Preface

I began teaching French cinema in a British university – then called a polytechnic – in 1975, during the pre-video era when 16-millimetre prints were screened to groups of students. The course, shared with a colleague, adopted, like this series, an auteur-based approach, and Bresson was one of six directors studied. I knew his work very little at the outset and did not care much for most of what I did know, so that the bulk of the teaching of his films fell to my colleague, fortunately an ardent enthusiast. *Mouchette* (1967), and even to an extent *Journal d'un curé de campagne* (1951), intrigued me by their tight visual organisation and depiction of the miseries of life in the depths of provincial France, but as that most oxymoronic of entities an ex-Catholic, I was unsurprisingly as resistant to the redemptive ending of *Pickpocket* (1959) as to the odyssey of meekness in *Au hasard Balthazar* (1966), which struck me as little more than *Black Beauty* with a strong dose of opium of the people thrown in.

That all changed in the spring of 1982, when study-leave arrangements meant that I taught the whole of the French cinema course, including Bresson. The family and personal circumstances that catalysed my change are less important than the dramatic manner of its occurrence. As the cross filled the silent screen at the end of *Journal d'un curé de campagne* (hereinafter *Journal*), I left the room in tears, and even more extraordinarily the same thing occurred – the same tears happened to me – at the end of *Pickpocket*, a film whose laconic style I had hitherto dismissed as meretricious.

Paul Schrader has identified a key Bressonian moment as that of the 'decisive action', which 'forces the viewer into the confrontation with the Wholly Other he would normally avoid' (Schrader 1972: 81). That confrontation enacts on the other side of the screen the decisive action carried out – often in spite of themselves – by the films' central characters, so that my experience on reviewing Bresson's films had all but made of me one of their protagonists, bringing about a performative identification that had less to do with *who* those protagonists were (I had stolen only infrequently and never been a priest) than with *where*. Within a week of the screenings that had so moved me, I had drafted an outline for a research proposal and submitted it to the British Academy for funding. I spent a

month of that summer in the film libraries of Paris, saturating myself in Bressoniana, and the resulting article (Reader, 1986) became the first one on film to be published by the journal *French Studies*.

I mention this not (only) out of boastfulness or in order to substantiate my bona fides as a Bresson scholar, but because the extraordinary speed with which I moved from scepticism, verging on hostility, to passionate professional and personal commitment remains unprecedented in my experience. Extraordinary too was the coincidence that in his major book on Bresson, published in the same year as my article, Philippe Arnaud deploys the selfsame quotation from the Judaeo-Christian mystic Simone Weil that I had used – ‘La grâce comble, mais elle ne peut entrer que là où il y a un vide pour la recevoir, et c’est elle qui fait ce vide’ (Weil 1988: 18; Arnaud 1986: 20; Reader 1986: 441). Less extraordinary than it may at first seem, perhaps – Weil’s sparse, aphoristic writing is easily read as a pre-text for Bresson’s own *Notes sur le cinématographe*, and the importance of grace in the Bressonian universe is recognised by virtually all commentators on him – but an indication nonetheless of how my view of that universe interacted with others’. My fascination with Bresson’s work is largely a fascination with the variety of critical discourses, ranging from the adulatory to the scornful, it has generated, and in the pages that follow I shall try to give due space to these as well as to the films themselves.

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 Schrader, Paul (1972), *Transcendental Style in Film: Ozu, Bresson, Dreyer*, Los Angeles/London, University of California Press.
 Weil, Simone (1988), *La Pesanteur et la grâce*, Paris, Plon.
1. Grace fills up, but it can enter only where there is an empty space to receive it, and it makes this empty space itself.