THEATRICALITY AND ANTITHEATRICALITY IN ROBERT BRESSON'S *MOUCHETTE*

ALFONSO HOYOS MORALES

> The human is indissolubly linked with imitation: a human being only becomes human at all by imitating other human beings.
>
> Adorno, 1978: 154

INTRODUCTION

Robert Bresson's distinctive view of film performers—whom he famously referred to as "models"—is widely known.[1] The French filmmaker develops an entire theory around them in his *Notes on the Cinematographer* (2006), and he returns insistently to the subject in almost all his interviews. A matter of central importance to Bresson himself, it has likewise become a key theme for his commentators in the secondary literature.[2]

However, Robert Bresson's notion of the model cannot be reduced to what Colin Burnett has called a mere "market alternative" (2017: 175) to the classical film actor. What lies behind it is instead an anthropological conception of the human being grounded in a critique of theatricality as a "moral" condition of the individual. The anthropological reality of the "theatrical" person is that of *seeming* rather than *being* (Bresson, 2006: 25). Nevertheless, the way Bresson explores this antitheatrical stance throughout his films is far from uniform. As is evident in *Mouchette* (Robert Bresson, 1967), he is able to reintroduce a certain sense of theatricality that does not contradict the moral and aesthetic principles of his antitheatricality. Mouchette, a character caught in a constant tension over the construction of her identity, is immersed in a network of imitation and representation that, paradoxically, defines her very nature.

This article demonstrates how film analysis and gesture analysis are inseparable from their philosophical interpretation, and how both can contribute to clarifying Bresson's notion of the model, as well as the cinematic and ethical dimensions of antitheatricality.

1. THEATRICALITY AND ANTITHEATRICALITY

1.1 The Actor and the Model

The distinction between the actor and the model is grounded in the dialectic of *seeming* and *being*. The actor inhabits the realm of *seeming* and can never fully *be* anything. "The actor: 'It's not me you are seeing and hearing, it's the other man.' But being unable to be wholly the other, he is not that other" (Bresson, 1977: 24). The actor is always double: on the one hand, he is himself—Humphrey Bogart, for instance (Shaviro, 1993: 245)—with all the accumulated aura of his stardom; on the other, he is the character he embodies in a given film—Rick Blaine, Philip Marlowe, Sam Spade—and yet he is never *fully* any of them. This is what Jefferson Kline calls the *inherent intertextuality* of the actor (Kline, 2011: 307; Sebbag, 1989: 5), which the semiotic virginity of Bresson's *model* precludes from the outset.

One of Bresson's cardinal rules was never to use the same model twice in his films.[3] With this rule, Bresson sought on the one hand to avoid the actor's inherent duplicity and representational nature derived from the theatre (Bresson, 2006: 23), and on the other to guard against the kind of "disenchantment" that afflicts anyone who imposes discipline upon his own actions (Bresson, 2006: 71). Actors, subjected to the discipline of both their own perception and the perception of others, exist only through projection; they are dependent on the spectator's gaze. This dependence recalls one of the fundamental features of theatricality: "the quality that a gaze confers upon a person (or in exceptional cases upon an object or an animal) who exhibits himself while being aware of being seen, in the course of a game of deception or pretence" (Cornago, 2005: 3). In cinema, that gaze becomes the eye of the camera: "For an actor, the camera is the eye of the public" (Bresson, 1977: 48). Conversely, the model is closed, and as such "does not enter into communication with the outside world except unawares" (Bresson, 1977: 51). What is distinctive about Bresson's view here is that this "theatrical" component is not merely a matter of artistic form but extends into the moral dimension of the individual. The worst thing about actors is not just that they act in films, but that "even in life [they are] actors" (Bresson quoted in Godard & Delahaye, 1966: 34). The model, therefore, is not merely an artistic alternative to theatrical acting—as the "modernist" argument about the specificity of the medium suggests (Pipolo, 2010: 11)—but rather an anthropological alternative with an aesthetic dimension.

ACTORS, SUBJECTED TO THE DISCIPLINE OF BOTH THEIR OWN PERCEPTION AND THE PERCEPTION OF OTHERS, EXIST ONLY THROUGH PROJECTION; THEY ARE DEPENDENT ON THE SPECTATOR'S GAZE

The model is not defined merely by being a non-professional actor,[4] but must completely avoid all the gestures and habits associated with performative mimesis: "It is not a matter of acting 'simple' or acting 'inward' but of not acting at all" (Bresson, 1977: 49); "To your models: 'You must not play either somebody else or yourself. You must not play anyone'" (2006: 54). However, far from the improvisation or "naturalness" characteristic of documentary cinema, the model must repeat the same gestures and words dozens of times, in strict adherence to Bresson's instructions, generally concerning rhythm or tone. The purpose of this repetition is to achieve the automatic execution of the gesture, stripped of any psychological connotation typical of classical acting (2006: 64), thereby turning each gesture and word into something purely mechanical and unconscious—an essential dimension repeatedly emphasised in *Notes on the Cinematographer* (2006: 24, 37, 48, 85).

This automatism and its consequent elimination of motivational intentionality completely preclude the "projection", and with it the real or virtual gaze that constitutes theatricality. Models must not speak to anyone other than themselves: "To your models: 'Speak as if you were speaking to yourself.' Monologue instead of dialogue" (2006: 66). This performative dimension concerns not only the relationship between Bresson and his actors/models but also the very nature of his fictional characters, who for the most part are young, naïve individuals who act under the influence of forces that remain mysterious even to themselves (see Hoyos, 2023).

1.2. The Model and the Antitheatrical Tradition

Although the antitheatrical dimension described by Bresson can be directly linked to modernist projects in Soviet cinema,[1] the *Bressonian* project becomes clearer when considered in light of the aesthetic sensibility that prevailed in what Michael Fried calls the antitheatrical tradition of 18th-century France, although it can actually be found throughout Europe and even in certain 19th-century authors. This tradition emerged as a reaction against Rococo art and was grounded in a particular notion of "truth" and "nature." In this sense, its aesthetic orientation, as in Bresson's case, carried an implicitly moralising tone. Thus, terms such as *naïveté* as described by Diderot (1959: 824), *ingenuity* in Schiller (1985: 78), the *grace* of the mindless marionettes in von Kleist (1988),[5] or the shrewd innocence of Dostoevsky's *The Idiot* (1996) appeal to both aesthetic and moral dimensions, and find their opposites in affectation, pomp, artificiality, or ultimately, theatricality. Bresson's filmography can be understood not only as a clear heir to this aesthetic tradition but also as its modern continuation in a medium particularly suited to achieving its aspirations. The mechanical, automatic nature inherent in the ontology of film, together with its association with automatism in human gestures, make cinema the ideal medium for fulfilling the desire of antitheatrical sensibility "to show the world without being seen" (Soto, 2010: 205).

Although Michael Fried focuses his notion of theatricality exclusively on the analysis of the work of art, his conception also carries moral connotations (Pippin, 2005; Gough, 2013). In a manner similar to Cornago's definition outlined above (2005), Fried defines a work of art as theatrical when its very essence depends on the relationship it establishes with the spectator. The theatrical object possesses a constitutive dependence: to be complete, it requires the gaze of the other, just as the actor needs the audience's gaze in order to exist. In this sense, Fried's critique refers not to an ontological dimension of the object—since every work of art is made to be looked at—but to an aesthetic dimension: the object gives the impression of being made for the gaze of the other. In other words, theatricality is not a descriptive judgment but an evaluative one.

In opposition to this dependence on the spectator, Fried proposes *presentness*,[6] which refers to an autonomy of the object that does not require the temporal unfolding of the spectator's observation in order to stand as a work of art (Fried, 2004). Absorption, a term drawn from phenomenology, as developed in his text *Absorption and Theatricality* (1988), is a specific form of this "presentness", which Fried defines as "the state or condition of rapt attention, of being completely occupied or engrossed or (as I prefer to say) absorbed in what he or she is doing, hearing, thinking, feeling" (Fried, 1988: 10). This definition, which refers to a psychological state, points to a mode of representation in the physiognomic expression of such states that Fried suggests is common in 18th-century French painting, in artists such as Van Loo, Greuze, and especially Chardin (Images 1 and 2), for whom Bresson had great admiration.[8]

The figures depicted by these artists and the characters in Bresson's films share this same ab-



Images 1, 2 and 3

sorption, which manifests itself in their intimate engagement in an action with their corresponding unawareness both of the immediate context and of the spectator who observes them (Image 3). Both kinds of figures seem to exist as if they were not being looked at, as if they did not need that gaze in order to exist, at least consciously. However, their unawareness should not be understood as a mere secret they are hiding from the spectator; rather, due to their ingenuousness, they themselves do not know the reason for their actions. They are ignorant of themselves, like the children in Chardin's paintings, Balthazar's donkey, or Dostoevsky's idiot.

The question of theatricality has various consequences that can be considered to help define the concept explored here. On the one hand, it possesses an aesthetic dimension that can be called *exhibitive*, referring to the fact that an object appears to need a third party—the observer—in order to exist. On the other hand, there is a second, specifically anthropological dimension that is crucial for understanding the development of Bresson's protagonist (Mouchette), which can be called her *performative* dimension. As Fischer-Lichte notes, theatricality is also an "instinct for metamorphosis and transformation" (2014: 11); in other words, it signals a creative drive to become something other than what one already is—something that, as other authors have observed (Pickett, 2017: 5), forms part of a moral impulse inherent in the human being. This transformation of the self thus requires an outward movement and an awareness of one's own possibilities for action. The gaze of the "other", whether concrete or abstract, is in turn the potential that guides me toward becoming something different from what I already am. In this sense, the *performative* dimension aligns with the *exhibitive* one. The instinct for transformation depends on my awareness of being observed (even if only by myself), and on the recognition that I could be observed in different ways. The actor, by taking on a role, reproduces these two dimensions; similarly, Mouchette, in her attempt to "fit in", performs certain roles with the aim of being seen in a particular way.

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The authenticity, naturalness, or ingenuousness sought by both Bresson and the authors of the antitheatrical tradition is associated with a conception of human nature that is both anti-exhibitive and anti-performative. In other words, antitheatricality functions as both an aesthetic criterion and an anthropological approach. Absorption is at once an unawareness of the spectator or observer and an unawareness of one's own capacity to step outside oneself and thus to transform.

As will be shown below, this is a common and essential feature of all Bressonian characters. On the one hand, the model-person—the "actor" in the true sense—performs gestures and utters words without fully understanding why, guided only by the filmmaker's directions. On the other hand, the model-character also acts without fully understanding his or her reasons. Michel does not know exactly why he steals, even though he offers rationalisations that camouflage his true lack of awareness; Marie does not know what draws her to Gérard, just as we do not know why Yvon transforms from a family man into a murderer. The case of the donkey Balthazar is even more radical, since the fact he is an animal ontologically precludes any form of theatricality in either of the two senses discussed above.

The consequence of the antitheatrical philosophy is a certain anthropological stasis. Insofar as only what is done "automatically" is considered authentic or true, intention is dismissed as an unfaithful representative of what we are, deemed "theatrical" and therefore false. For Bresson, our true nature as human beings remains an enigma to us, and all attempts at self-transformation are nothing more than hopelessly false simulations. Our inner life cannot be exhibited and, consequently, it cannot be freely manipulated by the will.

Although Bresson often shows a preference for young characters, *Mouchette* is his only film in which the protagonist is a child. At first glance, this choice might seem to fit perfectly with this moral archetype of antitheatricality. However, as will be shown below, many of this child's actions and attitudes can be classified as "theatrical", as they involve modes of action that presuppose a projection towards the existence of a third party, at times even reaching the point of hyperbole, as Jean Semolué points out: "Some have been surprised that a Bressonian character should display so many intense and varied emotions; they have considered that, in this case, Bresson was highlighting a true actress's nature" (1993: 155).

The complexity of this character is inherent in the complexity of the anthropological development of the human being at this stage of life. While childhood may seem a particularly "authentic" or "genuine" age, education necessarily imposes a process of adaptation to a set of social norms, which in turn requires imitation and comparison with various roles (classmates, teachers, parents), and thus, theatricality. The tension in the construction of Mouchette, as will be shown below, lies in her inability to participate freely in this imitative network. The child's "authenticity" is inseparable from her "inauthenticity", i.e., her constant desire to be something other than what she yet is. As Adorno notes: "insistence on the truth about oneself, that shows again and again, even in the first conscious experiences of childhood, that the impulses reflected upon are not quite 'genuine'. They always contain an element of imitation, of play, wanting to be different" (1978: 153). The "absorption" we witness in Mouchette is the short circuit between the nature to which she wishes to belong and her inability to do so because of her social circumstances. There is theatricality in *Mouchette*, but it is always a failed attempt, precisely because her truth is still in the process of being realised. As will be explored below, Mouchette's supposed theatricality fits perfectly with the antitheatrical ideal, since what Bresson portrays is a character utterly absorbed in her effort to step outside herself, yet unable to do so.

Image 4

2. THE ANTITHEATRICALITY OF THE THEATRICAL: THE CASE OF MOUCHETTE

2.1. Trapped in the Editing

Bresson described to perfection one of the defining traits of the main character: "Mouchette's terror resembles the terror of a trapped animal" (Bresson, 2015: 246). This sense of entrapment can be perceived at every level of the film, including both narrative and formal levels. The first sequence after the credits establishes the analogy that will function as a portrait of Mouchette and her fate. An opening of Bresson's own invention (absent from Bernanos's novel on which the film is based), it does not introduce us directly to the protagonist like Bresson does in his previous films. Instead, she is presented between two long sequences that introduce the film's two conflicts. The first is the conflict between Mathieu and Arsène, which itself is a twofold conflict: Mathieu, the village's official gamekeeper, represents society and order, while Arsène, the poacher, lives in a cabin in the forest and embodies marginality; they also compete for the affection of Louisa, the barmaid, who is barely mentioned in Bernanos's novel but is especially important to the film's development of Mouchette's character, as will be shown below. The second sequence introduces us to the illicit work of Mouchette's father and brother, who smuggle alcohol into the village bar.

The character of Mouchette appears in between these two sequences, a gaunt figure walking to school at a slower pace than her classmates, her name revealed only when another girl shouts it (Image 4). Her image serves merely as a link between the sequences that introduce the film's main conflicts because, as Tony Pipolo observes, she lacks the qualities required to drive the narrative forward (2010: 210). As Annette Michelson notes: "The first twenty minutes of *Mouchette* are composed [...] in such a way that seemingly disparate situations, dramatic lines, narrative potentials, and separate identities converge on a central destiny: that of a young girl" (1968: 411). This, then, is Mouchette's reality: caught in the middle of stories that are not hers, her efforts to find a place in either of them thwarted.

2.2 Trapped between Childhood and Adulthood

Mouchette's identity is suspended in a world that excludes her, where she can be neither fully a child nor fully an adult. Although she is still of school age, the second scene in which she appears shows her caring for her dying mother. When her father comes home, he lies down on the bed and begins to play with his cap, pretending it is a steering wheel (Image 5). In this way, play—which would be more appropriate to Mouchette given her age—that is taken from her and appropriated by her father, while

Image 5

Images 6 and 7

she is shown having to bear the responsibility of caring for both her mother and her baby brother.

And yet she cannot fully embrace the adulthood imposed upon her either. This ambiguity is made evident by means of a formal device in a subsequent scene in the bar. Up to this point, the only waitress shown in the film has been Louisa, the love interest of both Mathieu and Arsène. The sequence begins by focusing solely on a pair of hands at work (Image 6), leading the viewer to assume they are Louisa's. Only at the end, when the camera tilts upwards (Image 7), do we discover that it is Mouchette who has been washing the dishes. This task, clearly an adult's responsibility, is thus incomplete and even fictitious, as it is not associated with a wage of her own or with the real responsibilities of working life. Upon leaving the bar, she hands the coins she has earned to her father, who in return offers her a small glass of liquor—a gesture that underscores the ambiguity of her position.

Shortly after the bar scene, Mouchette goes to a local fair, in a sequence that does not appear in the novel, where she rides the bumper cars. The scene unfolds to the sound of carnival music and the rhythmic clashing of the cars, marking the first and virtually the only moment in *Mouchette* that conveys a sense of genuine childish joy, including a playful flirtation with a boy with whom she exchanges various glances and smiles (Images 8 and 9).

Images 8 and 9

When the ride ends, Mouchette steps out of the car and shyly approaches the boy, her head lowered. She looks up and smiles, but at that very moment her father grabs her and slaps her twice. Commenting on this scene, Charles Barr suggests that "[i]f [...] there's a dialectic in Bresson between involvement in the world and withdrawal from it, this section superbly dramatises the impulse to involvement and acceptance" (Ayfre et al., 1969: 120). Before this sequence, and throughout the film, we see another side of Mouchette's agency beyond her caregiving role. We see her deliberately dirty her clogs in the mud before entering the church, only to be reprimanded by her father with a blow from behind; we see her refuse to sing in class; and later in the film we see her repeatedly throw mud balls at her female classmates who, unlike her, can afford expensive perfumes and flirt freely with the boys.[9]

Mouchette's behaviour, as evidenced in the bumper car scene, does not stem from an isolation chosen out of an inner spiritual strength. She genuinely wishes to belong, to play and to participate in the erotic dynamics of her age and of her peers. Her rebelliousness is really just an expression of her frustration at being unable to attain what she longs for.

2.3. Isolation and Identification

The development of a character like Louisa, who is not featured in the novel and who is formally identified with the protagonist in the bar scene, serves to underscore the relational component that shapes the young girl's psychology, as well as her aspirations and frustrated desires.[10] Immediately after the bumper car scene in which Mouchette is slapped by her father, we witness one of the few moments where she is merely a spectator of a situation seemingly external to her. Mouchette is sitting in the bar, still with tears in her eyes after her father's blows. Mathieu, seated across from her, gets up and heads for the fair, where he sees Arsène and Louisa on a fairground ride together. He watches them for some time, and Louisa seems to notice his presence. He then returns to the bar and sits down again opposite Mouchette. "He's making a fool of you," another man at the bar tells him. "Who?" he asks. "Arsène," responds the man. "I'll get him," Mathieu replies. The camera, however, focuses less on Mathieu's face than on Mouchette's attentive reaction, as she looks from side to side, fully absorbed in the conversation and the unfolding drama from which she has been excluded before even being able to take part (Image 10). As Paul Adams Sitney points out, Louisa "is able to enjoy the fair publicly with her lover, but Mouchette is brutally humiliated and stopped before even speaking to a boy who was attracted to her in the bumper cars" (2011: 146). Louisa, who never directly interacts with Mouchette at any point in the film(a fact that further accentuates the protagonist's status as a pure spectator of her own desire), serves as a model to identify with and imitate. She embodies adulthood and the sexual world to which Mouchette cannot aspire. As Joseph Mai suggests, Bresson "has trapped Mouchette in a web of imitation in which she literally takes Louisa's place" (2007: 38).

Image 10

Images 11 and 12

As Sitney argues, Mouchette's attraction to Arsène may indeed involve a kind of transference of sexual value stemming from his success with Louisa (2011). Yet this attraction also arises from her identification with Arsène's marginalised condition. When he confesses that he may have killed a man, instead of shocking her, it seems to elicit even greater sympathy from her; she urges him to tell her everything so that she can help: "I hate them. I'll stand up to them all." Later, after Arsène's epileptic fit and Mouchette's soothing lullaby, she even declares with hyperbolic intensity: "I'd rather die than hurt you." Arsène approaches her and asks: "Why are you so afraid of hurting me?" He moves closer to her; Mouchette looks at him with her mouth slightly open, her bag slipping from her hands. Arsène seizes her arm and begins to chase her around the small cabin. Mouchette hides under a table, like a small animal, but Arsène finds her and throws himself upon her. What at first appear to be gestures of resistance soon turn into an intimate and forceful embrace (Images 11 and 12).

Much has been written about this ambiguous and controversial sequence. Rancière, for instance, describes Mouchette's surrender as "a very conventional means of representing the transition from pain to pleasure" (2012: 49). Conversely, Taylor interprets it as an act of resignation in the face of her powerlessness in the situation (Taylor, 2019). Miguel Gaggiotti (2023b), on the other hand, finds an operative dimension in Mouchette's gesture and, citing Elena del Río (2008: 38–39), conceives it as a device that reveals the power of performance to transform the meaning of a situation. What begins as a rape scene is, through the embrace, transformed into an encounter between two lovers.

This last interpretation of the scene seems to be reinforced later, when Mouchette declares to Mathieu and his wife: "Mr. Arsène's my lover." This assertion may seem absurd both to the spectator and to characters who hear it, yet it can also be understood as Mouchette's way of performatively confirming the genuine nature of her encounter. The initial attraction she felt toward someone as marginalised as herself leads her to interpret what happened as an act of love, in an attempt to draw a parallel with the relationships of the adult world or of those who "belong", like Louisa. When Mouchette calls Arsène her lover, she is speaking of something that is hers, and that possession gives her a place in the world, a sense of belonging to the public realm, with a role in the shared narrative of her village. She thus becomes someone worthy of being desired, worthy of having what others can have: a lover, and in turn, a name, "the lover". To possess a name is to be established in the world, to bring a place out of nothing into being. Children express this longing when they imitate firefighters, police officers, mothers, fathers, or even office workers. Play is, perhaps, longing without sorrow.

Image 13

The tragedy of the film lies precisely in the impossibility of fully enacting the imitative play characteristic of all children, as noted above with reference to Adorno. The inconsistency between Mouchette's mimetic desires and her reality is revealed in her tears after the rape scene. She has experienced something tragic, yet she does not fully grasp it (she lacks the language to name it), and she helplessly tries to give it a positive meaning that might grant her a place in the world. The breakdown between these two states of being—the *in-itself* and the *for-itself*, to use Hegelian terminology—produces the short circuit that afflicts her: the short circuit between adulthood and childhood, civilisation and the wild, communication and silence. The short circuit, ultimately, of her own identity. If Mouchette is someone (or rather, something), she is the very contradiction of the world made flesh through her.

2.4. The Hyperbolic Gesture as Resistance

In an interview with Bresson, Godard asked him about the possibility of redeeming an actor if to do so meant effectively representing him as an actor: "Just as you would take a blacksmith for what he can do, and not to play a notary or a policeman, you could, strictly speaking, choose an actor at least to play an actor" (Godard & Delahaye, 1966: 34). Barely a year after that interview, it seems that Bresson took Godard's suggestion into account when he conceived the character of Mouchette.

As noted above, if Mouchette is theatrical it is because her reality drives her to be so as a way of seizing hold of a world that escapes from her faster than she can move to reach it. At the same time, it is a form of resistance, a way of performing a stable identity that might shield her from her vulnerable reality. There are several examples throughout the film of a kind of acting that is much more expressive and even hyperbolic than it typical of Bresson's work. One of the first appears in an early scene where Mouchette encounters a couple of boys, probably from her school, who try to provoke her by pulling down their trousers. She glances sideways and turns her head away with a dignified, lofty air, as if attempting, through that gesture, to bestow upon herself a certain sophistication (Image 13)

Mouchette's relationship with Arsène alternates between moments of theatricality and others of childlike obedience. When they first meet in the forest, Arsène asks her what she is doing there, to which she replies: "*Perdu, je me suis perdu*!" in a grandiloquent tone similar to the one she later adopts when declaring that she would rather die than hurt him, as if imitating the histrionics of actresses in melodrama. This contrasts, for example, with her automatic way of obeying Arsène's instructions when she dries her hands by the fire. Her performative inflection of tone becomes even more explicit when she returns to Mathieu's house, ready to be interrogated and to defend Arsène. Her bowed head, timid posture, and downcast eyes immediately change as she assumes the role of witness (Images 14 and 15); she raises her chin and declares "*C'est vrai, oui, monsieur*" with feigned confidence.

Images 14 and 15

The entire scene is charged with an uneasy tension between Mouchette's apparent confidence in her statements and her insecure, uncomfortable body language, with her eyes lowered, as if searching for the right answers, like a child trying to recall a lesson for an exam (Images 1, 2, and 3). The contrived nature of her declarations becomes especially clear in her use of the word "cyclone"—a technical term that even Mathieu seems not to understand—taught to her by Arsène the previous day, which she repeats here mechanically. When questioned about the term, aware that she does not really understand it herself and has merely reproduced it automatically, she glances up and down several times before explaining it simply as "the rain". She is far less self-assured in front of Mathieu's wife, who notices the smell of alcohol on her and threatens to expose her secret. Theatricality here is, once again, a pitiful attempt at resistance in the face of the perpetual hostility of her surroundings.

3. CONCLUSION: BETWEEN PLAY AND DEATH

The film's ending persistently underscores Mouchette's ambivalent condition, suspended between the person she really is and the character she performs. None of this contradicts the underlying principles of the Bressonian model. Indeed, one of the essential traits of models is precisely the idea that what is most meaningful in them is "what they do not suspect is in them" (Bresson, 1977: 2). Mouchette, is incapable of fully grasping the contradiction expressed in her. What has been described here as her "theatricality" functions as an automatic self-defence mechanism to protect her against her hostile environment and give her the possibility of surviving it. Yet the protagonist herself never even suspects the true motive behind her actions. She performs naively, as all children do when they imitate.

This contradiction that defines her ultimately finds expression in the famous final sequence, which again operates through a series of contradictory gestures culminating in her death. At first, Mouchette lies down on the dress previously given to her by the so-called "sentinel of the dead" (Image 16). She then looks at the lake and rolls down the slope towards it. At this moment, a noise catches her attention; she rises and waves her hand at a passing tractor, in a gesture that hovers ambiguously between a call for help and a greeting (Images 17 and 18). She soon gives up without having given it much effort or even raised her voice. She then crouches back down and tries rolling down into the lake again, only to be stopped this time by a tangle of branches on the riverbank. Finally,

Images 16, 17 and 18

on the third attempt, she sinks beneath the water, and the film ends, to the sound of Monteverdi's music, with a strange visual loop that keeps the ripples moving on the surface of the lake.

Several authors, such as Barr (1969: 118) and Sitney (2011: 146), have pointed out the absence of any psychological foreshadowing in this scene. Its ambiguity lies in the convergence of two seemingly opposed elements—death and play—sharing the same setting. The parallel between them resides in the same naivety: the innocence with which Mouchette rolls down the hillside is the same innocence with which she ultimately sinks into the water, and with which she half-heartedly waves to the man on the tractor. Yet this innocence does not suggest a lack of complexity; rather, it hints at her immediate awareness of her actions, which reveals her existential condition: the condition of a hostage caught in conflicts she never chose to be involved in.

This contradiction, which has been explored throughout this article, ultimately defines most of Bresson's characters[11] and lies at the heart of his commitment to antitheatricality. Mouchette imitates, she performs, but what we witness is not the performance itself but what lies concealed behind it. If her theatricality contains anything truthful, it is because through it she expresses her own truth as a contradiction not only of herself, but also of the world as it is expressed through her.

This analysis of *Mouchette* not only nuances Robert Bresson's seemingly rigid view of his models but also lays the foundations for a broader, transdisciplinary perspective, as it connects with contemporary debates on authenticity, performativity, and representation, which are key themes in cultural studies that transcend the purely cinematic.[12] What does Bresson teach us about these questions? What relevance do his ethical-aesthetic insights hold today, in an age when such concepts are being challenged or unsettlingly reformulated, as Lipovetsky (2024) suggests in his most recent work? What ethical implications do theatricality and antitheatricality carry for the construction of identity? Although these questions lie beyond the scope of this article, they are implicit in the enduring resonance of Robert Bresson's thought and films. ■

NOTES

1 Bresson would not adopt this notion until quite late in his filmmaking career, in 1967 (Mylène Bresson, 2015: 256). Before that, he referred to his performers in various ways, such as "actor–living creature" (in M. Bresson, 2015: 58) or "protagonists" (Weyergans, 1965). Lev Kuleshov (1990; 1994) was the first to develop the concept of the "model" later taken up by other Soviet authors such as Kazanski (1998). Also significant are the studies by Yampolsky (1991) and Albera (1990; 1994). However, although these authors identified the "model" as a concept specific to the cinematic medium, their understanding was itself inspired by theorists of theatre such as Delsarte, Dalcroze, and Meyerhold. As Yampolsky notes, "Kuleshov's conception of the actor is not distinguished by any great originality, but it is borrowed almost entirely from theatre theory of the 1910s and the beginning of the 1920s" (1991: 31).

2 The studies on this question are too extensive to do justice to here; see the literature review by Colin Burnett for *Oxford Bibliographies* (2018).

3 There is only one exception to this rule: Arnold in *Au hasard Balthazar* and Arsène in *Mouchette* are both played by the same actor, Jean-Claude Guilbert..

4 For the complex range of discussions surrounding the notion of the so-called non-actor, see Miguel Gaggiotti's *Nonprofessional Film Performance* (2023).

5 The text *On the Marionette Theatre*, which Bresson himself referenced and paraphrased as follows: "the more mechanical it is, the more grace takes hold of it" (All About Cinema, 2022)

6 The neologism "presentness" is used here to avoid confusion with the term "presence", which is used as a counterpoint to the former.

7 See Gough (2013).

8 "A painter I admire greatly is Chardin. Chardin is, without a doubt, someone who seems to take things naturally. He gives no impression of composing. His tables are always placed before you. His objects possess an extraordinary fullness and naturalness" (Bresson quoted in Weyergans, 1965).

9 On these scenes, see Brian Price: "What matters is not the faces of the girls but their collective belonging to the social order, their collective identity as proper young girls, and the mud that both violates that identity and defines it by its obvious difference" (2011: 74–75).

10 This interpretation follows P. Adams Sitney: "The viewer naturally assumes that he [*sic*] is watching Louisa, because she is the only person we have seen behind the bar before this. [...]Now it seems to me that that complex and exciting shot embodies a subtle insight into Mouchette's psychology" (2011: 145).

11 "I once said that I chose them for their moral resemblance, but that's no longer true, because I believe that man—or woman, of course—is too strange, too contradictory, too... for me to know in advance what will come out of them. The more contradictory they seem inwardly, the more they interest me" (in CITYofEGG, 2021).

12 See Egginton (2003), Ackerman & Puchner (2006), Gough (2013), Fischer-Lichte & Arjomand (2014), Pickett (2017) and Quick & Rushton (2019; 2024).

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THEATRICALITY AND ANTITHEATRICALITY IN ROBERT BRESSON'S *MOUCHETTE*

Abstract

Bresson's concept of the "model" emerges as a reaction against the actor in classical theatre. In Bresson's work, this operates as both an aesthetic and an anthropological question. In his view, theatricality is defined by a person's imitative and projective nature in relation to an observing third party. However, in *Mouchette*, the protagonist engages in a constant game of imitation and projection, whereby her theatricality complements rather than contradicts the complex construction of her identity. This theatricality reflects the imitation characteristic of childhood, marked by the absence of a fully formed personality, while at the same time acting as a form of resistance against a hostile environment that constantly threatens her. Through this film, Bresson explores the tension between Mouchette's imitation and her frustration in a world that denies her the possibility of affirming her identity.

Key words

Robert Bresson; Mouchette; theatricality; antitheatricality; model; actor.

Author

Alfonso Hoyos Morales holds a PhD in Philosophy from Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona. His lines of research focus on phenomenology, aesthetics, and film. He has taught at Universitat de Barcelona and Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, and is currently teaching at the Universitat de Girona, offering courses in Aesthetics, Film Philosophy and Critical Theory, among others. He is the author of several articles published in academic journals such as the *Journal of Aesthetics and Phenomenology*, *Enrahonar* and *ESPES*. His doctoral thesis, which explores the notion of the model in Robert Bresson's work from a phenomenological perspective, will be published by Palgrave Macmillan in 2026.

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TEATRALIDAD Y ANTITEATRALIDAD EN *MOUCHETTE* DE ROBERT BRESSON

Resumen

El concepto de "modelo" se presenta en Bresson como una reacción al clásico actor teatral. Esto opera en Bresson no sólo como una cuestión estética, sino también antropológica. En su visión, lo teatral se define por el carácter imitativo y proyectivo de una persona en relación a un tercero que la observa. Sin embargo, en *Mouchette*, la protagonista habita un constante juego de imitación y proyección, donde su teatralidad no contradice, sino que complementa, la compleja construcción de su identidad. Esta teatralidad refleja, por un lado, la imitación propia de la infancia, marcada por la ausencia de una personalidad plenamente formada, y, por otro, se presenta como un acto de resistencia frente a un entorno hostil que constantemente la amenaza. A través de su film, Bresson explora la tensión entre esta imitación y la frustración de Mouchette en un mundo que le niega la posibilidad de afirmar su identidad.

Palabras clave

Robert Bresson; Mouchette; teatralidad; antiteatralidad; modelo; actor.

Autor

Alfonso Hoyos Morales (Sevilla, 1995) es doctor en filosofía por la Universidad Autónoma de Barcelona. Sus líneas de investigación se centran en la fenomenología, la estética y el cine. Ha impartido clases en la Universitat de Barcelona, Universitat Autónoma de Barcelona y actualmente en la Universitat de Girona sobre Estética, Filosofía del cine Teoría crítica, etcétera, Es autor de diversos artículos publicados en revistas científicas como *Journal of Aesthetics and Phenomenology*, *Enrahonar* y ESPES. Próximamente (2026) publicará su tesis doctoral en la editorial Palgrave Macmillan que versa sobre la noción de modelo en Robert Bresson desde una perspectiva fenomenológica.

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