immobile. The tight frame of the camera and the small natural framing of the car's back window, make the two bodies appear stiff and confined. Yet, this resemblance between the two characters, makes Fontaine's movement stand out and the differences between the two characters even sharper. For the prisoner, any movement comes solely through his gaze. His look is directed to the hand which is handcuffed to the man on his right. His other hand is never revealed and, as a result, the "free hand" does not strike the character or the viewer as an important part of the action at that moment. His second gaze is directed towards the door handle that Fontaine's hand touches instead of looking at the handle that Fontaine only comes in contact with. He looks at the prisoner, who is looking at the handle but never at Fontaine, creating an imaginary chiasm between their gazes. The prisoner's perception of the situation seems to be limited to his gaze, as he never uses his free-hand or any other body part. On the contrary, Fontaine chooses a tangible experiential approach and he uses sound more than sight to process his surroundings and plan his escape. Namely, he becomes aware of his environment through his hand and gradually through his body. The chiasm that Fontaine chooses to create every time that the prisoner looks at the handle also reveals a different aspect to Fontaine's sight. It is not a way of perceiving, but rather a way of communicating.

The sequence continues with a cut to the front window of the car showing the blurry backs of the men sitting in the front. It cuts back to Fontaine; his look is directed downwards and the upwards. Another cut to the front window follows and then another cut takes us back to Fontaine's gaze. His hand approaches the door. The film cuts back to

his gaze. The driver's hand changes gears accompanied by the corresponding mechanical sound. We see the front window again and the car accelerates, while a cut back to Fontaine shows his hand hesitating to come in contact with the handle. Fontaine's gaze crosses with the prisoner's as he looks at him while the prisoner looks at the handle. Each character's gaze turns to the front. The driver's hand changes gears. Fontaine keeps looking at the front. His hand approaches the handle. He hesitates and then looks down. The driver's hand changes gears again; his look is pierced to the front. A cut back to the front window shows a train passing by, making a loud noise. The camera, then, returns to Fontaine who suddenly opens the door, takes advantage of the acoustic distraction the train provides, and jumps out of the car.

In this part of the sequence, the communicative aspect of Fontaine's sight becomes clearer. His gaze is not used to merely "process", but to communicate a different kind of consciousness in order to hide the one he exercises with his hand. The film's continuity breaks through cuts in the editing, revealing how Fontaine's experience gradually becomes multidimensional. The driver's hand that Fontaine keeps track of via sight and sound, adds an additional layer to the sequence; Fontaine becomes aware of the speed of the car, the exterior of the car and the driver's contact with the gear stick through sound. In the earlier part of the sequence, Fontaine is only conscious of the prisoner's gaze. The direction of each gaze can be pointed out and counted because each look is directed at specific positions for enough time; in other words, they are neither continuous nor pointing fast to different directions. Once Fontaine begins tracking the driver's movement, the editing changes and embeds additional layers that become less

countable and more complex. The sudden break in continuity through editing shows that what complicates Fontaine's reality is what becomes of special importance to his touch and thus his attempted escape. The driver's hand to the gear stick is a haptic event that directly affects Fontaine's hand movement and touch, and becomes the central element of his escape.

The juxtaposition between the driver's and Fontaine's use of touch also reveals another aspect of Fontaine's experience: his reciprocation to contact. His experiential perception encompasses physical contact and the response to physical contact (of the driver's hand). Throughout the scene Fontaine's hand movement does not produce any sounds. All the sounds come from the humming of the car and the driver's hand as he changes gears. The sound of the changing gears becomes Fontaine's main source for keeping track of the movement of the driver's hand and by extension the car's movement. The sound becomes tactile as it reveals the driver's tangible movement. Thus, Fontaine's perception becomes audible and haptic as he processes the driver's touch. At the same time, he responds bodily through his movement, pulling back and forth from the door handle as the driver's hand comes in contact with the gear stick and withdraws from it. Fontaine's gaze is fixed and it exemplifies the variability and intensity of the rest of his senses emphasizing that the important elements for him are connected with the materiality of the world, such as the sound coming from actual contact between a hand and an object rather than a gaze. Still, the driver's touch differs from Fontaine's: his hand movement is mechanical, like an extension of the car. This mechanical interaction develops even further as the film moves forward through the ways the guards interact

with their surroundings inside the prison.

On a secondary level, the setting allows Fontaine to have a synesthetic experience as he becomes aware of the driver's type of touch through sound, and at the same time, the viewer becomes aware of the haptic interaction through sight and hearing. It also makes the viewer to reciprocate to the contact presented on-screen. For example, the sound of the changing gears is magnified against the silence of the other characters. The close-ups focus on the source of the sound: the driver's hand on the gear stick. It seems that the insistence on the small gestures puts the viewer to a microcosm of physical detail. The viewers experience touch, not through contact with their bodies but in the same way Fontaine experiences touch by hearing the driver's hand changing gear; both character and viewer, are forced to be attentive to the tactility in the action coming from the sounds. For example, the film pulls the viewer in a haptic experience during the driver's contact with the gear stick and withdraws the viewer from it during the shots that record the character's gazes.

Beyond calling upon the viewer's sense of touch[96] through haptic elements which are the result of sounds and visuals, the focus on gestures and the viewer perceives them, engages Fontaine and the viewer in a similar way with the setting of the film. "The sense of the gestures is not given, but understood, that is, seized by an act on the spectator's part. The whole difficulty is to conceive this act clearly without confusing it with a cognitive operation"[97]; drawing from Merleau-Ponty's remark, the viewer and the

[96] Laura McMahon, *Cinema and Contact,* 9.

[97] Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception,* trans. Colin Smith

character draw an understanding of the film's setting as a result of a physical and sensory experience rather than as a result of a process of thought. Perception becomes dialectical[98] rather than dialogical through Fontaine's focus on gestures and the haptic qualities associated to them. Moreover, the spectator's perception of gestures and haptics reveal the different types of relationships that may emerge from the interaction with the world through the senses.

In conclusion, the number of contrasts presented in the opening sequence reveal three different types of consciousness. First, the contrast between Fontaine and the prisoner represents a consciousness without contact since the latter excludes bodily perception; whether the prisoner is thinking about what he sees or not, his knowledge never becomes experiential in the way Fontaine's does. Secondly, even though Fontaine and the driver both interact with the world haptically, their perceptions are different, as the driver's mechanical movements prevent Fontaine from processing his experience. A third kind of contrast is presented when Fontaine reacts based on the driver's physical contact with the world. Fontaine synchronizes his contact and withdrawal from the physical setting, through his own movement and touch, exhibiting a consciousness that emerges from responding to a concrete experience (the driver's contact) in a heuristic way. As a result, Bresson seems to distinguish Fontaine's experiential perception from the driver and the prisoner. Bresson reveals the physiological contact while materializes

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(London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1962), 185 **quoted in** Vivian Sobchack, *The Address of the Eye*, 274.

[98] Vivian Sobchack, *The Address of the Eye*, 274.

Fontaine's awareness, as two parts that define an attentive multisensory experience. On the contrary, the awareness is missing from the driver's multisensory experience while the physiological contact is missing from the prisoner's experience. The experience of the world begins through an attentive process of contact. Fontaine's interaction with the world becomes synesthetic as he reframes the uses of different senses and consciously connects them with each other; for example, he uses sound to understand contact, while he also uses his sight to create an illusion of immobility.

Many scenes in the film present contrasts and relational methods in them. Beyond the microscopic analysis of the film, which we can perform in separate scenes to examine contrasts and relations, we can also extend the examination of juxtaposing elements throughout the film as a whole. Comparisons and contrasts exist between different characters and scenes, and not solely within distinct scenes, which reveal and express different types of experiences relative to Fontaine's. Subsequently, we will examine how Bresson insists on creating contrasts between the film's characters and the different ways they interact with the world: physically, mentally or somewhere in between the spectrum of hands-on experience and inactive theoretical impressions.

The Embodied Contrast: Intellectual and Experiential Views

The persistence on the visuals of the processes Fontaine undertakes in prison complement the narrative, exhibiting his experience of the world. For example, when Fontaine is taken to the cell upstairs, he immediately begins to interact with the setting. He observes the door, notices and feels its texture with his hands; he notices that it is not

made of oak, instead it is made by a softer kind of wood, which seems easier to open. He transforms his spoon into a sharp tool by rubbing it on the floor. He repeatedly carves the door until a small part opens up. A few minutes later he fills the open parts of the door with wet paper to make it seem unbroken and in its natural color. Later in the film, when the door frame breaks, he puts the pieces back together and draws the cracks with a pencil to camouflage the gaps. Fontaine interacts with his surrounding by understanding them as textures, materials, space and sounds. In a way, through Fontaine's empirical and physical interaction, "things are presented in their essence, in which the energy behind an appearance is released and the inner dynamic of an object or event revealed"[99]. The door is not just a door, it's a softer wood, not oak, it is something that – because of its essence – can be manipulated and changed. Through the use of close-ups and the insistence on Fontaine's actions for a long time, the viewer is drawn to these details. The sounds and textures of the monotonous prison scenery provide a sense of Fontaine's tactile experience.

For both Fontaine and the viewers, the shift from tactile experiences to intangible ones exhibits the changes in the quality of experience. One of the sharpest contrasts between the ways characters approach the world is found between Fontaine and the Pastor de Leyris. Through direct and indirect juxtapositions, Bresson reveals that each character's view of the world is antithetical to the other's. In their first encounter, the Pastor states his desire to have time to study the bible, and Fontaine responds "I do not

[99] Donald Skoller, ""Praxis" as a Cinematic Principle in Films by Robert Bresson," *Cinema Journal* vol. 9, no. 1 (1969): 22.

have a Bible, but I've got a pencil". In their second encounter, the Pastor shows the Bible in his pocket to Fontaine, and says "I'm in luck. A miracle! Everything has changed since yesterday". Fontaine is heard saying (in voiceover) "I'm in luck myself", as the camera zooms in and tilts towards a spoon by the side of a barred window. Thus, when he is contrasted to the Pastor, Fontaine's physical way of interacting with the world becomes even clearer. For the Pastor, the Bible has no concrete, practical application as an object; it is the source of intellectual and metaphorical presentations that he uses to interpret the world around him. On the other hand, Fontaine's spoon is concrete not just because the usual relation between a hand and a spoon is a functional one but because Fontaine does not limit the meaning of the object to its given function; by transforming the spoon to a type of blade, he is able to broaden the predetermined functions the label "spoon" dictates.

A Man Escaped also displays an equal number of indirect juxtapositions. For example, around the middle of the film, Fontaine assumes that Orsini, a fellow inmate, has been executed. Fontaine meets the Pastor at the prison's washroom and the Pastor asks "where is Orsini?" Fontaine directs his head upwards (to the sky) to imply Orsini is dead. Then the Pastor says "oh God, let him succeed" implying that for himself there is still a possibility for "success" with Orsini's body not being part of Orsini's identity. As a result, the body does not become an important way of interacting with the world for the Pastor. The Pastor uses metaphors to interpret his environment, disregarding the dichotomy between the body and the world by redefining a new doubling between the soul and anything physical. The Pastor's metaphorical view of the world becomes even

more evident in a note he gives to Fontaine with the words of Nicodemus. Fontaine reads it to Blanchet, his neighboring inmate, through the barred window:

> "How can a man be born when he is old? Asked Nicodemus "Surely he cannot enter a second time into his mother's womb to be born!" Jesus answered, "do not marvel that, I said to you, you must be born again. The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it goes"

Fontaine stops reading and asks Blanchet if he is listening. When he is about to continue, the sound of gun shots — possibly from Orsini's execution — interrupts him. Fontaine does not continue his reading. At this point, Bresson alternates between two different modalities: the abstract, intellectual view sourcing from the Pastor through Nicodemus words and the sensory, visceral and assaultive effect of the gun shot, which the viewer also experiences bodily. What reveals Fontaine's mind is that he cannot continue reading, and a dispassionate metaphor cannot make him neglect and replace the sensory input of the deadly setting.

The film itself endorses Fontaine's view by making this choice: the sensory input of reality interrupts the theoretical understanding of reality. There is a complex guiding moment that Bresson offers at this point through the visceral sound design: In addition to stopping Fontaine from reading it also guides the viewer to approach the film in a sensorial way. It is necessary to comprehend the literal meanings and have a sensory experience of the film in order to understand the characters' minds. If we neglect the visceral effect of the gun shot to us as viewers and to the character, we will miss the contrast that reveals Fontaine's mind and, subsequently, Bresson's world.

Yet, Fontaine's mind and identity are not utterly limited to his body and its

physical interactions with its surrounding setting; he is not an automaton. His conversations with Blanchet reveal his view behind his choice of staying in close contact with the physicality of the world. When Blanchet asks Fontaine "Why bother?", referring to the planning and execution of an escape from the prison, Fontaine replies "To fight. To fight the walls, to fight myself, to fight the door. You, too Mr. Blanchet, should fight and hope". What Fontaine expresses is not limited to a single concept, contrary to Blanchet who later limits his definition of freedom to suicide. Fontaine's freedom is a varying one in nature, it is the process itself: the walls, himself, the door. Possibly the meaning of Fontaine's words "to fight myself" cannot be pinned down. Still, by contrasting Fontaine's approach to Blanchet's, the words reveal aspects of the meaning of Fontaine's "fight" within oneself, namely, the fight against the static despair that Blanchet holds which in turn results in his own avoidance of a concrete experience.

We can use Wittgenstein's term of "aspect-blindness" to shed more light to the difference between the characters' relations with the world[100]. Noticing aspects of the world is closely related to the appreciation of emotional and aesthetic influences. Wittgenstein portrays the multidimensionality of human thought and the way we explore each side of it through changing aspects. His account can be extended to mathematics, the arts, human relationships, and other forms that we use to understand life, where different ways of structuring or understanding detail reveal new meanings and possibly blind others. For Wittgenstein, people who are blind to changing aspects lack something in

[100] This is not to imply that Bresson's world has Wittgensteinian concepts, rather "aspect-blindness" becomes one way to reveal the differences between characters.

their view[101]. The realization of the fluidity of aspect-perception is necessary to gain a more complete understanding. "Aspect-blindness" is similar to "the lack of a 'musical ear'"[102], or similar to not being able to recognize the style of "The Calling of St Matthew" painting and correspond it to Caravaggio. However, this sort of blindness may also occur beyond the visual and the aural, through aspects that generally prevent us from interpreting and understanding experience differently.

Wittgenstein also distinguishes between "seeing" and "seeing as" where seeing is part of perception while seeing something as something else is not part of perception[103]. "Seeing-refers to the representation or interpretation of what one sees[104]. In Wittgenstein's terms, the Pastor operates only at the "seeing as" level. He sees everything through an ideology relative to God that devalues concrete experience. In that way the Pastor is aspect-blinded in a deeper level: he does not only fail to perceive new aspects but he equates the process of "seeing" with "seeing as".

Blanchet's despair and immobility in the first half of the film works in a similar way; he is blind to the meaning of partial aspects of experience, like when he asks Fontaine for the reasons behind choosing to escape. Absoluteness seems as limiting as

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[101] Ludwig Wittgenstein, trans. Gertrude Elizabeth Margaret Anscombe and Peter Michael Stephan, eds. Joachim Schulte and Peter Hacker *Investigations* (Toledo: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), sec 261.

[102] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, sec 260.

[103] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, sec 137.

[104] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, sec 139.

seeing "the cross-pieces of a window as a swastika"[105]. Blanchet's view is not ideological as the Pastor's. What limits Blanchet lies in his invariability at that moment; "For me real courage would be to kill me", Blanchet says. Any meaning coming from change and process will come in opposition with the ultimate stasis that suicide carries. Blanchet does not deny the "usefulness" of concrete experience as the Pastor does, indeed, he says "I tried. I made a noose with my laces. The nail broke" describing a physical process. It is the fixed end-goal that makes him aspect-blind to the meaning of a continuous and varying process. Specifically, the meaning of concrete experience exists only to reach the end-goal for him, whereas for Fontaine, each detail of the process is part of his fight for freedom in the same way as when he escapes from the final prison wall, making his definition of freedom to own inherently an element of constant flux. William James comments on Hibbert, "[t]he immediate experience of life solves the problems which so baffle our conceptual intelligence"[106]. The categorical aspect, that Blanchet embraces, by definition makes life a finite experience with a known end-goal and therefore the meaning of every experience is relative to the goal rather than an independent one. Blanchet's relation to the world would not be more meaningful for him if he were outside the prison and therefore if he engaged with his surroundings through a process like Fontaine's, Blanchet's process would still be meaningless on its own.

Bresson further complicates Blanchet's view, as the film develops, because even

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[105] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, sec 420.

[106] William James, *Pluralistic Universe: Hibbert Lectures at Manchester College on the Present Situation in Philosophy* (Auckland, NZL: Floating Press, 2012), 136.

if his words during this specific discussion with Fontaine seem absolute, his actions towards the end of the film exhibit his change. Blanchet gradually begins to review the details of Fontaine's escape plan and ultimately gives his blanket to Fontaine so he can turn it into a rope. In their last conversation, Blanchet says "Goodbye, my friend". Although the idea of a friend, in their initial conversation, is not enough to make him participate in Fontaine's escape in any way, his experience of friendship is.

Fontaine's Sensory Approach to the Escape

A day before the escape finally takes place, a 16-year old boy, Jost, becomes Fontaine's cellmate. Although Fontaine is initially skeptical about Jost, he decides to take him with him. In the final scene in which Fontaine and Jost escape, many elements of the film reappear either unchanged or redefined, abridging the whole film to the last scene. Like Fontaine, the viewer is gradually trained to become attentive to the sensory pressure of the setting, paying attention to the sounds from Fontaine's surrounding. Until this point, the film has established certain sound motifs that allow both Fontaine and the viewer to expand perception beyond their limited vision; a skill that will prove useful during the final scene which is filmed with few sources of light. In "*Functions of Film Sound:* A Man Escaped" in *Film Art: An Introduction*, Bordwell notes that in addition to the darkness "[t]here are no establishing shots to give us a sense of the space of the roofs and walls that Fontaine and Jost must scale"[107] and explains that the effect on the viewer

[107] David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson, "*Functions of Film Sound:* A Man Escaped" in *Film Art: An Introduction* ed. McGraw-Hill (United Kingdom: McGraw-

is the heightening of his attention to his hearing[108]. In the following pages he explores the way the viewer's focus on audible tactility and movement is also intensified. Bordwell notes that there is a distinct pitch for every object[109]. In addition to that, there are different types of sounds assigned to every character revealing their minds. Sounds coming from the Germans, through their voices or their interaction with objects, differ from Fontaine's. Some sounds that we have been accustomed to are very loud with an echo effect whereas others are soft throughout the film and return during the final scene[110] to create meaning.

Sounds begin to recur as soon as the escape scene begins. Once Jost and Fontaine are out of their cell by removing the wooden placards that Fontaine has carved, Fontaine climbs through the ceiling window and reaches the roof. As he pulls the ropes and the hooks he has made, the sound of the train recurs. In the opening sequence, the sound of the train also becomes a cover when Fontaine opens the car door in his attempt to escape. Thus, we are immediately aware that it functions again as a cover for the sounds that Fontaine and Jost produce as they climb to the roof. Jost climbs up and both characters begin crawling across the roof.

The heightening of Fontaine's bodily awareness follows and is shared with the viewer. As the scene proceeds, the sound of the train stops and the camera tilts down and

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Hill, 2004), 295.

[108] David Bordwell at al., "*Functions of Film Sound:* A Man Escaped", 295.

[109] David Bordwell at al., "*Functions of Film Sound:* A Man Escaped", 295.

[110] David Bordwell at al., "*Functions of Film Sound:* A Man Escaped", 295.

reveals the ground that is comprised of gravel. We can now hear the sound of the footsteps clearly and immediately gain an understanding of the ground's texture mostly through sounds as there is very little light. This is the moment that Fontaine also becomes aware of the texture and its sound. The frame consists of Fontaine's kneeling legs that become more hesitant as a result of the sudden silence. The effect of the silence is shared with the viewer. In addition to being attentive to the sound from the contact between the characters' feet and the gravel, "[i]n silence, one becomes (at)tuned to the pounding of the heart and other bodily rhythms"[111]. As Fontaine becomes more aware of his body, the viewer also becomes aware of Fontaine's body and shares an aspect of the character's perception in a bodily way.

Aspects of previous events also recur as a variation in the final scene. Fontaine says, "The gravel crunched under our feet, we had to stop". When Fontaine is carving his door he often covers the carving sound by coughing. This event is transformed and placed in a different setting. This time, the characters' footsteps function in a similar way to the carving, they are part of the escape process in need of a covering sound. Fontaine moves forward and the camera records his front leg on the ground and his hand feeling its texture as he does when he examines the door in his cell. He remains constantly in direct contact with the gravel to move forward re-stressing the importance of tactility in his bodily awareness and constantly exhibits the experiential side of his escape process.

The viewer again is very close to Fontaine's subjectivity. A sound of quick

[111] Brian Ott and Diane Keeling, "Cinema and Choric Connection: Lost in Translation as Sensual Experience," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 97, no. 4 (2011): 386.

footsteps interrupts the scene and the two characters stop moving forward. From previous patterns we understand that the footsteps are not assigned to a prisoner but possibly to a German guard and we also understand that the guard must also be walking on gravel. For both the viewer and Fontaine, the sounds and their tactility reveal the subject's contact with the ground and become the source of our perception. The juxtaposing sound reveals who the subject is without the need of a visual aid. A voice and a door slam endorse the assumption that it is a guard.

When the train sound recurs Fontaine and Jost begin to move faster. The break in sound motifs also becomes the source of meaning. The two characters reach the end of the terrace and a new creaking sound is heard, which plays neither Fontaine nor the viewer recognize. The sound becomes a threat being mechanical and as Fontaine says, coming up at "regular intervals" is linked to the guards' general bodily behavior exhibited through sounds attached to them. Fontaine reaches the edge of the terrace and sees the guard he was hearing earlier. We can note that this is another type of a minor breaking of the style that the scene develops, as characters mostly move in the dark. Light falls only on Fontaine's eyes; a fact that exhibits the riskiness attached to vision that requires a direct line of sight with a subject in opposition to the hearing field.

The bell strikes midnight embodying time in sound as well. Then, one o'clock and the guard changes shift with another guard who begins walking in the same pace, with the same heaviness, almost drifting his shoes on the ground, creating a contrast with Fontaine's light footsteps, thus intensifying the sound difference between the two. Michel comments (in voice over) "their movements were identical". This is the way the guards'

interaction with their environment reappears through a variation. The film establishes a sound motif that expresses the way the guards behave. Bresson brings back the essence found in the contact of guards with their setting, namely, their automatic and mechanical way of interacting. The driver in the beginning of the film makes a strong sound by changing gears and his contact with the gear shift is always automatic. In addition, we associate guards with metal sounds and harsh voices, for example, when the guard leads Fontaine to his new cell earlier in the film he makes a metallic noise with the handrail of the staircase and the metal keys he is holding. When the guard leaves Fontaine in his cell, we understand he is moving farther away as the sound of the keys and the handrail become less and less audible. The guards' type of movement is embodied through sounds, which allow Fontaine to predict the movement of the guard in the final scene. Therefore, beyond the formal role that motifs play, they also have an interior role within the film.

At times, Bresson seems to combine the variations of events with the use of motifs and motif interruption. The clock strikes two and Fontaine climbs down a rope and reaches the ground level. When the motif of bodily movements established by the guards breaks, when the guard lights up a cigarette and stops walking , challenges Fontaine. Eventually the guard begins walking again and the intensity of the sound of his footsteps reveals his position. The sound of a train plays once again and Fontaine kills him. We may note that Fontaine chooses to kill him with his bare hands rather than using the hooks he made as he says "it didn't seem as a sure weapon"; once more Fontaine's chooses to have direct contact with his surrounding, in this case the German guard.

As the scene proceeds the film reveals aspects of Jost's mind through his own interaction with the setting. Jost climbs down the rope after Fontaine signals him, however, he forgets the shoes. Jost does not use his own sensory perception to make choices, rather he is led by Fontaine. Still, as they climb up another wall that will lead them closer to the outer world, Fontaine admits that Jost's presence is necessary. Fontaine says "alone, I might have remained there" as Jost climbs over him and reaches the roof, exhibiting the importance of the matter of a body that, when "added" to his, allows him to realize his plan towards freedom. During this moment, Jost and Fontaine embody trust and cooperation.

The two characters cross the last terrace before reaching the prison's surrounding walls. The creaking sound gradually becomes louder seeming nearer and nearer. The camera takes Fontaine's view and a top shot reveals another guard passing by with a bicycle. The bike, its sound, the voice of the guard, the repetitive movement and its steady pace embody all the elements of the guards. The harshness of the metallic sounds produced by the guards, is attributed to his single guard who rides the bike. At the same time, the automated movement is further emphasized by the vehicle that alludes to and comprises the characteristics of the opening scene as well. As a result, this scene becomes another example of recurring yet slightly shifted elements that define the German guards.

In the final stage of their escape, Fontaine throws the rope across the outer wall so they can cross over on the rope and reach the top of the wall. He ties it, but hesitates to proceed. Both characters sit down and wait. This moment also alludes to Fontaine's hesitation to leave the prison when he has his plan ready. The bells strike four o'clock.

Like the gun shooting sound then, the bells now remind him that the more he delays his escape, the slimmer are his chances. So, Fontaine attends to the recurring bicycle sound and once it passes , he begins to cross over and reaches the wall. Jost follows. They climb down the prison walls and jump outside. They have escaped.

Overall, events associated to sound as well as sounds associated with characters recur or appear as a variation. It seems as the viewer relives a variation of the whole film in the last scene. Yet, this time the viewer has developed the sensory tools, like Fontaine, drawing on the established formal and stylistic elements of the film, and by putting them in practice. Bodily awareness is shared with Fontaine and the viewer, revealing Fontaine's subjectivity. Sound embodies subjects, behaviors and even time; if Fontaine had not taken that into consideration, his escape would have been impossible. Similarly, the viewer would disregard the meanings of the film.

To conclude, the final scene summarizes the different types of experiences that are derived based on the character's physical relation with the world. Bresson's addition of Jost character adds a new layer about the types of different views of the world. Jost as an adolescent boy seems that he is still developing his view and he is not consciously attached to any specific understanding, such as an intellectual or a strictly experiential one. Before Fontaine asks him to escape with him, Jost even oscillates between befriending the Nazi guards or not; this is further embodied in his clothing as he wears civilian pants and a German jacket[112]. Still, his mind does not seem to mimic the

[112] Peter Schofer, "Dissolution into Darkness: Bresson's "Un Condamné à Mort S'est échappé"," *SubStance* vol. 3, no. 9 (1974): 65.

mechanical interaction of the German, nor any other fixed view of reality. As a result, he is not aware of the importance of Fontaine's experiential approach but he trusts it instinctively. His reality is not as attentive as Fontaine's, still Fontaine would be unable to escape without him. Furthermore, Jost becomes the complementary of the two other characters that could escape with Fontaine, Orsini and Blanchet. Earlier in the film, Blanchet says to Fontaine that his body would not allow him to follow his plan, yet Jost, being younger is able to do so and it is his physical flexibility that also becomes what helps the two characters to climb the second wall. Orsini, on the other hand, decides not to follow Fontaine's plan and he cannot trust it contrary to Jost does. These are the reasons why Jost's body and mind complement the elements Orsini and Blanchet are missing, embodying companionship and at the same time stressing the importance of the material body. We see that in Bresson's eyes, Fontaine' experiential interaction with the world becomes what allows him to escape, yet Jost's help deriving from both his mind and his material body, is of equal. The synesthesia in the film has a very important role, as it identifies the viewer with Fontaine, and their subjectivities meet, since they are both sensitive to the sensory input the setting creates. In this way, Fontaine's view of the world becomes truer in the sense that we as viewers also experience it.

Bresson creates numerous juxtapositions to establish the different ways the characters perceive and engage with the world, through contrasting elements found in single scenes as well as through relations between characters throughout the whole film. Elements of style such as textures, sounds, framing and touch work adjacent with formal elements and embody Fontaine's highly sensorial perception and experience, while

immediately share it with the viewers by affecting their senses.

CHAPTER TWO

Pickpocket: The World Upside Down

Deconstruction of the Body

In *Carnal Thoughts,* Vivian Sobchack discusses the relations and reversibility among the world's "subjects and objects"[113] and refers to Merleau-Ponty's question "Where are we to put the limit between the body and the world, since the world is flesh?" In *Pickpocket* the answer to this question is rather complex. The film creates new ways of thinking about bodies and their limits. The skin is not always the limit of the body and the beginning of the world. In *A Man Escaped,* the fragmentation of the body through the close-ups, and the different kinds of contact becomes indicative of Bresson's style, so as in *Pickpocket*. Yet, in *Pickpocket*, Bresson explores a different type of the body's dual role that complicates further the inner and the outer parts of oneself and, therefore, one's sense of identity.

Usually, critics assign Bresson's distinctive style to a kind of cinematic "asceticism" resulting from "[t]he spare sets, minimal dialogue, and rare […] use of non-diegetic music"[114], which are vital in understanding the director's world. Yet, McMahon discusses an additional element of Bresson's style that is unique: the use of bodies. In her

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[113] Vivian Sobchack, *Carnal thoughts: Embodiment and Moving Image Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press: 2004), 302.

[114] Ceilidh Orr, "Stealing the Scene: Crime as Confession in Robert Bresson's Pickpocket," in *Border Crossing: Russian Literature into Film,* ed. Burry Alexander and White Frederick (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016), 86.

chapter "A Cinematography of Contact", McMahon explores the treatment of the body in *Pickpocket* which becomes another way Bresson breaks the form of conventional filmmaking. McMahon writes "[t]he body […] is no longer the unitary, coherent and continuous body of classical cinema but a fragmentary and interruptive assemblage of sites and surfaces of contact"[115]. This kind of fragmentation visualizes the disconnection within the body. McMahon's reference to the "surfaces of contact"[116] refers to the importance of touch in Bresson's definition of the body. Contact becomes a collage of different elements, whether it is a space or a hand in contact with an object, which redefine the protagonist's body and add to the complexity of his identity.

David Bordwell's chapter "Parametric Narration" in *Narration in the Fiction Film,* provides a technical description of Bresson's narration in *Pickpocket.* Bordwell notes how a scene often starts: "with a character's entering a space which is defined as contiguous to that occupied by another character; the relation of the characters is defined through glances and/or portions of a body intruding into the shot"[117]. The contiguity that Bordwell describes among characters and spaces, relates to the complexity of identity in the film and the reversibility of subjects and objects. The intrusions reveal the doubleness in the characters' relationships, for example the contrast between an idle expression and the sensual movement of the hand. The relation characters have with themselves is also

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[115] Laura McMahon, *Cinema and Contact,* 38.

[116] Laura McMahon, *Cinema and Contact*, 38.

[117] David Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985), 293.

defined through the images of their own body parts interrupting a shot, like the close-up of a hand interrupting a medium shot of the upper body of a character. Clothes play an important role as well in terms of defining the limit of the body in the film and communicating meaning by affecting our bodily perception. A person might not feel that a thief is stealing from his pocket, however, touching one's clothes while they are unware of it, can be as intrusive as touching one's body. Bordwell's observation becomes a technical exploration of McMahon's argument of the non-unitary body. The intrusion of body parts and glances into the shots carries a different weight, sometimes giving the impression that the body parts have their own independent identity. Finally, Bordwell's technical remark regarding the relation of characters and body parts suggests one of the ways Bresson creates meaning through his artistic choices. Namely, such relativity invites the viewer to observe comparisons and contrasts between characters, shots and scenes to explore Bresson's imaginative meanings, since both subjects and objects are defined in relation to one another.

In *Bresson on Bresson: Interviews, 1943–1983*, the director comments on *Pickpocket* with an aphorism: "Hands are like people. They have their own intelligence, their own will"[118] which becomes another way to express an artistic disconnect in his view of the body. A duality between hands and the rest of the body is embodied in *Pickpocket* to create imaginative meanings about the character's relationship with the world. We may note that one of his aphorisms in *Notes on the Cinematograph* was the

[118] Robert Bresson, ed. Mylène Bresson, trans. Anna Moschovakis, *Bresson on Bresson: Interviews, 1943–1983* (New York: The New York Review of Books: 2016), 83.

"unusual approaches to bodies"[119] that *Pickpocket* becomes an example of.

In the following pages I am comparing the main characters of *Pickpocket* and *A Man Escaped,* with an emphasis on the ways they interact with the world and their bodies. I proceed with the analysis of *Pickpocket* through comparing and contrasting the pickpocket's contact with different objects and subjects within single scenes and throughout the film. My purpose is to examine the way Bresson fragments the body in this film, in order to understand the importance of touch and its ability to give form to otherwise abstract events, features and ideas.

The World Inverted: A Comparison Between Michel and Fontaine

Robert Bresson's *Pickpocket* was released three years after *A Man Escaped* and demonstrates the evolution in Bresson's style through a furthering of his exploration of touch. This time Bresson inverts the world of *A Man Escaped.* The protagonist, Michel, is led behind bars, unlike Fontaine, whose way of contact with the world liberates him in the end. Through a comparison of the two films we can see that in *Pickpocket,* Michel's touch –unlike Fontaine's– has a problematic aspect.

As the film's title reveals, *Pickpocket,* is a film about a thief, Michel, who steals from bags and pockets. As soon as the film begins, Michel states that he made the decision to start stealing a few days earlier. Just before he takes money from a woman's

[119] Robert Bresson, *Notes on the Cinematographer* (Los Angeles: Green Integer København, 1997), 25 **quoted in** Laura McMahon, *Cinema and Contact: The withdrawal of Touch in Nancy, Bresson, Duras and Denis* (London: Legenda: 2012), 38.

bag for the first time, he says “I should have left”. Thus, right from the start Michel’s regretful reflection opposes his actions of theft, revealing a doubleness in his consciousness. Soon, Michel proceeds with his first theft. He practices the craft of pickpocketing and continues to steal from people’s bags and coat pockets. At the same time, Michel’s sick mother gradually gets worse. Jeanne, a young woman who lives in the same building, takes care of her. At occasions Jeanne urges Michel to visit his mother rather than neglecting her. On the other hand, his friend Jacques tries to discourage him from stealing. Meanwhile, a police inspector keeps Michel under careful observation. Michel leaves Paris and returns after two years; in his first attempt to steal, the inspector arrests him.

In *Pickpocket’s* opening scene, Michel is in a horserace among a crowd at Longchamps in Paris. He is soon framed in a medium shot, standing between a woman and a man with binoculars. They are both facing towards the camera as they are watching the race. The camera lingers on Michel’s upper body that is between the upper body parts of the woman and the man. Then the film cuts to the woman’s bag; Michel’s hand slowly reaches the bag’s clasp, opens it, and withdraws his hand. As he withdraws his hand it seems as if he caresses the bag. The film cuts back to the medium shot: Michel’s expression is empty creating a juxtaposition with the nearly sensual movement of his hand in the close-up. Back to a close-up, his hand reaches from below and pushes the upper part of the bag open. The film cuts back to Michel’s face with an instantaneous expression of relief but his expression immediately becomes vacant with his look fixed to the front. Back to the close-up of the bag, Michel’s hand reaches in. The medium shot

follows again, accompanied by the sound of galloping horses. Another brief cut to the close-up of the bag shows his hand taking the money and putting it in his pocket. Even in this short shot, Michel's hand does not just enter into the bag and into his pocket, but slithers over the different textures of the bag and his coat.

In the opening sequence, the similarities between *Pickpocket* and *A Man Escaped* reveal the resemblance between Michel and Fontaine, since both characters interact in a physical way with the world. However, there is a thin line that differentiates them from each other, which emerges from the type of touch each one exercises and which is an extension of their philosophical views of life. Bresson never shows the impact that theft has on Michel's targets. Instead, he presents the problematic aspect of his actions through style, form and physical interaction. As a result, the way each character interacts with the world defines the one (Michel) as controversial and problematic, and the other (Fontaine) as determined and skillful.

As in *A Man Escaped, Pickpocket* begins by reimagining the body through editing, framing and movement. *Pickpocket* cuts between close-ups of Michel's hand and medium shots of his upper body. His hand moves in a nearly sensual way while his body seems immobile and his look unexpressive. The split seems to exhibit two different identities between his hand and the rest of the body. In *A Man Escaped* the body is not as sharply split through the editing; still, the contrast between the immobility of the body and the movement of the hand offers a distinct identity to the hand. Actually, Fontaine consciously assigns an identity to his hand in his effort to escape.

The degree of contrast between Michel's and Fontaine's hands and bodies is

what reveals each character's mind. If we were to assume another identity for each character's hands, Fontaine's hand and body identities seem closer, namely, more consistent with each other, whereas Michel's hand and body express a gap, embodying the doubleness in his consciousness. Furthermore, the two characters use their sense of sight not so much to see, but rather to hide the physical activity of their hands. Namely, they use their sight to direct the attention away from their hands, by looking at the front with an empty expression. Yet, Michel's gaze differs at single moments since his facial expression can become expressive for a few seconds when he opens the bag. The spontaneity in his act, the sensualism[120] that is briefly expressed in his gaze, shows a loss of control.

Then again, the two characters also exhibit similarities in their philosophical views of life and the way they choose to connect with the world through physical interaction. Physical contact becomes a way for Fontaine to fight and hope, it is not just an intermediate step for an ultimate goal but a more general mindset: "To fight. To fight the walls, to fight myself, to fight the door". Michel's philosophy works in an analogous way on the surface. Michel is not stealing only to make his living, just like Fontaine who is not planning his escape only to be free. Towards the end of the film we see that Fontaine is not sure if he is going to succeed or not. Correspondingly, Michel has the option to get a job; Jacques keeps urging him to do so and during the beginning of the film he gives him some helpful addresses that the latter never uses. Still, pickpocketing is not just an easy way out for Michel. On the contrary, the film constantly reminds us of

[120] McMahon describes it "ecstatic" in Laura McMahon, *Cinema and Contact, 4.*

the level of skillfulness he needs to achieve in order to succeed. Michel keeps practicing with the perspiration of a magician practicing a magic trick[121]. In an early discussion with the inspector, Michel says "Can we not admit that certain skilled men, gifted with intelligence, talent or even genius, and thus indispensable to society, rather than stagnate, should be free to disobey laws in certain cases? Society could only gain from it". Michel's words reflect an attempt to justify himself[122] and at the same time exhibit his difficulty to adapt socially. Pickpocketing becomes a way of revolt against something unsaid, rather than an action that strives for an end-goal, like becoming wealthy by stealing. Michel never wears the watches he steals nor sells them, still at one point he says "the watch was beautiful", which demonstrates that what drives him to steal is not the monetary value of the object but a certain kind of materialism. Thus, we can see how Michel's consciousness differs from Fontaine's. Michel's theory does not justify his actions and at the same time his theory is not what drives him. On the contrary, Fontaine's experiential awareness as his way to freedom is something that he believes and acts according to.

However, Michel's reasons to steal are not solely bound to logic, which makes his stance more complex and, as a result, different from Fontaine's. When Jeanne asks

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[121] An interesting note that Brian Price makes in his book, connecting the magician with the pickpocket, is that "Kassagi went on to a new career as a magician, appearing regularly on French variety shows. But as Bresson's film attests too well, even the most public encounters can pass by undetected in dominant culture. No one, after all, has even bothered to wonder how Bresson might have known Kassagi in the first place" in Brian Price, *Neither God nor Master.* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 2011), 39.

[122] Ceilidh Orr, "Stealing the Scene: Crime as Confession in Robert Bresson's Pickpocket," 95.

Michel the reason he steals he responds “To get ahead. I was frustrated getting nowhere”. Yet, right before that he says “Knowing a deed is bad doesn't stop you”. On the one hand, Michel’s words assign his action to the pursue of some kind of success. On the other hand, he exhibits a compulsive aspect that does not rise from his aspiration to become financially stable[123]. This exhibits another aspect of duality in Michel’s character.

The different levels of doubleness make the film multithreaded. The two characters’ experiential approaches are part of a system of thought that in both cases becomes a way to revolt against something in their social circle (the prison in one case and the larger community in the other). This doubleness is embodied in *Pickpocket* through the fragmentation discussed earlier. Michel and Fontaine are both found in a situation where the ways their hands acts are forbidden. However, Michel’s gap between the physical interaction of his hand and his body exhibits a problematic aspect that does not exist in *A Man Escaped.* Michel’s doubleness exists also through the contrast between his choices and his compulsive drive which again suggests a problematic side to him that is absent from Fontaine.

The multithreaded presentation of *Pickpocket* also extends to the viewer’s haptic experience of the film but differs from the one that *A Man Escaped* offers. In the opening scene at Longchamps, it is the highly-textured handbag that creates a tactile space on screen. Michel’s sensual touch emphasizes the patterned crocodile texture of the bag. The white light falling on the black bag gives it a glossy texture. Among the shades of gray of

[123] Ceilidh Orr, "Stealing the Scene: Crime as Confession in Robert Bresson’s Pickpocket," 96.

wool fabric textures of the three people in the close-up, the bag creates a contrast through its lustrousness. As the film cuts between medium shots and close-ups it also creates a contrast between the intangible and the tactile elements of the image accordingly. During the medium shot we focus on the gaze while in the close-up our sight becomes haptically active. Thus, the viewer oscillates between the identity of Michel's upper body and the identity of his hand. In the medium shot, we linger on the character's gaze through a similar inactive gaze of our own, whereas in the close-up we experience the texture that Michel's hand feels, moving from a visual experience to a visual tactile experience. The tactility is embodied by the viewer's experience. Thus, an additional duality of identities rises between the inactive and physically active experience of the viewer.

The Problematic Touch

McMahon describes the bag in the opening scene as an extension of the woman's body in her discussion of contact between surfaces, "[c]lothes, pockets and handbags act as prosthetic supplements which accentuate and ease the exposure of bodies to one another"[124]. Clothes that characters wear, fabrics that cover them, objects that dangle from them, become a part of them that extends the material limits of their body. According to McMahon's argument, when Michel touches and reaches inside the bag, he crosses the limits of another body. He becomes invasive and feels the texture without the woman experiencing it. At the same time, the sensualism in the movement of the hand

[124] Laura McMahon. *Cinema and Contact,* 42.

exemplifies the aspect of intrusion even more.

Bresson defines the pickpocket's problematic aspect of touch visually and haptically. In *Bresson on Bresson* he states that "[t]he relation between my pickpocket and his hand led […] to the moral question"[125]. Thus, for Bresson, the problem does not only exist due to the external effect on other's bodies — Bresson never shows the aftermath of an act of theft — but it also exists within Michel's body. Bresson quotes Montaigne "[w]e do not command our hair to stand on end or our skin to shiver from desire or fear; The hand often goes where we haven't sent it";[126] that somehow explains the strange relationship Michel has with his hands and the fact that his touch often seems intrinsically problematic.

When the protagonist does not engage in pickpocketing, his contact with others continues to reveal aspects of a strange relationship with his hands and the world. After Jeanne and Jacques prompt him again and again to visit his sick mother, he finally does so before her death. He enters his mother's bedroom and kneels before her bed as he takes hold of her hand. The camera pans from left to right following the protagonist's motion in a medium shot. All Michel's upper body is in the frame without being disjointed by it. As he gets down on his knees and grabs his mother's hand, his movement, rather than being restricted to his fragmented hand, comes from his entire unfragmented body, giving the impression that his entire body is directed towards her

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[125] Robert Bresson, *Bresson on Bresson,* 179.

[126] Michel de Montaigne, "On the Force of the Imagination,", *Essays,* Vol. 1 (Paris: Firmin-Didot, 1833), **quoted in** Robert Bresson, *Bresson on Bresson: Interviews, 1943–1983* (New York: The New York Review of Books: 2016), 179.

hand, which he kisses. This time the contact between the different body parts aims to be felt from both sides, even though his mother's hand does not reciprocate. We note that the only time Michel's body is not disjointed and is able to exhibit affection, is with a person who is headed towards death; at the same time, it is with his mother, who is the first person that a person develops a relationship, which determines all others. Until the end of the movie we do not see Michel communicating affection through his body again.

This relationship, where Michel is affective while his mother due to her illness seems weak to become expressive through touch reverses when Michel and Jeanne come in contact. Right before Michel flees away to London, he confronts Jeanne and asks her if she thinks he is a thief, she responds "yes". Michel says "I won't shake your hand, then" and Jeanne hugs him instead of shaking his hand. During this full body contact, there is no doubleness through the camerawork, and no double identity created between the woman's body parts. This affection is similar to the one that Michel expresses to his mother. Yet, this time Michel is the one that does not reciprocate to Jeanne's hug, instead he stands cold, takes a few steps back and leaves. Contrary to pickpocketing, Michel is far from physically sensual with Jeanne at this moment.

Apart from the embodied inability the characters have to reciprocate physically, they also tend to exhibit it through the style of the dialogue at the end of the scenes. Many scenes and conversations end with a question. For example, in the beginning of the film, when Michel requests some addresses from Jacques that would help with his employment, Jacques asks "Will you go?" and Michel leaves without responding. Jeanne also asks Michel "You're not coming in to see her?" when Michel is outside his mother's

apartment, “Will you come back?” insists Jeanne, while Michel goes down the staircase without answering. Michel also does not get a respond when he says to Jacques “You love her. Admit it”, referring to Jeanne; he then continues and asks “And does she love you?” while Jacques exits the hall of Michel’s building. Most of the characters exhibit an inability to reciprocate verbally or physically, displaying some form of emotional emptiness. Characters respond to questions with their bodies exiting doors and the frame. The expectation a person has when asking a question is at the least a negation or an affirmation; however, neither is ever offered or received by the characters. Thus, the film presents a deeper problem of general disconnection in human relationships. This becomes clearer if we compare Jeanne, Michel and Jacques with the Inspector[127] in the film whose questions always seem to be answered. However, he also does not always provide answers to questions, like when Michel asks “what are your plans?”, he also exits Michel’s corridor without giving an answer. Yet, it seems that his role, as an inspector, that is to ensure regulations are obeyed, gives him an additional authority in society where the people questioned by him are obliged by law to answer to him, that further establishes the absence of genuine connection and communication.

As *Pickpocket* progresses Michel reveals new aspects in his distinctive touch. A characteristic example is his theft on the street, after he visits the inspector’s office to give him Barrington’s book. Michel stands on the pavement. His upper body is framed in a medium close-up but his hands are not in the frame. He spots a man across the road. The man begins to cross the road as cars pass by. When the man comes close the

[127] Professor Carney, Feedback

pavement, Michel takes a few steps towards him. In an extreme close-up, their bodies meet and the upper part of their legs, dressed in suits, fills the screen. Michel grabs the man's hand and pulls it. The film cuts to a car braking. Then it cuts to a lower body close-up of the Michel holding the man's wrist; the camera tilts down following both their bodies bending down as Michel reaches for the man's hat that fell. Michel then puts the hat into the man's hand whose wrist is holding. The man leaves the frame and Michel's hand puts the man's watch into his pocket. The film cuts to a different scene in which Michel is in his room practicing his skills: The pickpocket's hand unbuckles a watch attached on a table's leg in an extreme close-up, revealing the movements that took place during the theft earlier. The camera tilts up and zooms out framing the pickpocket's upper body in a medium shot.

This time Michel's interaction is slightly different than the regular acts of theft that reaches into jacket pockets or purses. He hides the mechanics of his hand under an act played by the mechanics of his body. The pickpocket's body pretends to help the man, pulling him away from the car and picking-up his hat from the ground, while his hand unbuckles the watch. He actually acts like a magician who has to use his skill secretly and conceals it through open manipulations such as fancy shuffles[128]. As a result, the role of Michel's united body and role of his hand are separated.

Along with Michel, the viewer also enters into a haptically intensified world, where the textures of the suits fill the screen and the sound of the car's tires have create

[128] Jehangir Bhownagary, "Creativity of the Magician," *Leonardo* 5, no. 1 (1972): 33.

tactility audibly. The saturation of the haptic elements continues throughout the beginning of the next sequence through the close-up on the watch: the movement of the hand turning the watch to unbuckle it, exemplifies the smooth texture of the fabric tied up on the table's leg, whose density and texture resemble the flesh of the human hand. At the same time, the fluid movement of Michel's fingers exhibit a highly tactile interaction with the watch. The viewer exits the intense haptic space as the camera turns and frames Michel in a medium shot again.

Yet, before the film reveals the protagonist's movements, the theft scene functions as an optical illusion to the viewer as well. McMahon stresses that the rapid editing aids the creation of such an illusion, deceiving the viewer as much as the subject being robbed[129]. The haptic space that Bresson creates adds to the illusion, since the audience focus on the textures of the clothes and the audible tactile sound of the car rather than the tactility expressed by the fingers unbuckling the watch, which reveal the act of theft.

Counterintuitively, Bresson also attaches a degree of beauty in the tactile exchanges, which is especially evident in the collaborative acts of the theft. The pickpocket scenes stand out from the rest[130], due to the embodied excitement that they express, which is absent from the rest of the film. Around the first third of the film, Michel notices a man outside his building door, he follows him, and asks him who he is. The man is another pickpocket whose name is never mentioned, played by a real

[129] Laura McMahon, *Cinema and Contact,* 45.

[130] David Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film,* 305.

pickpocket, Kassagi. Michel finds Kassagi sitting at a bar, joins him and they talk. Kassagi says “come and see” leading Michel to another part of the bar. A fragment from Orchestral Suite No. 7 by Johann Caspar Ferdinand Fischer begins. In a close-up angle shot, Kassagi reaches in Michel’s suit-pocket, and at the same time turns him facing the front. The frame ends up including only Kassagi’s hand and Michel’s chest. Kassagi attaches his hand onto Michel’s suit, drops the wallet inside of it and catches it from the lower part of the suit with his right hand; the camera tilts down to record the movement. Kassagi transfers the wallet from his right hand to his left and, at the same time, turns around: his front body is directed towards the camera and then towards Michel; he returns the wallet to Michel with his left hand. Kassagi’s movement along with the camera movements resemble a choreography. The sequence continues with Kassagi instructing Michel; there is no dialogue, instead, everything is accompanied by the orchestral suite. At the same time, the camera records and sometimes follows the mechanics of the hand against the two bodies.

Bresson implies through the cinematography, that Michel practices his skills by mimicking Kassagi, but we do not see him complete the actions. An overlap transitions us to the next shot where Kassagi’s body is static, filling half of the screen. Michel walks towards the camera and hits Kassagi’s button with his fingers to open his suit, while he also fills the rest of the screen with his suit. We transition to the next shot where the teacher’s hand takes a pen from Michel’s inner pocket and makes it disappear into his sleeve. Another transition continues with Michel completing the pickpocketing that Kassagi showed earlier. As he turns, he leaves the wallet on a table. The sequence ends

with Michel stretching his hands and rolling a coin on his knuckles.

Kassagi provides a kinesthetic lesson to Michel. While the complex camera shots and characters' turns and geometric movements make the sequence resemble a dance piece, the editing and the overlapping transitions redefine the viewer's temporal and spatial perception. Other sequences in the film are also elliptical[131]. However, in this case, even if not every act is not completed in an unbroken timeline, Bresson maintains the connectivity through the tactility of the bodies and the systematic style the movement of the hands expresses. It is not clear how long these lessons last, instead they seem to be out of the usual time that the film progresses. At the same time, objects, fabrics and hands fill the screen, leaving very little room for depth and thus make the cinematic space almost disappear.

In this case, Bresson creates emotional meanings by creating a contrast to the rest of the sequences and through a new syntax that is composed by the combination of bodily movement (characters and camera) and cinematic movement (editing, transition) pinned together by the music (that only exists in very specific parts of the film).

The sequence recalls the performance of a magician, not because of the performative elements in acting, but because of the excitement it evokes, which seems similar to the one felt after a series of magic tricks. Bresson writes in *Notes on Cinematography,* "Today* I was not present at a projection of images and of sounds; I was present at the visible and instantaneous action they were exerting on one another and

[131] Brian Price, *Neither God nor Master,* 4.

at their transformation. The bewitched real."[132] Yet, the "bewitched real" is not limited to the tricks. The sequence focuses on the revelation of the skills that are used in pickpocketing, which is closer to a dance. Like in the art of dancing the essence of this sequence can be found in form and not in representation, this sequence has a similar effect: "In a graceful disposition of the body […] it is the body itself […] that is revealed" as David Michael Levin argues in "Balanchine's Formalism". Through the imaginative editing and the body movement Bresson reveals the sublime. Levin describes Kant's definition for the sublime as follows:

> "The sublime, […] [is a] more difficult sort of pleasure: that which has its ground entirely within the subjective conditions of productive (imaginative) consciousness itself, and for which the sublime is merely the original occasion. For the sublime, unlike the beautiful, does not offer an immediately commodious (purposive) form; on the contrary, it offers something which is manifestly formless, or which, in any case, defeats the straightforward. Thus, the sublime challenges the imagination to surpass its perceptual rootedness, summons it to strive for a glimpse of some possible, but very obscure, form"[133]

Bresson evokes the sublime through breaking his own formal syntax of the scenes where no pickpocketing is involved. At the same time, this collaborative lesson of pickpocketing also creates a contrast with the opening scene where Michel's touch becomes problematic and intrusive. The obscurity in the form is created through the stylistic contrasts between the two sequences. This time, the emphasis is only on the identity of the hand and not on a doubleness (even though Bresson might still be

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[132] Robert Bresson, *Notes on the Cinematographer* (Los Angeles: Green Integer København, 1997), 43.

[133] David Michael Levin, "Balanchine's Formalism," *Salmagundi*, no. 33/34 (1976): 227.

implying a double role in the greater context of the sequence, he does not redefine Michel as non-problematic). The two men's identities are reduced to fabrics and their hands that fill the screen. The only way to identify them is by noticing the differences in the textures of the two suits and the differences in their hands. In a small scale, the construction of the images and the subjects in the sequence display an element of beauty during the rehearsal of pickpocketing, making it distant from the problematic elements in Michel's touch. When we consider this sequence in comparison to the whole film, we can see that it becomes part of the sublime since it challenges the viewer's imagination, in terms of understanding new meanings through this innovative breaking of form. As a result, Bresson complicates the morality of the pickpocket and turns the audience towards the question "why does Michel steal?", instead of asking if it's wrong of right.

As in *A Man Escaped*, the Gare de Lyon sequence, where Michel, Kassagi and two other pickpockets collaborate, echoes previous scenes and becomes, if not a variation, a combination of them. In one of the thefts at the Gare de Lyon train station, one of the two accomplices puts pressure on a passenger's shoulder while Kassagi's hand reaches in the passenger's breast pocket, all recorded in a medium shot. There is a cut to a close-up of Michel's hand in which the passenger's wallet falls from Kassagi's hand (not shown in the shot) into Michel's hand. Another cut follows where Michel and the passenger exchange a look in a medium shot and another cut shows Michel's hand putting the wallet into the second accomplice's pocket in a close-up.

The doubleness between body parts appears again, creating a distinct identity for the hands. As in the opening sequence at Longchamps, this is visualized due to the

contrast between the expressive movements of the hands and the inexpressive faces of the thieves that blends them with the people that surround them. It is further visualized through the contrast between the interchanging of close-ups and medium shots that separates the thieves' hands from the rest of their bodies. Moreover, the contrast between the textures in the close-ups and the less textural medium shots, creates an additional juxtaposition in the viewer's bodily effect between a tactile sensuous experience and less tactile, yet visual, experience. For example, when Michel slides the wallet into the third accomplishes' pocket, the screen is separated in three vertical parts by the three different textures of the men's suits. The characters move away from the camera and as they reach a medium distance, the background of the station becomes again part of the frame, lessening the textures of the textiles and as a result the haptic effect of the experience. At the same time, the collaboration of the four characters alludes to Michel's lesson with Kassagi, attaching the element of beauty in pickpocketing as in the earlier sequence of the lesson.

The combination of various elements from previous scenes reveals Michel's mind in some degree and Bresson's imaginativeness. Yet, we still have to consider that the sequences of pickpocketing are saturated with the overall silence of the film. For example, even though Gare de Lyon is a busy train station, the volume seems to be reduced to a "patter of footsteps"[134] and light "murmur"[135] communicating a social idleness and passivity. Therefore, the beauty of pickpocketing is justified in some degree

[134] Laura McMahon, *Cinema and Contact,* 44.

[135] Laura McMahon, *Cinema and Contact,* 44.

as a revolt to social passivity. It makes the viewer, like Michel, have a direct experience with the world — an interactive sensual experience. Yet, at the same time, this experiential approach remains problematic because the contact cannot be sensed or reciprocated; as McMahon argues "a transgression of the borders of the body which cannot necessarily be felt […] whilst actively problematizing notions of propriety and essence"[136] and at the same time makes this contact a one-way experience and, as a result, only momentary exciting for Michel.

Michel's state of mind during pickpocketing differs from the minds of those who do not involve in pickpocketing. In Gare de Lyon, inside trains, in the streets of Paris, in the apartments and halls of buildings, silence takes over. Conversations are left incomplete, as all characters leave the scene without answering at some point in the film. Yet, the pickpocket aims to neither answer nor have his touch reciprocated from the victim of theft, instead, the win or loss comes down to whether the pickpocket seizes something or not. In other words, the pickpocket normalizes the problematic social aspect by making it a way of living. In conclusion, Michel's tactile contact displays a role opposite to the usual one, it is not a way of communicating anymore, but the path to an isolation that is striving for silence.

Michel's problematic touch surfaces by comparison to Fontaine's experiential approach, and reveals the bodily doubleness extending to his mind. Furthermore, the doubleness through fragmentation and body gestures embodies the problematic identity of Michel, while the association of a sensual touch to thefts reverses its usual role and

[136] Laura McMahon, *Cinema and Contact,* 39.

physically forms its intrusive aspect. The film allows the duality to be experienced by the viewers by pulling them in tactile spaces and withdrawing them from them, like in *A Man Escaped.* The haptic experience becomes more intense in pickpocketing scenes, filled with textiles and haptic elements whereas social exchanges are quietened down, characters are withdrawn from the frames and diverge from each other at every chance. Yet, Bresson further extends the duality in *Pickpocket* by beautifying the act of pickpocketing and problematizing the viewer by forcing the admiration of pickpocketing rather than its condemnation.

CHAPTER THREE

Bodily Inconsistencies in A Gentle Woman

A Gentle Woman (Une femme douce) presents some shift from Bresson's earlier films, such as *Pickpocket* and *A Man Escaped*. It is the director's first film in color which adds an additional thread to his cinematic world and the film's texture. Still, the director's foundational stylistic elements remain the same, as the gentle woman says in the film, "[it's] the same material […] arranged differently". As in his previous films, Bresson reduces emotions to their essence and eliminates any theatricality in the main characters[137]. He continues to approach bodies in an unusual way, while he emphasizes the details of the material world. Thus, the fleshiness of bodies and the world continue to be part of the way to understand Bresson's film. Yet, this time direct juxtapositions explore human relationships. The film has various cases of embodiment that are not limited to expressing emotional states and modalities. Aspects that are found in the embodiment of objects also exhibit our strange relationship with matter.

Elements from *A Man Escaped* and *Pickpocket* return in the film and are re-explored. Fontaine's experiential view of the world in *A Man Escaped* and Michel's problematic touch in *Pickpocket* are echoed in *A Gentle Woman,* revealing new ways of thinking about the characters' relationships with matter and living beings. At the same time, the haptic elements and the visceral effects of the film create additional meanings[138]. Still, different meanings, as in *Pickpocket* and *A Man Escaped,* rise mostly

[137] Atwell, Lee, *Film Quarterly* 23, no. 4 (1970): 54.

[138] Professor Carney

through Bresson's juxtapositions. The contrasts in *A Gentle Woman* are numerous, from the dead body of the female character opposed to the living, from the woman's different relationship to objects as opposed to her husband's, as well as their different relationship with the arts, which reveals the source of the inconsistency in the couple's relationship, and explore different ways of viewing the world: from an economic understanding to an artistic one.

The narrative is based on Dostoevsky's *The Gentle Maiden* (1876), however, Bresson has changed the essence of the characters and the subject of Dostoyevsky's story[139]. In *Bresson on Bresson,* he explains that in the film the central subject is "the uncertainty of the husband in the face of the mute corpse: "Did she love me? Did she betray me? Did she know that I loved her?" […] It's about the incommunicability, even if unrecognized, between two people who live together"[140].

The main characters are a man and a young woman that get married early in the film. Bresson never reveals their names. As other scholars and writers do, we can use the French pronouns for "he" and "she" to refer to them as Lui and Elle[141]. Right after the opening titles the film shows the aftermath of a woman's suicide. For the rest of the film the husband, a pawnbroker, is reflecting on their relationship in an attempt to understand his wife's death while he utters his thoughts to his maid, Anna. He begins by reflecting on the first time he saw her in his shop, he moves on to their marriage and reflects on the

[139] Robert Bresson, *Bresson on Bresson,* 205.

[140] Robert Bresson, *Bresson on Bresson,* 205.

[141] I am thankful to Professor Carney for this suggestion.

evolvement of their incompatible relationship, striving to understand their relationship, his wife's mind and her reason for committing suicide. Elle does not always appear transparent, possibly because her presentation is coming from the point of view of her husband, yet Bresson gives us the opportunity to delve into the form and style of the film so as to understand her and differentiate our subjectivity from Lui's.

In the following pages, I am examining the juxtapositions Bresson creates through the role of touch and the body. Moreover, I am exploring Bresson's use of embodiment and the haptic effects, from sound, to color and texture, as a way of making meaning. The role of touch, the body and other senses come back in this film and become a way to reveal Bresson's meanings about the character's relationship with matter and the human body.

The film begins with a juxtaposition of sound and silence that recurs throughout the film. The sound of car engines is heard, as the opening titles begin, and accompanies an image with numerous cars on a central road. The film cuts to a glass door accompanied by silence. Anna, Lui's maid, opens the door and we begin to hear traffic sounds from afar. A rocking chair in Lui's balcony swings back and forth, while the table in the balcony falls, and along with it a pot and a small plate smash on the floor. The point of view changes and the camera records from outside the house, under the balcony. A white shawl floats in the air. The film cuts to the road where we see Elle on the ground in a prone position with a trail of blood by her head.

The contrast between the loud traffic noise of the opening scene and the silence right before the door opens, exhibits the relationship that the film has with silence. Loud

noises exist to contrast with the silence at important moments. In this case, the silence comes in to be broken again by the shattering noise of the pot and the thud of the table. The magnification of the silence in contrast to the traffic sounds, followed by the amplification of the sounds of various objects right after the woman's suicide, creates a shocking effect. The sounds and the movements of the furniture animate them as if they were alive and thus exhibit how close was the event of Elle jumping from the balcony, possibly one second after, embodying the tragedy. At the same time, the aftermath embodied in the furniture exhibit the incomprehensible chiasm between a woman alive and then dead, between life and death. We will return to this contrast as it recurs through the film, emphasizes silence and amplifies microsounds that embody emotional states.

Elements of Michel and Fontaine in Lui and Elle

The inconsistency between Lui and Elle are expressed both through the images of their relationship and Lui's reflections near Elle's dead body. One juxtaposition between the two is expressed early in the film, exhibiting the different views the characters have towards the value of objects. A close-up shot fragments Lui's hand the first time we see him at the pawnshop. A ring is in the middle of his palm. Elle opens the door; the traffic noise interrupts the silence and then we cut to the upper body shot of Lui looking at the ring in his palm. He leaves the ring on the wooden counter. The camera tilts down following his hand's movement and frames his hands alone again. The hands open a drawer and he gives the money to the woman over the counter. Lui looks again at the ring in an upper body shot and throws it in a drawer.

Lui's hand works as a support for the ring in order to inspect it. This attentiveness he exhibits is directly connected with assigning a value to it, while contrary to the previous shot in which he gives the money to the woman and he throws it as if he disposing it, exhibiting in this way, his unattachment to the object. Moreover, the interchange between medium shots of the upper body and the close-ups of hands allude to the fragmentation in *Pickpocket.* Yet, even if it does differentiate between two visual modalities as the fragmentation does with Michel (contrasting his idle face to his sensual hand movement), it does not create a duality in Lui's identity. Bresson reframes the problematic elements in Michel and explores a different side through Lui.

Lui's touch is reduced to the estimation of monetary value. The medium shots do not change the coldness expressed by the hands as they examine the ring. This unvarying mode expresses his inability to respond emotionally to the customer. He reduces the value of the object to its economic value. The automatized way his movement is performed when he exchanges objects and money, expresses his attention to the objects as he translates its value to money while disregarding all the other aspects assigned to the object by the customer. For example, for the customer, like in this case, the woman's wedding ring, embodies a significant aspect of her life and a valuable memory. Most customers seem to bring in objects that embody an emotional part of their lives. For instance, another customer brings in a black box with a velvet interior that has math compasses; the case exhibits that it has been used many times (it has a mark on one side), yet at the same time all the instruments in it appear in faultless condition, exhibiting that the customer took good care of it up until now. The camera lingers on the open case

through a close-up, allowing us to experience the case's texture, the mark, the objects it contains, thus aspects which embody the customer's relationship with the objects. Lui closes the case and the film cuts to a medium shot of his hands taking the money which was behind the counter and quickly giving it to the customer. During this transaction, any sentimentalism related to the object is removed and its value is viewed in terms of money. This occurs by means of the sudden change of rhythm that Lui's quick gestures set as well as his disconnection from the customer and his immediate swapping of the object for money without saying a single word to the customer.

Elle returns to exchange some little personal objects for money, including a small statue of Jesus on a metal cross. Lui takes the objects upstairs to weigh the metal cross. He says "you take the Christ, I will keep the metal cross" and in order to determine its value he separates the Jesus figurine from the cross. Lui's understanding of textures is based on a standardized value based on the material – the figurine has no value since it is not metal. Then the value of the object is further reduced to a more direct relationship between weight and it worth that certain grams define. In this way, Lui's character is more reduced than the pickpocket, as his goal is make money, which also defines his relationship with it, contrary to Michel who does not resort to to pickpocketing to make money.

Elle's touch is not reduced to a role of estimating things financially. Later in the film another woman comes in the pawnshop with a small pin. This is after Elle and Lui got married and Elle is now working in the pawnshop. The customer's hand is framed in a close-up, the hand is half-opened, exhibiting the woman's sentimental bond with the

pin. Lui briefly examines it and returns it, as he finds it valueless. The customer takes it back and looks at the object in her palm as she walks slowly towards the exit of the shop. The contrast between the way Lui and the customer view the object and relate to it, highlights their different points of view regarding the value attached to the object, which leads one to dismiss it and the other to treasure it.

Elle responds emotionally rather than economically. She takes the pin from the customer. Her body embodies her emotional synchronization with the customer, as her hand takes the pin in the same slow rhythm that the customer is walking, instead of being intrusive in the customer's bodily patterns and emotionality. Even though Elle appears to perform the same movements as Lui when he performs an exchange (she also takes the pin and gives money in exchange for it), her kind of touch differentiates her from her husband at a bodily level: She grabs some of the money from the drawer as if it was any other object and without counting it, she gives it to the woman, exhibiting her disregard for the value of money and valuing objects through money. Like Fontaine in *A Man Escaped*, Elle does not limit the essence of an object to a title or another narrowly defined element like its monetary value. This becomes one of the effects of miscommunication in the couple; right before this scene, her husband says, "Our first quarrels arose over her whimsical ideas of buying and paying objects above their values" exhibiting that even after her suicide he is unable to see that the value of an object is not statically defined through its translation to money for everyone. Thus, Bresson seems to revisit the elements of Michel's and Fontaine's interaction with objects and also to explore how they interact when they are added together in the same film, advancing the complexity of

touch in *A Gentle Woman.*

Lui's Embodied Sight and Materialism

Lui's contrast to Elle comes through the different relationships the two characters have with the material world through their sight. As we have discussed previously, sight is grounded in other senses[142]. "For both Merleau-Ponty and Vivian Sobchack, vision is an embodied act, one that is rooted in the indivisible connection between the perceiving subject and the perceived object."[143] In "Embodied Vision in Against the Day", Fahim writes that "One significant aspect of vision […] is the notion of proximity". Thus, something that is often overlooked is the materiality of the visual experience[144].

Lui's character challenges the idea that perception through sight can be exclusively disembodied[145]. Lui expresses the connection of sight with proximity and thus materiality is expressed through his need to follow Elle against her wishes early in the film. This incident comes before the two characters are married. After a walk in the park, they are sitting in the car. Elle asks Lui not to follow her. She exits the car and once she leaves from the frame, Lui gets off the car and runs behind her, exhibiting his need to

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[142] Dana Wiggins Logan, "*The Embodied Eye: Religious Visual Culture and the Social Life of Feeling* by Morgan, David (Review)," *Journal of Religion and Popular Culture* 25, no. 1 (2013): 165, https://muse.jhu.edu/article/505966.

[143] Abdel Raouf Fahim, "Embodied Vision in Against the Day," *Orbit: A Journal of American Literature* 5, no. 1 (2017): 11.

[144] Abdel Raouf Fahim, "Embodied Vision in Against the Day," 10.

[145] Abdel Raouf Fahim, "Embodied Vision in Against the Day," 1–14.

keep the "self-object"[146] always in view, which reveals his dependence on the materiality of Elle's existence. At the same time, he reveals the association of sight with its tangible qualities. Even though this might not seem as an issue of haptics, it is as an extension of Lui's manner of interacting with objects.

Yet Lui is unaware of the embodiment in his sight. This is firstly suggested in the scene in which the two characters return from a trip in the country. A number of interchanging shots follow between Elle's and Lui's gaze. The two characters' eyes are fragmented through the natural frame of the rearview window of the car. We can see through the mirror that Lui constantly directs his look towards his wife. Yet, Elle, who as who is more aware of embodied sight suggests that this is dangerous. Lui denies the risk, yet a few seconds later he almost crashes the car.

We can note that the viewer shares Lui's subjectivity in the car scene. We, as viewers, are also concentrating our cinematic gaze on the two characters' moving eyes while we are getting used to the pattern that develops in the scene as the two protagonists exchange looks. The rhythm does not break or decelerate, even when the film cuts to the front end of the vehicle that is steadily approaching the car in its front. When Lui realizes that, there is a sudden break in the form: the squeaking wheels of the car interrupt the rhythm, the expressions right before the cut to the front of the car stopping become more intense than they are usually throughout the film, while the editing becomes faster. The sudden break results in a visceral reaction to both characters and the spectator, which

[146] Tony Pipolo, *Robert Bresson: A Passion for Film* (Cary: Oxford University Press, Incorporated, 2010), 249. Retrieved from ProQuest Ebook Central.

takes us back to Barker's argument[147]where the film touches the viewer and the two characters viscerally. Without moving, the viewers experience a bodily impact just through their sight which makes them aware of our embodied gaze. From one kind of touch without contact, which is performed through the gaze we move to another type of full-body perception through the viscera. In this instance, we escape the husband's subjectivity as the outer world unaltered enters and affects the temporal rhythms of our body[148].

Lui's gaze reveals a different a different use of it compared the characters' use of gaze in *Pickpocket* and *A Man Escaped*. His use of sight differentiates him from both Fontaine and Michel, who use sight as a cover for their hands as they interact physically. Lui's need to have Elle in his optical framework is directly connected with his embodied perception through sight, while he does not seem as aware of the role of his sight as Elle or the protagonist in the two other films. What values for Lui is matter valued in a very specific way, which creates his need to remain in constant contact with his wife. This kind of sight reveals his preoccupation with the physical world[149] and the reduction of living beings to objects.

His understanding of the world is limited to a materialistic perspective and he neglects to see how bodies (his or his wife's) can communicate meaning through their

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[147] Jennifer Barker. *The Tactile Eye,* 120–144.

[148] Jennifer Barker. *The Tactile Eye*, 145.

[149] Howard Robinson, "Dualism," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Stanford University, Fall 2017, https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/dualism/. (accessed April 21, 2020).

senses and language. Even if Lui acts on his embodied vision, he seems unaware of the functions of the layering of the senses. His unawareness of his bodily functions limits his understanding of Elle's bodily functions and thus language. The husband's perspective prevents him from understanding Elle's embodied vision. "It's a strange thing. I never caught her looking at me. Was it timidity on her part? She seemed so gentle", he says. Superficial characteristics based on either his first impression or a cultural view of women lead him to the wrong conclusions. As a result, he fails to see more profound external characteristics like the one to which Elle responds visually and haptically. Elle only receives static adjectives as characterizations by her husband rather than descriptions that reveal his understanding of her mental state. Instead, he understands her through an impersonal image of his wife's surface: A gentle woman.

Juxtapositions as an Element of Art

This one-directional way of thinking comes in contrast with Elle's perception and reflection. Lui's misunderstanding of the different views that come from different types of using sight comes from his juxtaposition with the film's mind, namely, the film's general form. In other words, his failure to understand his wife's different use of embodied vision comes from his inability to see the world artistically, like she does. The mind of the film, presents its meanings through juxtapositions rather than general statements. In the early scene she goes through a second book, with paintings, most of them depicting women's bodies. A close-up shot to one of the paintings transitions us to the Louvre Museum where Lui says "The Venuses and Psychées she admired at the Louvre made me see women as instruments of pleasure". His view directly exhibits that

he reduces the meaning of the artwork to the objectification of women. He does not look at the form and the style to appreciate it, rather he embodies himself to a character exercising the male gaze.

Like the film's approach, Elle perceives the world through comparison and contrast. A characteristic example that exhibits both the artistic mind of the film and Elle's imaginative perception is during a four-minute scene, where the couple goes to the theater to watch a Shakespeare play, *Hamlet.* The final act of *Hamlet* play; even though the scene might present narrative connections to the film, Bresson seems to add it in the film to create an aesthetic juxtaposition[150]. Hamlet and Laertes duel each other with swords while Claudius and Gertrude as well as other royal members watch[151]. There are cuts that show Elle and Lui watching the play. At one of these cuts, Lui turns his head and looks at Elle, as he does in the car and in other instances. The play ends and Lui, along with the members of the audience, applauds. However, Elle does not; instead it seems that she has no bodily response to the play at all, contrary to the viewer that responds bodily to the film. The couple returns home, and Elle goes to the bookshelf. She reads a part from *Hamlet's* book that was left out of the performance "I knew it. They omitted this so they could bellow. This is Hamlet's advice to other players: "Perform the speech just as I taught you, if you exaggerate the words like some actors do, I might as

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[150] Gaëlle Ginestet, "Une Femme Douce by Robert Bresson: Hamlet or Anti-Cinematography," in *Shakespeare on Screen in Francophonia* (Université de Montpellier III, Institut de Recherche sur la Renaissance, l'Âge Classique et les Lumières, 2011), 291, http://shakscreen.org/media/articles_pdf/ginestet_hamlet_2011.pdf.

[151] Lysander Kemp, "Understanding 'Hamlet,'" *College English* vol. 13, no. 1 (1951): 9–13.

well have a newscaster read the lines. Don't use too many hand gestures. When you get into a whirlwind of passion on stage, remember to keep the emotion moderate and smooth" etc. etc." Elle perceives that the company omitted Hamlet's advice because it contradicts their style which is filled with exaggerated body movements and loud voices. (In an interview between Charles Thomas Samuels and Bresson, the director describes that he has experienced this in real life where a French theater company omitted Hamlet's advice[152]). In this way, Bresson, through Elle, creates a contrast between his film and the style of the theater and as Ginestet says "Bresson [proposes] a lesson in the art of the cinema"[153].

The movements of Hamlet and Laertes, as the theater scene begins, are fast. It gives a different, accelerated rhythm to the film. The different bodily effects that the change of rhythm has on the viewer further exhibits the differences between the film's the style of the film and the play. When the king says "stop", he also raises his hand, contrary to the film, in which gestures are eliminated, unless they are necessary. Ginestet explains that Bresson insisted on an unexaggerated delivery and quotes from *Notes on Cinematography* "Model. Thrown into the physical action, his voice, starting from even syllables, takes on automatically the inflections and modulations proper to his true

[152] Gaëlle Ginestet, "Une Femme Douce by Robert Bresson: Hamlet or Anti-Cinematography," 299.

[153] Gaëlle Ginestet, "Une Femme Douce by Robert Bresson: Hamlet or Anti-Cinematography," 297

nature"[154]. Hamlet's advice agrees entirely with Bresson's principles[155]. Thus, as Ginestet writes, "This interview confirms our initial impression: the function of Shakespeare's play is less to provide a *mise-en-abyme* for the story of *Une femme douce* than to illustrate the aesthetic positions of the film author"[156]. In addition, it further differentiates Elle's perception from Lui's.

Elle becomes perceptive of the body language of the used by characters in the play, contrary to Lui, and understands the relative exaggeration in gestures, thus she finds the general style of the play not effective. The film uses juxtaposition to exhibit the artificial reality of the exaggerated acting in plays. At the same time, it exhibits the unrealistic effect of theatrical acting in film in general. Similarly, Elle uses a comparative approach to understand the bodies and gestures, and the world around her, which reveals her artistic approach and differentiates her entirely from Lui's materialistic one. As Ginestet writes, "Far from the materialism of the pawnbroker, [Elle] is curious about all forms of art as well as natural history"[157].

The style of the play differs from the cinematographic style of the rest of the film.

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[154] Robert Bresson, *Notes on Cinematography* **quoted in** Gaëlle Ginestet, "Une Femme Douce by Robert Bresson: Hamlet or Anti-Cinematography," 298.

[155] Gaëlle Ginestet, "Une Femme Douce by Robert Bresson: Hamlet or Anti-Cinematography," 297.

[156] Gaëlle Ginestet, "Une Femme Douce by Robert Bresson: Hamlet or Anti-Cinematography," 299.

[157] Gaëlle Ginestet, "Une Femme Douce by Robert Bresson: Hamlet or Anti-Cinematography," 294.

For example, Bresson presents death in two ways that contradict each other[158]. In the filmed play, death is presented through dramatizations and action whereas the film shows the gentle woman commit suicide through three shots:

> "the table falling and the rocking chair vacillating on the balcony from which she has just jumped […], the white stole floating in the air and slowly falling […], and at ground level, cars stopping, legs rushing towards the body and the red blood stain, probably the only splash of bright colour in the whole film"[159]

The lifeless objects, the sound of the cars braking and the tactility in the image of the floating scarf replace the action. The image becomes an experience that we feel through our senses rather than a representation of death. Finally, the deep red blood contrasts the pastel pallet of the rest of the film and the dry textures, coming from fabrics and wood, expressing the contrast both visually and haptically.

Furthermore, the cinematographic style relies on medium and close-up shots[160]. When the characters return home there is a clear contrast in the way Bresson is filming, using fragmentation. Ginestet lists the shot that follow: "medium shot on the gentle woman, then insert shot on the book (close-up […]), return to the gentle woman, then insert shot on the page (extreme close-up), showing Hamlet's advice to the players, and

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[158] Gaëlle Ginestet, "Une Femme Douce by Robert Bresson: Hamlet or Anti-Cinematography," 304.

[159] Gaëlle Ginestet, "Une Femme Douce by Robert Bresson: Hamlet or Anti-Cinematography," 304.

[160] Gaëlle Ginestet, "Une Femme Douce by Robert Bresson: Hamlet or Anti-Cinematography," 302.

finally return to the gentle woman"[161]. Therefore, this aesthetic of fragmentation also reveals, once again, the unique approach to bodies that is nonexistent in theater. While the close-up of the woman's hands makes the film a more multithreaded experience compared to the play, the way Elle holds the book reveals the micromovements of her hands. Her fingers slowly move and slowly adjust position, showing an affective quality in her touch as she holds the book. This shows Bresson's cinematographic style is inconsistent with the style of the play or any other theatrical style, and introduces a new inconsistency between the man and the gentle woman, found in their different kinds of physical touch.

Elle and Lui: Inconsistencies through Touch

The characters' visions are re-explored through their touch. Lui's embodied vision, re-explores the kind of touch Lui exercises on Elle when they are in direct contact and it reveals its problematic aspect, which leads to his failure to connect and understand his wife. His touch, more than physical, becomes materialistic.

Marleau-Ponty gives an example that illustrates the body as a means of communication and differentiates it from an object:

> "If I touch with my left hand my right hand while it touches an object, the right hand object is not the right hand touching: the first is an intertwining of bones, muscles and flesh bearing down on a point in space, the second traverses space as a rocket in order to discover the exterior object in its place"[162]

[161] Gaëlle Ginestet, "Une Femme Douce by Robert Bresson: Hamlet or Anti-Cinematography," 302.

[162] Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 92.

Lui acts without considering that the effect of touching is to be touched and what effect his touch has on Elle.

Towards the end of the film the husband says, “I want to believe in you! To be bound to you by the deepest belief. I love you, I want you", he touches his wife’s legs and then kisses them. Elle withdraws herself, sits on her armchair and starts crying. Bresson does not condemn Lui’s attempt for affection with Elle, but he views the body as an object rather than part of a subject. His touch becomes problematic as he treats his wife’s legs in the same way that he treats objects. When he deals with objects, he does not take into consideration the language of the subjects. In this case, he disregards Elle’s unresponsive body language and therefore fails to understand her.

A similar incident is repeated over their breakfast scene. Lui is sitting at the kitchen table and makes breakfast. Elle enters in the kitchen and says “I shall be a faithful wife. I will respect you”, which seems to be exactly what Lui would like to hear. Lui stands up and begins to kiss her. Elle’s expression is empty. She does not reciprocate, instead she remains completely unresponsive, until she withdraws by moving away towards the table, stepping out of the cinematic frame. Lui says “I kissed her wildly like a husband after a long distance” that exhibits that his actions are not so much a genuine expression of his affection, rather his action is based on a generalization: what a husband would do. Such a generalization disregards the significance of individual responses of the body which cannot be categorized under a universal rule, such as, a rule about husbands and wives. This is exhibited visually through the contrast between the wife’s and the husband’s bodily expressions during their contact. Elle lays back her head seeming to

avoid Lui kissing her face, yet he only withdraws when she takes a step back. As Lui kisses the woman, a reverse-shot which frames Lui's hand holding her hair follows. This reveals an additional perspective, namely that Elle lays back her head through the force that Lui's hand exerts on her hair. This becomes the epitome of Elle's treatment as an object-subject from Lui, who touches her hair and kisses her neck for his own pleasure, as she remains expressionless and her body movements at this moment only appear to happen as a result of the forces Lui exerts for his own pleasure. After Elle's exit from the frame, Lui's exit from the kitchen follows. He says "why did I leave then?" exhibiting that he does not even understand his own bodily response to Elle's coldness and distance.

As a result, when he reflects on their relationship to Anna, he never understands his own and his wife's body language. Instead he strives to understand why his actions always seem to have a negative effect on their relationship, even though they seem to fit general norms in a psychoanalytic manner that seems to lead to the wrong conclusions. Lui cannot understand the body as a living entity, but rather superficially, "She was so pale and thin, I was struck by her pensiveness". He connects elements of her appearances to her degree of thoughtfulness. He can only seem to see static elements such as "pale" and "thin", like he is used to with objects (early in the film he examines the weight, texture and color of a cross to figure out its value). The paleness and thinness become static characteristics of weakness and he is problematized as they do not seem to translate to pensiveness. He seems to fail to regard dynamic elements that express the inner thoughts of a human, such as the expressions, the movement, and the rhythms of her

body. On the contrary, he seems to base his psychoanalytic thinking on a certain static image of women.

At times of aggression his disregard of the body as subject becomes even more evident. After Lui's jealousy has evolved, he recollects that everything was a reason for a fight. A scene follows where Elle arranges some light-yellow roses. A few roses are already in glass bottles — one in each bottle. Elle cuts the ends of the roses, and places the scissors on the wooden surface, it is quiet so we can hear the sound clearly. She takes a pitcher and begins to fill a glass bottle with water. The silence allows us to focus on the microsound, such as the clink of the contact between the glass pitcher and the glass bottle or the sound of the slow dripping of water in the bottle or Elle's slow footsteps on the wooden floor. Here "the *tonic physicality* of sounds *bestows tactility to objects*."[163] As a result, we, as Elle, become more sensitive to our perception of tactility. At the same time, the rhythm of the scene slows down even more in comparison to the previous ones. The sound of the opening door disrupts the focus on the slow microsounds. We hear Lui's voice, "I thought you didn't like flowers" which is amplified compared to Elle's sounds as she cares for the roses. The film cuts to Lui holding the door, "who gave them to you?" he continues. A quick cut back to Elle follows, interrupting the slow rhythm that the scene has established until the point that Lui enters. His footsteps are faster and heavier than Elle's. Soon he comes face to face with her, grabs her from the arms and says "Tell me, tell me!" as he shakes her body. Even before he grabs her, the tactility of the sounds

[163] Tony Pipolo, *Robert Bresson: A Passion for Film*, 114.
Pipolo's observation is about Bresson's films *Lancelot* (1974) and *L'Argent* (1983).

and the change in the rhythm expresses his aggression and differentiates him from his wife. Further, the way he touches his wife when he grabs her, shows again that his value of the body is evaluated similarly to the way an object is evaluated in terms of its monetatry value, you can shake it and grab it without necessarily having an effect on its price. On the contrary, Elle's contact with objects and, in this scene, living beings as well is affective and they have an emotional value rather than an economic one.

Elle responds to her husband's aggressive bodily contact and disrupted rhythm and, instead of answering to his instructive statement, she leaves the room, an action which aligns her as a character with the mind of the film, which does not state ideas, but rather it problematizes through juxtapositions. On the contrary, Lui's mind does not seem to align with the mind of the film, as his actions in this scene are one-directional in need of a clear answer. Elle is not capable to give an answer to such a statement, similarly to the film, that "from start to finish, […] remains the film of doubt, of unanswered questions"[164] as Jean Sémolué states. The scene becomes a representation of the general logic in Lui's reflections. When Lui reflects the moment, he saw Elle in a car with another man thinking she was being unfaithful, he says "she might have seen me in the mirror, and thought quickly". Contrary to Sémolué's observation about the mind of the film, he says "But such doubt was impossible, she had rejected his advances. I knew it, to

[164] Jean Sémolué, "*Une femme douce* reste du début à la fin le film du doute, des questions sans réponse" in *Bresson ou l'acte pur des métamorphoses* (Paris: Flammarion, 1993), 182 **quoted in** Gaëlle Ginestet, "Une Femme Douce by Robert Bresson: Hamlet or Anti-Cinematography," 307.

hurt me, out of hatred" which again contrasts his psychoanalytic, linear type of logic with the logic of Elle and the logic of the film which follow an artistic logic.

Bresson contrasts analytic interpretation and artistic understanding, which becomes reflexive about the viewer's aesthetic understanding of the film. Lui aims to bring to the surface the "inner nature"[165] of his wife, yet everything in the film, including Elle's character can be understood on the surface. Campbell Crockett, in "Psychoanalysis in Art Criticism", argues that the conception of aesthetics presupposes "that the point of criticism is to expose some "inner nature" of the work of art", which aligns to the husband's approach in *A Gentle Woman.* Crockett explains that "when we talk about works of art, we are not or should not be aiming at some single outcome that uniquely constitutes success" like Lui does when he linearizes his thoughts when he says, "tell me" or "such doubt was impossible".

Bodily Responses through Sound and Silence

Lee Atwell writes "A variety and richness of visual backgrounds, unusual for this normally austere filmmaker, allows Bresson to bring into play, […] excerpts from theater, cinema, and television as counterpoints to the action"[166]. Television has a multithreaded role, as most elements of what Bresson adds in his film. It becomes a way

[165] Campbell Crockett, "Psychoanalysis in Art Criticism," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 17, no. 1 (1958): 35.

[166]Lee Atwell, *Film Quarterly* 23, no. 4 (1970): 56.

to embody the character's mental and bodily states, while it affects their bodies and shares the effect through the effect on the viewer.

The television appears three times throughout the film. After the couple gets married, they exchange rings in a restaurant over dinner. They arrive at Lui's apartment that is two floors above his pawnshop; Lui closes the exterior door; we can clearly hear their footsteps as they go up the stairs and a few car noises coming from outside. They reach a second door. When Lui closes it the sounds of the cars are eliminated. Elle grabs his hand and rushes him upstairs. She runs in the bathroom and the sound of the running water makes understand that she is running a bath. She runs to the television and turns it on. Racing cars appear on the small screen of the TV, accompanied by their amplified sound. She runs back to the bathroom. The film cuts to the television screen and then back to the bedroom, where Elle rushes in with her towel and unbuttons her husband's shirt. She runs back in the bathroom and then back to the TV. Her towel falls, she picks it up, turns the TV off and the film cuts to her legs jumping on the bed. They both cover underneath the bedsheets and giggle.

In a 1970 interview by Charles Thomas Samuels with Robert Bresson, the interviewer asks "Why do they always see races and machines on television?"[167] and Bresson explains that "The auto race excites them sexually in the scene after the wedding"[168]. On one level, the race aligns with Elle's "racing" excitement throughout the

[167] Charles Samuels, *Encountering Directors* (New York: Putnam, 1972), 57–76, https://archive.org/details/encounteringdire00samu.

[168] Charles Samuels, *Encountering Directors*, 57–76.

scene. In a secondary level, according to Bresson, the race seems to have a bodily impact on Elle. The trigger is material and specific to the sounds of the television rather than based on an idea about the wedding night. Excitement is embodied through the race on the television and at the same time triggered by it. The film has a formal break through the change of rhythm and the amplified sound stemming from the television. The rhythmic and auditory changes affect the senses of the viewer. The crisp, loud sound expresses the textural tactile of the vibrating car wheels on the asphalt, while the change of rhythm creates temporal tactility[169] that the viewer experiences. Bresson reduces the sensory impact to amplify it in this scene. Through the intensity of these effects which rise from the change in the form, Bresson creates an alternative saturated reality[170], that aligns with the fast televisual rhythms.

The second time the television appears in the film is after the scene where Elle places the flowers in the bottles and leaves the house after her husband grabs her arms. The scene ends with Elle closing the door. The film cuts to the television screen in Lui's bedroom, showing part of a documentary about World War II. A soldier starts the engine of a plane, airplanes take off and fly through the air accompanied by a strong mechanical sound. The film cuts to Lui who is waiting by the door, he walks towards the television and turns it off, making the scene almost entirely silent. As Bresson notes in his interview with Samuels "the noise of the airplanes goes with his anxious awaiting of her

[169] Jennifer Barker. *The Tactile Eye*, 145.

[170] Bert Cardullo, *The Films of Robert Bresson* (London: Anthem Press, 2009), 220.

at night"[171]. The sound and its harsh textures embody the character's anxiety. Yet, this time from a saturated reality crated from the sound and rhythm, we go back to the world of microsounds and detailed tactility. Once the television is off, we become aware of the sound of the switch, as Lui turns the light off and his footsteps as he walks to the bathroom. He takes off the robe, and against the silence, we can perceive the sounds the fabrics make when Lui's robe comes in contact with his nightwear and his nightwear the bedsheets as he slides in bed. It is the silence, that allows the viewer to perceive every small sound in the room, and share his subjectivity as it the small sounds are enlarge embodying the character's state of mind as he waits for Elle's return alone.

Bresson composes silence out of volume. As Bresson says, "silence is the great discovery of sound film"[172]. "Interestingly, the notation used in music to depict silence is called a 'rest' – a visual representation on a sheet of paper, but a rather active presence in the sense that it constructs rhythm"[173], in the same way that happens in the film. The transition from the saturated reality, constructed through the television, to silence has a bodily effect on the viewer. "Just as the surface sensuality of the film's objects, spaces, and sounds engages us physically and emotionally in the world of the film"[174] so do the rhythms of the film. The change in rhythm, urges us to become attentive and concurrently expands our attention to ourselves when we experience silence. In this way,

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[171] Charles Samuels, *Encountering Directors*, 57–76.
[172] Robert Bresson, *Bresson on Bresson,* 37.

[173] Morgan Meyer, "A Space for Silence: Exhibiting and Materialising Silence through Technology." *Cultural Geographies* 23, no. 2 (2016): 322.

[174] Jennifer Barker, *The Tactile Eye,* 139.

we can become conscious of the sound produced by possible movements we make and other microsounds that can be heard (when in silence). The way we experience silence thus contributes to our bodily experience of the film.

Overall, elements from the two previous films reappear and are re-explored. Through touch the film embodies economic, emotional and artistic responses to the world. It distinguishes between the different types of experiential perception. Even if Lui touches objects and is in continuous contact with materiality, the limitations of his evaluative interactions extend to a limiting view of the world. On the contrary, emotional and artistic responses that Elle embodies through her interaction with objects and subjects, as well as through changes in rhythm and her perception of form, exhibit a more multidimensional and less interpretative approach to life. The formal changes, such as the shift in body gestures during the play, and stylistic juxtapositions between sound and silence, further distinguish the couple's views while sharing them with the viewer. This occurs through the experiential elements of the film, sometimes through visceral effects while other times through the effect of gestures, sounds, silence and textural substances.

CONCLUSION

This thesis has explored three significant works of Robert Bresson's filmography, with an intention to show how their affective qualities can complement our understanding of the director's meanings. It diverges from approaching the stylistic and formal elements of the films as "visual representations" but explores them as "affective events". With an emphasis on bodies and touch, it has explored the cinematic meanings rising from the director's treatment of on-screen bodies and the effect on our bodies and our perception of the tactile structures in the films. As a result, touch, becomes a crucial element in our understanding, being the primary way, the characters interact with the world and at the same time the way the film sometimes affects the viewer's body.

Vivian Sobchack, Jennifer Barker and Laura Marks drawing from Maurice Merleau-Ponty, provide a framework of how a film can "touch" the viewer by broadening the definition of touch as a contactless act yet with a bodily effect. Textural, spatial and temporal tactile structures are shared by the film and the viewer[175]. Our vision and even the characters' vision in the films, as we see in Chapter Three, becomes an embodied experience[176] deeply connected to touch. While Laura McMahon drawing from Jean-Luc Nancy explores touch as both contact and withdrawal, balancing the focus of the analysis among touch expressed between film and spectator and touch in literal bodies appearing on-screen[177]. Expanding from this framework, this thesis has addressed some of

[175] Jennifer Barker, *The Tactile Eye,* 145.

[176] Vivian Sobchack, *The Address of the Eye*, 307.

[177] Laura McMahon, *Cinema and Contact,* 3.

Bresson's meanings. In all three films, meanings depend on juxtaposition, which in turn depend on our attentive experience of the character's bodies and the film's effects on ours.

Dufrenne writes, "meaning itself must traverse the body. Meaning can be read by feeling or elaborated upon by reflection only if it is first received and experienced by the body, that is, if the body is intelligent from the beginning"[178]. Bresson explores the different aspects of this thought through his characters, that can create meaning through their bodies, and often understand meaning through their awareness of the sensorial structures they are caught in, like Fontaine. In Chapter One, audible and visual tactility becomes a way to share Fontaine's subjectivity with the viewer and introduce his experiential view of life. His touch becomes a way of differentiating him from the other characters in the film and reveal his experiential understanding of the world that leads him to free himself in the end. Through this juxtaposition, Bresson reveals the differences between experiential and symbolic understandings (such as the Christian theoretical framework that the Pastor's view is based on) and directly connects them to the perception and expression of the body, which also is something that he strives for in his films, namely, an experiential presentation rather than a symbolic one. Bresson reveals that Fontaine is the one who escapes because his body is closer to the physical world through his understanding of it. By transforming objects, Fontaine reveals the different sides of their multidimensional essence, whereas other characters like the Pastor see

[178] Mikel Dufrenne, *The Phenomenology of Aesthetic Experience,* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973), 341 **quoted in** Jennifer Barker, *The Tactile Eye,* 160.

objects, like the Bible, according to what their label dictates, or even only to what they symbolize and disregard their conception as part of matter. Visceral effects of sounds, both perceived by bodies and the character's body, engages us with materiality of the world; as spectators we become conscious of the significance of the sensory experience of the film as part of the character's advantage that allows his escape, and in turn, our advantage, to understand the film.

Chapter Two reflects on the experiential view of the world and how this approach, that appears superior in *A Man Escaped*, can become problematic through a different kind of relationship with the world. Our closeness to the material world can be problematic or not depending on how our minds and our bodies decide and compel to touch it. Juxtapositions in *Pickpocket* reveal a dual role within the character himself that becomes the effect of his problematic decisions and compulsion. Even though he becomes attentive of the sensory input of the environment in a very similar way to Fontaine, using sounds or his gaze as a cover for what his hands perform, Michel has inverted the world he is approaching so attentively; he applies sensualism when he steals objects, and passivity in his relationships with humans. Sensualism is not supposed to be perceived while apathy is the optimum image in order to hide his actions as he blends with the rest of people in his society. However, his relationship to matter is not an avaricious one, rather a strange materialistic one. By showing Michel coming in contact with subjects and objects through a problematic touch while he does not aim for wealth, Bresson distinguishes between a regular thief that wants to get wealthier and Michel who steals a beautiful watch but does not wear it or sell it. Thus, Bresson shows how, Michel's

experiential approach has diminished all other principles than the reality of matter, that his hands compel him to interact with. The subtle shift in the characters' touch from *A Man Escaped* to *Pickpocket*, exhibits Bresson evolution in style and the interconnection of thematic threads to it: The fragmentation that leads to a split in Michel's consciousness and the juxtapositions between different types of touch and the different relations to the surroundings, explore new aspects of the experiential reality in *A Man Escaped.*

In Chapter Three we finally see how the exploration of touch not only reveals the director's cinematic meanings but further exhibits the evolution of Bresson's style and especially form, and as a direct result the gradual increase in the complexity of his meanings. The formal changes interplay with the characters; The excerpt of *Hamlet* evolves the narrative, but breaks the usual Bressonian experience for the viewer and Elle. The man's understanding of the world in the film is differentiated from the woman's through the juxtaposition of the different levels of perceptiveness. Lui's character shows that calculating the value of everything, even theatre, through money, eliminates the importance of other juxtapositions that reveal meaning and even the reasons of his wife's suicide. Furthermore, Bresson seems to re-explore the elements from *A Man Escaped* and *Pickpocket,* by taking their extremes and adding them together: Elle's advanced experiential perception with Lui's materialistic relationship with the world, create a miscommunication that on the surface cannot seem to be pinned down unless we experience the different subjectivities of the two characters. At the same time, Bresson teaches us, through our sensory experience of *A Gentle Woman*, the similarities and differences between different forms of arts and between life and art. Life as art remains

inexplicit as there is no single frame of reference to apply to it and interpret it through that. Lui's explicit view — a materialistic one reduced to calculating value through money — confines his wife's artistic view of life.

Bresson raises issues of our relationship with matter through touch while shows how physical elements of the world "touch" us back, such as sounds and textures. The meaning of Bresson's artistic images is founded in their materiality; parallelly they explore the materiality of the world, and through that, the different relationship humans have with it. Starting from the simple element of touch, that all humans experience, Bresson crafts juxtapositions that reveal radical differences among humans' perceptions. From the Pastor's metaphorical view disregarding aspects of physical experience, to the withdrawal from it through the shocking effect of the shooting in our viscera, to the oscillation between Fontaine's sensual touch of a bag's texture and drawing back through the medium shot of Michel's idle face, to the magnification of Lui's materialism through his fragmented hands, Bresson creates meaning through shifts in our senses, the textures of experience, through the different types of touch, through hands and bodies, that become part of the human *relationship* with the material world.

The relational values that Bresson seems to explore in his films seem to be directly related with the increasing use of juxtapositions in his films. In *A Man Escaped* juxtapositions appear through the different ways characters interact, in *Pickpocket* juxtapositions appear even within the same character, while in *A Gentle Woman,* juxtapositions expand to the formal changes of the film, the character's physical and artistic relationships with matter. What remains the same in all three films, is that Bresson

keeps the viewer close to the material experience to communicate meaning. A table falling, a chair rocking, and a pot smashing becomes the relative physical reality that connects the woman's interaction before and after suicide; even death is experienced through its practical aftermath due to Bresson's interests in a relative truth.

Bresson's art films diverge from life by rearranging its structures, yet remain true to its essence by lessening representations and holding true relations. Bresson's films both explore the corporeal and at the same time communicate meanings in a physical way. The characters' senses are embodied and interweave with films' stylistic choices affecting the viewer's senses. "Haptic" derives from the Greek word "haptein" that means "to fasten", that exhibits one of the reasons that the observation of haptic elements allows us to come *closer* to the films we watch, as its characters concurrently touch the world and experience it through their own bodies.

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