

Mouchette and the Sacrificial Scene: Bresson's Cinematic Anthropology

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Introduction

A certain tendency in Film Studies seeks to hastily affix the facile labels of “spiritual,” “Catholic,” or even “Jansenist” to the work of French filmmaker Robert Bresson without taking the time to explore the implications of such pigeonholing.⁽¹⁾ When directly asked whether or not he considered his films to be “religious,” Bresson would respond in the affirmative, but would nuance the question by stating that he was indeed “*croyant*” (literally, “a believer”) and that his beliefs must naturally find a way into his films.⁽²⁾ However, reducing Bresson’s challenging body of work to traditional Christian tropes is, in a sense, merely a way to evade the intellectually taxing enterprise of analyzing these most esoteric films—especially when one considers the degree to which Bresson breaks from conventional Catholic thought. Those labeled his “most spiritual films,” namely *Au hasard*, *Balthazar* and *Mouchette*, include scenes of human cruelty, prostitution, rape, and suicide, which are employed more to illustrate human interaction within a society than to act as a dogmatic assertion of religious creed. In other words, his work is much more anthropological than theological. In fact, his films often seem to pose more questions than they offer answers. Thus, while embodying certain Catholic themes in his films, Bresson appears to be turning the mirror on ritual and aiming to understand its sociological and anthropological underpinnings. This seems especially the case in the film to be studied in this essay: Bresson’s 1967 offering *Mouchette*, where transcendence, even redemption, is found in an act of suicide, a mortal sin held as unpardonable by the Catholic faith.

While Bresson’s Catholicism certainly has bearing on the film, especially in all that concerns his choice of symbolism and motifs (the number three, falling objects representing the Fall, stigmata, etc.), *Mouchette* is the Bresson film that most fully presents the filmmaker’s anthropology. As we follow this young girl from rejection to violation to suicide, we become complicit as members of the society that virtually sacrifices her. Employing his signature cinematography that accentuates either sound or image, Bresson creates an uneasy mood that the viewer carries to the cathartic moment in the final (self-)sacrificial scene. Still, as

this essay aims to demonstrate, *Mouchette* is not as concerned with presenting a poetics of transcendence as it is with understanding how man negotiates his own redemption. In no way does this study attempt to undermine Bresson's Catholicism; rather, I suggest that by understanding his anthropological concept of sacrifice and his sociologically-driven vision of humanity, one can better grasp and further nuance what it meant to be Catholic for a complex thinker like Bresson, whose ideas often challenge religious convention. With a sound understanding of the sacrificial nature of society and mankind's precarious place within it, in *Mouchette*, Bresson cinematically expounds an anthropology that depicts our role in redemption.

From *Au hasard Balthazar* (1966) to *Mouchette* (1967): Reflections on Society and Violence

Released only ten months apart, Bresson's final two black-and-white features are often considered the most "spiritual" of his films. His 1966 *Au hasard Balthazar* presents an elliptical narrative of the tragic life of a donkey, which parallels that of his first owner, a young girl named Marie, both of whom are trampled and debased by the cruelties of society until the donkey ultimately dies a senseless and ignominious death away from his beloved. Choosing a donkey as his central protagonist, Bresson appeals to the humble beast of burden's "time-honored place both at the Christmas crib and in Christ's triumphal entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday" (Cunneen 98). The choice of the name of Marie, who in the film is repeatedly sullied to save her donkey from the same society that will ultimately slaughter him, carries obvious religious connotations as well. In fact, some have gone as far as to read the humble Balthazar, her "son," as a "Christ-figure" (cf. Cunneen 105). As compelling as such a reading may be, unlike that of Christ, Balthazar's death serves no transcendent end: no sin is atoned for and no mortal being expiated through the shedding of his blood. As indicated by the elliptical presentation of events from the donkey's life, he dies as arbitrarily as he has lived. In fact, Jean-Luc Godard's reading of the film is much more incisive: "Ce film, c'est le monde. Vraiment, en une heure et demie, en une heure quarante, on voit le monde depuis l'enfance jusqu'à la mort avec tout." [This film represents the world. Really, in an hour and a half, in an hour and forty minutes, we see the entire world from childhood to death.]⁽³⁾ Essentially, the violence enacted upon the donkey represents that of society towards its own scapegoats. In other words, the death of Balthazar is more a reflection of society's arbitrary violence and an individual's release through death than any message of intercessory salvation. A scapegoat in life that is sanctified in death, Balthazar merits our attention as he draws in the cruelty of society and mitigates it through his escape from the world.

Upping the ante in his subsequent film—as if the struggle of a helpless beast was not sufficiently powerful as an image of the cruelties of society—Bresson makes his next victim the eponymous *Mouchette*, a young social misfit who is driven to suicide in what has been described as "one of the most searing portraits of human desperation ever put on film."⁽⁴⁾

In making this transition from beast of burden to fellow human being, Bresson embodies, most vividly and horrifically, his anthropological vision. French novelist Georges Bernanos, upon whose *Nouvelle histoire de Mouchette* (1936) the film is based, claimed inspiration for this story about “une fillette traquée par le malheur et l’injustice” (1886n) [a young girl stalked by misfortune and injustice] from his first-hand witness of the atrocities and miseries of the Spanish Civil War while exiled in Majorca. Borrowing Spanish tropes from Bernanos and relating Mouchette’s demise to that of Balthazar, in his *Cahiers de l’Herne* interview on the novelist, Bresson explains Mouchette’s character in terms of Bullfighting: “(E)lle était comme un taureau qui reçoit des banderilles, les piques, et l’épée” (15). [She was like a bull who receives *banderillas*, lances, and the sword.] In the sacrificial scene of the *corrida*, spectators are simultaneously drawn in and repulsed by the ritual violence enacted upon the sacred/sacrificial body of the bull. One is met with a Kierkegaardian crossroads of *skandalon*, where one must reject or forge ahead, the violence becoming either a stumbling block or a necessary-albeit atrocious-part of scenic ritual. In fact, the filmmaker admits in this same interview that extending the domain of the *corrida* to the life of the village and the progressive destruction of this young adolescent at the hands of society is what drew him to the text: “Je me défiais de l’atroce” (13). [I wanted to defy atrocity.] So effectively does Bresson cinematically depict atrocity that critically engaging with his film nearly equates to an act of self-flagellation as we as viewers implicate ourselves and become complicit in the communal torture of this innocent child. However, as the film progresses to its climactic conclusion, the *askēsis* eventually gives way to a cathartic-even transcendental-sense of hope, which is wrought, ironically, in the scene of the protagonist’s suicide.

Mouchette’s Victimary Status: A scenic analysis of Ostracism, Violation, and Sacrifice

At a narrative level, *Mouchette* is the rather simple tale of a wretched young outcast, who, rejected from all circles of society (family, school, community), over the span of a few days is subjected to various tribulations—including ostracism from peers and family, rape at the hand of an older man she trusted, and the death of her mother—and is finally so downtrodden that she takes her own life. For this film to go beyond the sadistic observation of (even participation in/complicity with) the progressive demoralization of this young victim, it is essential that Bresson both establish a pathetic image of social marginalization as well as provide meaning—even a transcendental sense of hope—to the ultimate scene of suicide. In the three sequences I will analyze over the course of this article—the introduction of Mouchette as scapegoat (00:06:02- 00:14:21), her rape at the hands of a local villager (00:42:17- 00:53:45), and, finally, her suicide (01:18:01- 01:21:07)—Bresson establishes a cinematic interplay between sound and image that creates a contagious tension in the audience as it builds to the sacrificial moment. While introducing Mouchette as a social misfit in the first scene, Bresson at the same time provides subtle thematic clues and motifs that will recur in the two other scenes to be analyzed, which will ultimately allow his

anthropological message to break through the sentimental *and transcendental* (or Christian) mood that had been the backdrop of the entire film.

i. Mouchette as Misfit: Depicting Disconnect

By design, the young Mouchette (played by non-professional actress Nadine Nortier), is the center of our focus in the film. As Bresson explained to Jean-Luc Godard in a 1966 *Cahiers du cinéma* interview that preceded the film's release: "I want to concentrate, constantly, absolutely, on one face, the face of this little girl, to see her reactions. . . . That is what interests me. The camera will not leave her" (cited in Cunneen 112). Following two brief vignettes (to which I will return), which bracket the narrative and represent a sort of *mise-en-abyme* for the entire film, Bresson introduces us to Mouchette as a social misfit in three "concentrated and economical" scenes (McNeece 269) that effectively separate her from peers, home, and community. Visually detaching and isolating her from these various social levels is key to establishing her character and allowing her to entropically evolve as different and apart-and thus subject to scapegoating. Employing parsimonious cinematography and an austere *mise-en-scène*, Bresson successfully creates this mood of dejection in these early sequences.

In the first scene to be analyzed, social disconnect is related in a matter of seconds. Set at the school gates, it depicts Mouchette, dressed in a drab grey housecoat and walking lethargically towards the threshold, being passed by on both sides by classmates, whose cheery disposition, well-kempt hair, and lightly-hued spring dresses separate them from her, as they rush to enter the gate. Eventually fixing the camera on and panning with a now solitary Mouchette, Bresson zooms to a medium close-up to catch her reaction: she sighs deeply, hesitates at the gate, and with an expression of profound angst and despair, stares off into the distance. Even when acknowledged by a classmate, it is painfully clear that Mouchette has no status or sense of belonging in this world of juvenile girls. She is a misfit.

From this scene of isolation amongst peers, we next see Mouchette at home in her equally desperate family situation. Dwelling in a squalid, one-room shack that lacks basic amenities and is located immediately next to a busy highway, she is left to tend to her ailing, bed-ridden mother and provide all care for her infant brother. As her father and older brother, whom Bresson has just introduced in a previous scene as local bootleggers who sell alcohol on the black market, return home, they do so without any greeting or acknowledgment-verbal or non-verbal-of Mouchette or her mother. The brother leaves the screen in seconds and the father immediately collapses, flopping down onto his shabby cot, removes his hat, and pretends it is a steering wheel in some infantile game that Tony Rayns describes as a "perfect disconnect."⁽⁵⁾ Mouchette's pitiful domestic separation is amplified by Bresson's signature concentration on diegetic, off-screen sound:⁽⁶⁾ the exaggerated whoosh of speeding automobiles and clatter of delivery trucks on the freeway, the shrill cries of Mouchette's baby brother, the raspy breathing of her mother, and the sputtering car

noises of the absentee father, all contribute to sense of desolation that is reflected, once again as the scene fades to black, in Mouchette's face as she impassively gazes into the distance and apathetically retires to her own cot on the floor.

Sound also plays an essential role in a third scene, which rounds out Mouchette's identity as social misfit, rejected by peers, family, and now community, as represented by the schoolmistress. In another scene at the school gates, where Mouchette once again lags behind, a prevalent, cheery blend of giggles and gossipy side conversations eventually gives way to the lone, grave clunk of the trailing Mouchette's oversized clogs on the pavement and tile as she tardily stomps into the classroom.⁽⁷⁾ Met with the scornful gaze of the schoolmistress (which is ironically, almost comically, aggravated by Bresson with a prolonged, low-angle, point-of-view shot to reinforce Mouchette's anxiety, inferior position, and status as societal scapegoat), the impassive and rebellious Mouchette merely stares back. As this shot dissolves into the next, we witness another sign of revolt as Mouchette refuses to sing along in the music class. However, beyond depicting a simple act of rebellion, Bresson offers here a rich clue to understanding the film's central paradox. In what constitutes the opening scene of Bernanos' novella, the girls are standing and—all but Mouchette—singing in unison an apparently banal song about Christopher Columbus' discovery of the New World. Forebodingly circling the girls, upon noticing that Mouchette is not singing, the school-teacher violently shoves the young adolescent to the piano and, grasping her by the nape of the neck, forces her to listen to the first few notes and sing by herself. While Mouchette's humiliation before her classmates and their amusement at this ridiculous spectacle reconfirm her status as social misfit, our attention in this scene is beckoned elsewhere: to the suggestive lyrics of a song that we will hear again, one whose subject speaks to the paradox of hope and redemption at the heart of the film.

Ultimately reduced to tears by her inability to hit a musical note, Mouchette, in false tones, sings the following lyrics (adapted for the film by Bresson's composer Jean Wiener):⁽⁸⁾

-Espérez!-Plus d'espérance!
-Trois jours, leur dit Colomb,
En montrant le ciel immense,
Le fond de l'horizon.
Trois jours et je vous donne un monde
Vous qui n'avez plus d'espoir,
Sur l'immensité profonde
Ses yeux s'ouvraient pour le voir.

[Hope! Hope is dead! / Three days, Columbus said to them, / Pointing to the vast sky ahead / That stretched beyond the horizon. / Three days and I'll give you a world / to you who have no more hope / Over the vast depths / He opened wide

his eyes.](9)

In the case of the figure of Columbus in this poem, the imperative “Espérez!” (Hope!) that begins the poem is based on his faith that beyond the horizon and despite the naysayers in his company, hope of a new world still exists. Juxtaposing this command with the reply “Hope is dead!” the film seems to ask whether or not, in the face of such seemingly insurmountable adversity, one can still find place to hope. Of great significance is Columbus’ retort to the naysayers: “Three days,” which matches the period between the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ—the quintessential scapegoat, who was ostracized, violated, and crucified by society, thus rendering hope possible. However, in this case, Mouchette’s (and, by connection, Bresson’s) Christ is not necessarily the image of transcendence and guaranteed salvation a Christian reading would generally propose. While Columbus’ three days hold the promise of a new world beyond the horizon to those who have no more hope, for the rebellious Mouchette who sings these lyrics, as we shall soon see, hope is located not in accepting Christ’s expiatory sacrifice as infinite but rather in recognizing him as a scapegoat whose choice of sacrifice at the hands of society liberated him from the pains of life. Mouchette’s negotiation of the potential for hope is more internal and individualistic in nature than that of Columbus and is substantially based upon her personal experience of degradation. While we cannot know as much at this point in the film, Bresson’s focus on Mouchette’s humiliation in singing this song opens the doors to an overarching paradox upon which the plot—and the film’s anthropological message—will hinge—especially in the closing scenes when we hear the song again. With his focus on this song/poem, Bresson seems to ask each viewer to reconsider his or her personal, human role in enacting hope and how this hope figures into our own earthly redemption.

The answer to this all-important question is dependent upon an understanding of Mouchette’s degraded situation and the character’s complete evolution to victimary status. To this point in the film (and our analysis), she is but a social misfit; however, in order to more fully come to terms with this status, it is useful to understand the society from which she is ostracized and will ultimately escape. Her home town is a decaying collectivity in the Vaucluse region of southeastern France that Keith Reader describes as “a spiritually and materially impoverished village community” (89). In a 1967 interview accorded to Theodor Kotulla on the set of *Mouchette*, which would be included in his award-winning documentary *Au hasard Bresson*, the filmmaker takes a Manichean stance in asserting that “Il y a la solidarité dans le bien et il y a la solidarité dans le mal. J’ai choisi pour [*Mouchette*], la solidarité dans le mal. Il y a encore, oui, une espèce de solidarité dans le mal contre la pauvre Mouchette.” [“There is solidarity in good and solidarity in evil. For [*Mouchette*], I chose to focus solely on the solidarity in evil. There’s a kind of evil complicity against poor Mouchette.”](10) The small town is plagued with alcoholism, marital infidelity, unbridled masculinity, violence, and moral ambivalence. Mouchette’s father and brother, we have already seen, operate by selling liquor on the black market, with complicit police that

turn an indifferent eye to a crate left behind. They, like other townsfolk, are paid in shots of alcohol, consumed without speech. Following Sunday mass, the village parishioners leave church and hastily head to the bar before the bells cease to toll. Mouchette's dying mother has to hide gin from her abusive spouse. Even the town's interdependent poacher/warden pair, Arsène and Mathieu, bring an end to their cat-and-mouse charade in the woods by sharing a drink from Arsène's canteen full of gin. The motif of alcohol and its abuse stands as a distinctive mark of the moral decay of Mouchette's society; however, the corruption of this town is not limited to alcoholism. Nearly all the social actions we witness are heavy-laden with lawlessness, abuse, violence, and/or oppressive sexuality. To name but a few: the married warden Mathieu is, at least, attempting to seduce the barmaid Louisa; Mouchette's father and the school mistress violently shove her in three separate scenes; young boys expose themselves to Mouchette as she walks home from school and, last not least, Mouchette is raped by a poacher, an outsider whose survival depends on his transgressing the law. Indeed, Mouchette's society is one of extreme decadence and lawlessness, one that is ripe for a scapegoat upon whose back it can collectively discharge the burden of its vice and one from which the victim will gladly depart.

ii. From Outcast to Victim: Mouchette's Rape and its Consequences

Another scene of confrontation with the young classmates who have spurned her—in which Mouchette appears alone filmed at a low angle in a ditch throwing mud at a group of cheerful young girls who are giggling and spritzing each other with perfume before leaving with their boyfriends—prepares the determining scene for the entire film. After having her mud-cake assault basically ignored by her peers, Mouchette takes a momentous walk into the woods that will essentially all but seal her fate. Finding herself in a rainstorm, she takes refuge under a tree, not far from the location of a physical altercation between the poacher Arsène and Mathieu the warden, one that oddly ends in the two men sharing the gin from Arsène's canteen in an indication of their co-dependency. Upon being discovered by Arsène, the young Mouchette, who was far enough removed from the conflict not to witness the outcome, pretends she is lost and then decides to accompany the poacher to his hut in the woods, where together they devise an alibi should the police question Mouchette. While it is unclear at this time why Arsène would need an alibi, this act of solidarity with a member of her society—a marginalized outcast himself no less—provides Mouchette an unprecedented bond with another human being. This acceptance and complicity with Arsène will, however, soon prove her undoing and assure her victimary status.

From the hut, Mouchette follows Arsène to a deserted bar. Kicking in the door, Arsène enters and continues constructing his alibi, oddly changing his story and now admitting that he believes he has killed a man and that he needs Mouchette to stand by him. Arsène, who was unaware of what she may have seen, is astonished to hear Mouchette mention Mathieu and, between sips of gin, constructs an unlikely story of their struggle. As the details become increasingly vague and Arsène's speech begins to slur, he suddenly drops the

canteen and begins to rub his forehead, all the while reassuring Mouchette that all is well and this is a common occurrence for him, which he calls *une absence* [a blackout]. Approaching Mouchette and now perspiring and continuing to rub his brow, temple, and eyes, the poacher continues the story (that we later discover to be entirely untrue) of his murder of Mathieu, who he claims to have killed with his rabbit trap. Whether a delusion as part of the *absence*, the result of an earlier blackout, or a pure invention altogether,⁽¹¹⁾ we never fully know—but, we see Mouchette buying into it, despite evidence to the contrary. What this confession allows is for Mouchette to become even more complicit with Arsène, reassuring him that he can count on her, that she hates everyone in her village, and that she will defend him against them all. This intense solidarity she feels with Arsène is accompanied by his progressively falling deeper and deeper into an *absence*. Eventually, he begins to drool, his vision becomes hazy, and, he falls violently to the ground, where he convulses and a stream of blood and frothy gin spew from his mouth. Rather than being repulsed at this scene or escaping, Mouchette kneels beside her new accomplice and, with a rare smile, steadies his head in her arms, wipes the bloody foam from his lips, and, as the seizure passes, begins to sing to him. The song is none other than the same Columbus song she had sung earlier; however, this time—with the acceptance of a fellow outcast—she is pitch-perfect, hitting the note she had missed with her classmates.

As Arsène regains his senses, the two smile at each other; then, he arises, grabs his rifle and canteen and offers to accompany Mouchette back to her house. Unsure of how wise his idea is, Mouchette demonstrates her devotion to Arsène, reminding him that (at least according to his story) he had killed Mathieu, something of which he now appears to be totally ignorant. Hanging his gun and canteen on the rack, Arsène then blocks the door with his body, pursues a suddenly uneasy Mouchette, and threatens to kill her if she utters a word of the affair to anyone. Assuring him she would rather die than harm him, Mouchette drops her satchel to the ground and watches in disbelief as Arsène caresses her shoulder. Pushing him away proves futile as his drunken attempts to capture her culminate in his throwing her onto a pile of kindling, where he forces himself upon her and rapes her. Significantly, while Mouchette resists at first, her struggle is accompanied by—once again—*three* audibly exaggerated moans, the last of which is paired with a medium close-up of her hands on Arsène's back, once constricted in resistance, now oddly relaxed and caressing him as he violates her.

As Mouchette's perceived complicity with Arsène gives way to distrust and violation, the physical act of violation further transforms into an act of consensual love. The rape/love scene, which immediately follows Mouchette's pitch-perfect rendition of the Columbus song and a series of objects falling (canteen, Arsène, Mouchette's satchel, bottles), is significant as it represents a transformative action whose discovery transfigures Mouchette from simple outcast to victim. Already spurned by society, Mouchette bears salient marks of this physical, sexual initiation (gin on her breath, her unbuttoned top, scratches on her chest, her defense of Arsène, etc.), which will lead her neighbors to deduce (albeit erroneously)

and react to what has taken place. As varied accounts of the event circulate in her society, it is this misinterpreted sexual act that assures Mouchette's victimary status, thus rendering impossible her continued status as a marginal youth. In its stead, the village will see her as a common whore, while she grapples with the dual status of *woman* capable of love as well as *victim* of a horrific act of violence. If we are to read Christian themes into Bresson's anthropology (as I think we should considering the repetition of the number three), we must do so in seeing Christ as the exemplary victim—another outcast, who was unduly scorned and violated to bring about, first, his own redemption and then that of mankind. Again, in *Au hasard Bresson*, the filmmaker is quite clear on this point. Feeling that Bernanos had glossed an important step that is, what he terms, “the *transformation of the soul*,” Bresson holds that a central message of the film is as follows:

Bien sûr, la rédemption ne se fait pas dans la mort—on ne sait pas ce qui se passe après. Mais, la rédemption doit se faire dans la vie même—au moment même—là, dans notre vie. Le Christ nous a rachetés par sa mort; mais, nous, nous sommes rachetés de notre vivant. C'est à nous de bien vouloir nous faire racheter.

[Of course, redemption is not achieved in death—we don't know what happens in the hereafter. But, redemption must occur in life itself—now, in this moment—here, in life. Christ redeemed us with his death; but, we redeem ourselves in life. It's up to us to be willing to be redeemed.]([12](#))

For Bresson, redemption is an important step; however, human beings play an active role in their own redemption, one that can be expressed through free agency and will. While holding that Christ paid the price of our redemption for the hereafter, the filmmaker's anthropology is concerned with this world, where we redeem ourselves in emulating Christ's expiatory suffering and sacrifice, where we are saved with our own stripes.

Mouchette's redemption is assured in her transfiguration from social outcast to scapegoat—as her victimary status has been assured. As she redeems herself, Bresson includes imagery and motifs that reflect the ideas of a lost and fallen state. For example, Rayns notices a motif of dropping, pointing to at least four cases (there are more) where Bresson uses a low camera angle to show objects falling and crashing to the ground; yet, the critic insists that there is no clear meaning and nothing to decode in this motif. However, read both anthropologically and from a Christian perspective, these images of falling objects point to the Catholic doctrine of the Fall of Mankind, which necessitates the intervention of the Christ in the first place. The four scenes in question—the dropping of the boy's pants when he exposes himself to Mouchette, Arsène's steel rabbit trap clanking on the ground when he is confronted by Mathieu in the woods, Mouchette's satchel falling to the floor of the bar when she is about to be raped by Arsène and, later, Mouchette's dropping of the tea cup at the grocers' exposing the scratches on her chest—are all moments of rupture that

mark Mouchette in her life's experience, and all are visual images of mankind's destitution. This point is supported by the stain or mark of sin with which Bresson has likewise imbued his film—in the motif of mud. When mocked at school, Mouchette retaliates by throwing mud at her classmates. She loses her clog in mud before the fateful meeting with Arsène. She stamps her feet in mud before entering the church and repeats this action later when she grinds the mud into the rug of the “*sale, vieille bête*” [dirty old beast (my italics)] who offers her a shroud and a few dresses to wear for the interment of her deceased mother. When she does dishes at the bar on Sunday to earn a few extra *sous* for her alcoholic father, her wet, dirty hands soil her skirt. She wipes the bloody foam from Arsène's mouth with her handkerchief when he has an epileptic *crise*. She spills coffee on the table at home and loosely swaddles her baby brother after he's dirtied his diaper. And, finally, when she reacts to her father's curt response to her and false devotion at the bedside of his deceased wife, Mouchette uses a key term of *souillure* (that Bernanos explains is the worst word she knows): *Merde!* [Shit!]. Numerous are the metaphors of the experience of moral depravity and indelible are the marks left behind on this young social misfit.

Two themes that Rayns analyzes exceptionally well are those of experience and sexuality. As she is forced to assume the role of a mother even before she is fully a woman, Mouchette's venture into womanhood is as corrupted as is everything else in her life. Poet and essayist Robert Polito aptly titles his comments on the film “Girl, Interrupted,” focusing on the fact that “For Mouchette, love, sex, empathy, service, humiliation, and force are all bound up together.” While her “white-knickered” (Rayns) classmates are riding off on motorbikes with older boys, Mouchette is subjected to flashing by young boys at the distillery. Given a sole chance at a normal development and happiness in the flirtation scene on the bumper cars, the natural course of her sentimental education is thwarted as her father suddenly appears and violently shoves her away from her potential paramour. When she gets lost in the woods during Arsène's “cyclone,” not only is she sexualized by Bresson's camera angle (Rayns) as she wrings the water from her soaked stockings, she realizes her sexual awakening as she is raped by the man she has just cared for through an epileptic fit. From outcast to victim, as classmate, pupil, daughter, sister, caretaker, citizen and “lover,” Mouchette progressively has her most basic desires and needs frustrated by the prevalence of worldly carnality. Physically and emotionally marked by this carnality, in the violation that is rape, she is forever separated from youthful innocence and, as a victim, has earned the basis for her redemption in life.

iii. Sealing Fate: Mouchette's Death and Bresson's Poetics of Redemption

In order for Bresson's message to ring true, “Mouchette ne doit pas seulement souffrir mais en mourir” (*Au hasard Bresson*). [“Mouchette must not only suffer but also die.”] Before she dies, however, she must make another pass through the village and face the society that has rejected her. Having lost her mother on the same fateful night, in a community with sympathy, Mouchette should normally be consoled and taken in by benevolent neighbors.

However, such is not the case in this depraved society. Once again, her rejection occurs with the motif of three. Bearing physical marks of her experiences, she is questioned about the odor of gin on her breath by the inquisitive Madame Mathieu, whose husband is very much alive, and to whom she simply replies, “[Arsène] is my *lover*” (which also indicates that she has accepted this role as woman and outcast). When the grocer’s wife, who has invited Mouchette in for coffee and croissants upon hearing the news of her mother, notices the bloody scratch marks on her chest, which can even be interpreted as a stigmata, the physical manifestations of Christ’s suffering, she dismisses Mouchette as a common “whore” [*traînée*]. While the simultaneous dropping of the tea cup symbolizes the depravity of this world, the third potential surrogate for her mother that Mouchette encounters en route to her death is the aforementioned *sale, vieille bête*, who has offered Mouchette a shroud for her mother, dresses to wear to the funeral, and her services to stand in wake with the body. She is not, however, as directly related to the stain/mark of depravity as she is the idea of death, the final step in Mouchette’s rejection from society. In fact, Mouchette’s disgusted name-calling is prompted by this woman’s explanation of her strange cult of the dead, which prompts the young girl to flee the awkward situation and escape to the woods, with death fresh in her mind.

Arriving in the forest and witnessing hunters shoot and kill rabbits right before her eyes (presented graphically by Bresson in a lengthy scene), the thought of death-as-escape presents itself—for a *third* time (her mother, the old woman, and now the rabbit)—in Mouchette. In fact, this hunting scene both parallels and completes the frame of the second of the two *mise-en-abyme* scenes that open the film, which immediately follows the opening credits. This early scene, containing a montage of a series of close-ups on hands, glancing eyes and game traps—reminiscent of Bresson’s *Pickpocket*—introduces us to two characters that we later learn are Arsène and Mathieu. The poacher sets a trap and catches a partridge; the game warden, seeing the partridge suffer and struggle on earth, eventually lets it fly free, in another case of exaggerated sound with the wings flapping freely as the bird ascends to the heavens. Naturally, this partridge can be taken to represent Mouchette, whom Bresson calls “the prey,” and her earthly sufferings that will eventually give way to an upward release, a moving away from this world. This early scene mirrors that of the rabbit hunt, where, as she stares down at the dead beast in shock, Mouchette appears to be overcome with a pervading sense of animal kinship and solidarity similar to that felt the evening before with Arsène.

Escaping from the scene of the rabbit hunt and arriving at a hill near a pond, Mouchette next sits and opens the package from her elderly neighbor and holds a light-colored, muslin dress against her figure for size, but not without catching and tearing it, however, on a shrub beneath her. Gunita Randhawa interprets this rupture poetically as the complete rupture in her life and an example of Mouchette caught in a trap, as was the partridge, the one unique path to liberation: death (102). Marked by sin and a witness to death (her mother, the rabbit) and trapped as an object of inescapable hostility, Mouchette realizes the

only path to freedom from society and redemption is her own death. The other *mise-en-abyme* frame at the beginning of the film depicts—although unknown at this time—Mouchette’s mother (played by French novelist Marie Cardinal), who, seated in a church with tears on her face, prefaces both her own death and the unsure fate of her family: “What will become of them without me? I can feel it in my breast; it’s like a stone inside.” The answer to her question (and the nagging pain in her breast) comes in the final scene, thus rounding out the framed narrative, when Mouchette, the only hope for the dysfunctional family, abandons her brothers and father and joins her mother in death.

While depravity, death, and hopelessness weigh heavily in this final scene, Mouchette’s decision to end her life by suicide is made rather instantaneously. We must insist, as does Fanny Howe, on the random, unpremeditated nature of Mouchette’s suicide, as being caught in a moment. “Suicide is usually a reaction to one’s own idea of a future. . . . Rather than running and shedding the present in a state of blind hope, you falter and feel the rest coming at you” (46). And, later, “One is seized by suicide as one is seized by love” (47). Initially, Mouchette’s rolling down the hill appears to be no more than a little game she’s invented, perhaps a way to sully the dress as she has stained everything else in her life. Following her first of *three* rolls down the hill, she notices and waves at a neighbor on a tractor, possibly suggesting second thoughts about what she was doing or simply requesting a ride back into town. When this final chance at conciliation with a society that has repeatedly rejected her once again fails, (13) she looks down twice in despair (as she did when we first saw her at the school gate and with her family), ascends the hill again, wraps herself in the dress and begins to roll. Off-screen, we hear the deep, spaced peals of a church bell (perhaps the *glas* announcing the death of Mouchette’s mother and, quite possibly, presaging her own). The second roll down the hill, this time towards the water, with the heightened sound of Mouchette’s body and clogs banging over the terrain, results in her being tangled in some shrubbery alongside the pond—and is immediately followed by another resounding peal of the church bell. On the third trip down the hill, (14) Bresson follows Mouchette with the camera, panning to a certain point and then stopping to allow her to leave the frame. Suddenly, we hear a pronounced splash off-screen, following which Bresson cuts to a moderately high-angled shot of the water rippling and Mouchette’s muslin dress caught in the brush. Although we may expect her to re-emerge from the depths of the murky water, she never does. Bresson brings closure to this ambiguity with a selection from Monteverdi’s “Magnificat” from the *Vespers for the Blessed Virgin*, the same sacred music played in the opening credits, successfully “giving the girl’s ‘suicide’ the overtones of liberation” (Cunneen 112).

However, music is not the only way Bresson sacralizes this tragic event. Joseph Cunneen and others have suggested that the white muslin dress resembles a wedding dress (119), offering a ritual or sacramental feel to the suicide. Beth Curran also reads the scene in sacramental terms, suggesting that

The purity, gentleness, and clarity of the water evoke not only a peaceful rest but also the waters of baptism. . . . Mouchette will *emerge to a new life* [and thus her] . . . drowning then represents both death and rebirth: Mouchette achieves rebirth through her baptismal death. Water plays a central role in religious symbolism for Christians through the association with baptism and eternal life. In the rite of baptism, which is the first and most important sacrament, baptismal water is literally a substance of life: it purifies the soul *by erasing sin*, and bears the sign of the Christian's birth. (81)

Still, we cannot ignore the fact that this act of purification and redemption came by way of a mortal sin. And, while the tired Catholic cliché would see death as the shedding of this mortal tabernacle of the flesh, escaping this veil of tears to the paradise that awaits our immortal soul, the Catholic stance against suicide still considers it a sin that jeopardizes immortality. In her aphoristic article "Au Hasard Suicide," which discusses the random nature of the decision to commit suicide in *Mouchette* (comparing it to Bresson's preceding film *Au hasard Balthazar*), Howe speaks to the same notion: "Suicide for Catholics remained a renunciation of hope; it was a collapse into despair" (46). However, rather than accepting her sole option of complacently continuing to exist in a world of depravity amongst a society that has arbitrarily singled her out as its scapegoat, Mouchette chooses to physically remove herself through the *pis-aller* of suicide. Even if the scene is replete with ritualistic imagery, the active choice of suicide representing redemption precludes a facile Christian reading of the event.

Bresson is very clear on this point: Christ's sacrifice provides us redemption for the hereafter. Still, that only satisfies what happens after life, and the sacred music is truly just the means of marking the end of the life of the character Mouchette and framing a cinematic narrative for which there is a deeper meaning. As her innocent rolling game gives way to the choice of suicide, Bresson pulls back the curtain on his theory. At this sobering and cathartic point in the film, Mouchette is no longer the subject but the vehicle of Bresson's higher anthropological message. In having cinematically depicted the miserable-and atrocious-existence of this young girl, steadfastly tracking her from ostracism to victimization to her ultimate sacrifice, Bresson offers an "esthetic redemption" to his complicit viewers in turning the mirror on society and forcing them to reflect on their own vicarious violence.

In this sense, Bresson's cinematic anthropology is active (and inter-active) in that it draws the viewer into an allegorical universe, one in which he or she is complicit in the progressive degradation, breakdown, and ultimate sacrifice of an arbitrarily-chosen victim. However, as the film builds and progresses to this sacrificial scene (or, even, as we reflect upon it after the film), we are able to separate ourselves from the crowd and sympathize with Mouchette, as she symbolizes our common humanity. In so developing his film, at the

end, Bresson simultaneously expiates us from the communal violence (as the cinematic death is quickly followed by sacred music), provides us a cathartic moment to reflect on this violence and the necessity of its deferral, and offers an explanation of our personal, active role—as well as that of Christ—in our own redemption. Otherwise stated, Bresson’s allegorical film accomplishes something that Catholicism alone cannot: it depicts, using the rational terms of sociology and anthropology, the human condition, mankind’s need for hope, and our role in redemption from a violent world in a manner that surpasses the means of the irrational realm of religion. With his brand of cinematic anthropology, Bresson defends the Christian virtues of faith, hope, and charity (the exemplary love that can conquer resentment) in terms that defy transcendence and are almost entirely this-worldly.

Conclusion

For the unprepared viewer, engaging with a Robert Bresson film is a very off-putting and tedious experience. Many resist the somber tone, the slow development, the emphasis on reaction over action, the uneasy use of heightened sound, even the choice of black and white film stock in an era of full color pictures.⁽¹⁵⁾ This is deliberately so. Bresson’s unique take on cinematography (as detailed in the aphorisms that make up his *Notes on Cinematography*)⁽¹⁶⁾ is dependent upon the viewer’s apprehension and discomfort. He calls for his viewers to “Be attentive” (55) and “Use these impatiences” (28), insisting that the message of his films comes forth in these most austere, visceral, and emotionally-charged moments. As much is revealed by the viewer’s reaction as by the *model’s* (re-)action on-screen. As suggested above, this is certainly the case with *Mouchette*.

In attempts to avoid the personal involvement Bresson requires with films like *Mouchette* or *Au hasard Balthazar*, it is easy to fall victim to the dismissive gesture of simply relegating them to the domain of “spiritual” or “Catholic” films. Bresson’s choice of music, themes, motifs, symbolism, and so on, certainly allows such an easy way out. However, simply labeling Bresson as a “Jansenist” or “transcendental” filmmaker is rather disingenuous, especially considering just how decidedly this-worldly his films are. In his “most spiritual films,” Bresson offers his most anthropological message on the nature of society and sacrificial violence. Not only is the ill-fated donkey Balthazar not a Christ figure but the earthly redemption of the wretched Mouchette is not guaranteed by grace alone. Bresson’s films go beyond mere Catholicism. A self-confirmed believer, what sets Robert Bresson apart is his status as a Catholic *thinker*, one who reflects on society and understands the need and purposes of religion. What makes Bresson an extraordinary filmmaker is his ability to challenge convention and contain his anthropological message—and theory of society—within the space of a 90-minute film.

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Notes

1. The most recent book-length studies on the filmmaker focus on the "spiritual style" (Cunneen) of his film and the austere brand of Catholicism he shared with contemporary French novelist Bernanos (Curran). Even Paul Schrader's classic 1972 study takes as its subject (and title) the "Transcendental Style" of his films. ([back](#))
2. From the "Travelling" interview segment included on the *Mouchette* Criterion Collection

DVD. ([back](#))

3. Quote from a television interview included in “Un metteur en ordre: Robert Bresson” (Included in *Au hasard Balthazar*, Criterion Collection DVD). ([back](#))

4. Liner notes; *Mouchette*, Criterion Collection DVD. ([back](#))

5. Quoted from the commentary track of the Criterion DVD. ([back](#))

6. In his fragmentary collection of aphorisms, *Notes on Cinematography*, Bresson puts forward a theory on sound: “The eye solicited alone makes the ear impatient, the ear solicited alone makes the eye impatient. *Use these impatiences*” (28, his italics). ([back](#))

7. These clogs, like the housedress, we learn from Bernanos, were also handed down to Mouchette. In the second paragraph of the novella, he explains that “They were Eugène’s [her older brother’s], and so wide that she could push all five fingers of her little hand under the top while she was wearing them. They had one advantage—if she pushed her toes to the end, treating them like a pair of enormous castanets, as she ran across the asphalted schoolyard, she could make the kind of noise that drove the mistress wild” (7, Whitehouse English translation). Her stomping is the first of three acts of rebellion in this sequence. ([back](#))

8. A version of this poem, which is adapted from the first four verses of 19th-century French Romantic Casimir Delavigne’s 1700-verse “Trois jours de Christophe Colomb,” was also used by Bernanos in the opening pages of the novella. For comparative purposes, I include Bernanos’ version (with his diacritical marks for sound emphasis): “Espérez ! ...Plus d’espoir ! / Trois jours, leur dit Colomb, et je vous dô..o..onne un monde. / Et son doigt le montrait, et son oeil, pour le voir / Scrutait de l’hô..o..orizon l’immen-si...té prôo..fonde...” (I: 1266). Unlike Bernanos, who uses Delavigne’s *espoir*, Bresson changes a number of words, not least of which is *hope* (*espérance*). Naturally, his preference for *espérance* could simply be chalked up to Wiener’s attempts to harness the poem into a musical composition for the film. Nevertheless, this choice of the more active, evolutionary noun *espérance* over the more abstract, static *espoir* may bear some significance. Although, in French, *espérance* and *espoir* are near synonyms and, as such, are used interchangeably (both translate to *hope* in English), a couple of notable differences—which directly speak to Bresson’s artistic vision—separate the two. Reviewing both the CNRTL dictionary of French language history and etymology (Centre National de Ressources Textuelles et Lexicales <<http://www.cnrtl.fr/etymologie/>>) alongside Émile Littré’s authoritative dictionary from the 19th century, we notice that *espérance*, with the gerundive suffix *-ance*, implies a present state of *hoping*, an action still in negotiation: it is the “disposition de l’âme qui nous fait considérer ce que nous désirons comme devant se réaliser” [disposition of the soul that makes us consider our desires as necessarily fulfilled]. On the contrary, *espoir* is more of an abstract concept, a static idea—a “sentiment qui porte à espérer” [a feeling given to hope]—a

substantive of the verb *espérer*. Littré is fairly direct on the matter in insisting that all that separates the words are the suffix (-*ance*) and highlighting the fact that *espérance* is “l'état de l'âme de l'espérant” [the state of the hoping soul]. Perhaps a negligible detail in common discourse (one would never ask a Frenchman to differentiate between whether he has *espérance* or *espoir*), as we work to understand Bresson's anthropology, the active nature of *espérance* and the marked preference for this term in French biblical translations (from Jacques Lefèvre d'Étaples' first French edition in 1525 to Louis Segond's modern translation in 1910) when dealing with the three Pauline theological virtues of faith, hope and charity, I feel, merit my calling it to attention. ([back](#))

9. Here, I use the English translation provided in the subtitles of the Criterion Collection DVD. ([back](#))

10. Again, I use the translation provided in the Criterion DVD subtitles. ([back](#))

11. Arsène's credibility as narrator is in question from the beginning of his story. Earlier, he had invented the story of a “cyclone” (that Mouchette oddly believed) in reference to a passing storm and now the details of his confrontation with Mathieu are becoming hazy. What is important here is that Mouchette *wants* to believe him and feels human solidarity with him. ([back](#))

12. This translation is my own. ([back](#))

13. In his sociological study on *Suicide* (1897), Emile Durkheim explained the phenomenon as directly resulting from differing degrees of conflict between personal ideals and the values of society—or a simple disconnect between the individual and his or her community. This final rejection, in a Durkheimian sense, could be read as the moment of ultimate disconnect that would lead one to what he terms an *egoistic* suicide. ([back](#))

14. Continuing with the Christian symbolism of the number three in relation to baptism and redemption, my colleague Scott Sprenger directed me to David Bentley Hart's *Atheist Delusions: The Christian Revolution and its Fashionable Enemies* (Yale UP, 2009), where the author explains that, in the early Church, baptism consisted of *three* successive immersions, naked, in the live-giving waters of a pool, after which the person dons a *white garment* and returns to the church to take the Eucharist (112). ([back](#))

15. This list represents a near-unanimity of my students in teaching *Mouchette* and *Les Dames du Bois de Boulogne*, as well as screening scenes from *A Man Escaped*, at UCLA and BYU. Surfing movie blogs and popular film criticism sites on the Internet largely produced the same results. ([back](#))

16. For Bresson, “cinematography” was not simply defined as writing movement; it was, according to him, a minimalistic language “where expression is obtained by relations of

images and of sounds" (5), a "new way of writing, therefore of feeling" (15). The visceral response to Bresson's austere scenic representation is what allows his anthropological message to pass. His choice of non-professional actors (that he called "models") and his predilection for depicting adolescents in his films all contribute to this study of the human and mankind's problematic place within society that is at the heart of so many of his films.

[\(back\)](#)