

A woman is seen from behind, standing in a room and watching a television. The room is dimly lit, with a painting on the wall to the left and a fireplace mantel with vases to the right. The overall atmosphere is quiet and contemplative.

FILM
CULTURE

IN TRANSITION

Late Bresson
and the
Visual Arts

Cinema, Painting and
Avant-Garde Experiment

RAYMOND WATKINS

Amsterdam
University
Press

Late Bresson and the Visual Arts

Late Bresson and the Visual Arts

Cinema, Painting and Avant-Garde Experiment

Raymond Watkins

Amsterdam University Press

Sections of chapter 1 and 2 have previously appeared in “Robert Bresson’s Modernist Canvas: The Gesture Toward Painting in *Au hasard Balthazar*,” *Cinema Journal* 51.2 (Winter 2012): 1-25. Sections of chapter 3 have previously appeared in “Robert Bresson’s Surrealist Ghosts,” *Studies in French Cinema* 13.2 (May 2013): 141-155.

Cover illustration: A nude Dominique Sanda positioned in front of television set and Cupid and Psyche painting in *UNE FEMME DOUCE*.

Cover design: Kok Korpershoek, Amsterdam

Lay-out: Crius Group, Hulshout

ISBN 978 94 6298 364 9

e-ISBN 978 90 4853 399 2

DOI 10.5117/9789462983649

NUR 670

© R. Watkins / Amsterdam University Press B.V., Amsterdam 2018

All rights reserved. Without limiting the rights under copyright reserved above, no part of this book may be reproduced, stored in or introduced into a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means (electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise) without the written permission of both the copyright owner and the author of the book.

Every effort has been made to obtain permission to use all copyrighted illustrations reproduced in this book. Nonetheless, whosoever believes to have rights to this material is advised to contact the publisher.

Table of Contents

Acknowledgements	7
Introduction	9
Bresson in Color: Reinventing History through Avant-Garde Experiment	
Part 1 Classical and Postwar Painting	
1. Bresson's Debt to Painting	35
Iconography, Lighting, Color, and Framing Practices	
2. The Turn to Postwar Abstraction	81
Action Painting, <i>L'Art Informel</i> , and <i>Le Nouveau Réalisme</i>	
Part 2 Avant-Garde Experiment	
3. Bresson's Flirtation with Surrealism	129
Sexual Desire, Masochism, and Abjection	
4. The Design and Pattern of the Whole	161
Constructivist Painting and Theater	
5. Between Constructivism and Minimalism	207
Bresson's Ambivalence Toward the Modern	
Illustration Credits	233
Bibliography	235
About the author	247
Index	249

Acknowledgements

Because this project has had such a long incubation, it has benefitted from the help of many more people, institutions, and communities than I can possibly acknowledge. I was very fortunate at the start to be part of a talented community of filmmakers and scholars at The University of Iowa. The idea for this project first emerged through a student-led reading group on phenomenology and the visual turn, progressed through a graduate seminar with Dudley Andrew on cinema and modernity, and was guided by Jacques Aumont in Iowa City and in Paris. Dudley's tireless, infectious enthusiasm for cinema pushed me to pursue obscure leads and engage the material in more intellectually vibrant ways. A research fellowship in Paris supported by Véronique Godard and funded by the Society for French American Cultural Services and Educational Aid (FACSEA) enabled me to map out the project. Thanks to Steve Ungar for encouraging me to apply, and for providing the foundation in Surrealism that shaped chapter three.

This book is indebted to many readers, mostly anonymous. Brian Price's insights helped me theorize in a more thorough way the tension between painting and the anachronistic in Bresson's work. Two anonymous readers at Amsterdam University Press pointed out weaknesses in the manuscript's structure in such a lucid way that I was forced to address them. I also want to single out for special praise an anonymous reader at *Framework* some years ago, whose nine pages of single-spaced notes on AU HASARD BALTHAZAR provided a route to think through the stakes of a book-length study.

A good deal of the primary research was done while teaching at Case Western Reserve University. I couldn't imagine completing this study without the tremendous collection at the Ingalls Library in the Cleveland Museum of Art. Thanks to Case Western art history faculty members Anne Helmrich and Ellen G. Landau, who helped me identify artworks in Bresson's films. While at Colgate University, I made several research trips to Paris, and presented my work at a number of conferences. Thanks to Lynn Schwarzer in Film and Media Studies and Connie Harsh in English who were strong supporters of my research and travel requests, no matter how far-flung. Conversations with Scott MacDonald provided energy at critical times, especially his concept of the cine-nocturne shared in draft form.

I am equally indebted to the small community of passionate scholars who study the intersection between cinema and the arts. Through her conferences, publications, and journal, Ágnes Pethö has been a unifying force for studies of cinema and intermediality in Europe. In the U.S., the insights and

comradery of members of the CinemArts Scholarly Interest Group kept the project on track, especially Susan Felleman, Steve Jacobs, Brigitte Peucker, and Jennifer Wild—and buoyed by the friendship of Prakash Younger. A special note of thanks is due to Angela Dalle Vacche, who has been the most enthusiastic supporter of this project from the start. Her feedback is reflected in innumerable ways in this study, through perceptive comments at SCMS panels, promising research directions shared through email, and a consistently attentive reading of drafts. The final product would have been far inferior without her sustained interest and involvement.

Obtaining permissions for the images has proven to be nearly as arduous as writing the book. Harumi Klossowska de Rola liked the project, and kindly allowed the Balthus painting *La rue* to be reproduced. Without James Quandt's help in navigating the labyrinth of Bresson rights, alerting me to recently released DVDs, and putting me in contact with the right people in France, this book would have almost no images. No one knows the Bresson landscape as well as James, and he did everything he could to ensure that the project would be successful. Thanks too to Mark Morrisson, Chair of the English Department at Penn State University, whose subvention helped defray permission costs for images. Finally, I am indebted to production team at Amsterdam University Press for their thoroughness, care, and attention to detail, especially Kristi Prins, Sarah de Waard, Chantal Nicolaes and Maryse Elliott.

Much of this book was written in central Pennsylvania while living in a large, Victorian farmhouse, which turned out to be the ideal place for such a task. I thank Ziggy Coyle and David Bauschpies for the use of Circle Z Farm, and my mom, Kathy Graham, for her steadfast support. I dedicate this book to Tina Coyle, who lived with it practically every day for the past three years, read innumerable drafts, and remained a patient sounding board for my daily anxieties, doubts, and worries.

Introduction

Bresson in Color: Reinventing History through Avant-Garde Experiment

These men drew upon the pictorial, sculptural, theatrical, and poetic enterprise—the cinema of the Bauhaus, the theatre of constructivism, the objects of surrealism, the festivities of dada, preserved, partially and precariously, through the emigration of European artists driven to this continent by fascism.¹

Although Annette Michelson's above quote traces the genealogy of postwar American avant-garde film, I argue in this study that many of the same avant-garde and disciplinary influences are evident in Robert Bresson's late films. If Michelson's comment addresses the lack of serious and sustained inquiry into the artistic lineage of the American avant-garde, then this study suggests parallel missed opportunities in examining Bresson's late color work. While many Bresson studies focus on his use of literary texts, his talent at adaptation, or his reliance on such Christian themes as punishment and salvation, this study instead investigates Bresson's work from a fine-arts perspective. I explore connections to sculpture and performance art, Bresson's interest in gallery and museum space, the turn to long-established painterly themes and motifs, the parallels to postwar gestural and abstract art, and his affiliation with the avant-garde, especially the movements of Surrealism, Constructivism, and Minimalism. My claim is that a very different view of Bresson emerges by approaching his work through other visual arts traditions and practices. At the heart of this comparison between cinema and the visual arts is Bresson's—and the Bresson scholar's—understanding of the relationship between cinema and history, a connection that I explore in this introduction through three interconnected topics: the method and approach of film archeology; the way avant-garde influences emerge in

1 Annette Michelson, "About Snow," *October* 8 (Spring 1979), 111-112.

Bresson's work, with a focus on Surrealism and Constructivism; and Bresson's predilection for tropes of automatism and the new.

Georges Didi-Huberman and the Anachronistic Tradition

*Images certainly have a history; but what they are, the movement proper to them, their specific power, all that appears only as a symptom—a malaise, a more or less violent denial, a suspension—in history.*²

This study questions the widely accepted narrative story of Robert Bresson as director. Colin Burnett's recent study, *The Invention of Robert Bresson* (2017) pursues much the same goal by deconstructing the view of Bresson as an "isolated recluse", as part of the way he has been mystified as auteur, largely based on critics who have "compil[ed] an inventory of arbitrarily periodized clusters of facts and rumors".³ To rectify the problem, Burnett reclaims Bresson not as a philosopher or theologian, but first and foremost as auteur by situating him within 1950s French film culture. In contrast, this study explores the way Bresson draws on other painterly and avant-garde visual styles and incorporates them into his particular approach. Our goals are nonetheless complementary, since, in this study, Bresson is seen to engage actively with a range of pre and postwar artistic forms and practices, and, for that reason, could not be further removed from the notion of isolated recluse. While Burnett concentrates on the shifts in Bresson's early maturation as an auteur, this study suggests that such experimentation continues—and even accelerates—in the subsequent late films.

The place where we most strongly diverge, however, is that the present study is much less tethered to the biographical events of Bresson's life, and much less focused on establishing links between Bresson's cultural milieu and his formation as film director. Certainly the impulse to place Bresson in the historical context of 1940s and 1950s French film culture is long overdue. But we must be equally careful not to reach conclusions about Bresson's style or approach that are true simply because they are shown to grow out of events that happened in his life. Should we, for example, as Burnett suggests,

2 Georges Didi-Huberman, *Devant le temps: Histoire de l'art et anachronism des images* (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 2000), 25. All translations from this and other texts in French are my own unless otherwise indicated.

3 Colin Burnett, *The Invention of Robert Bresson: The Auteur and His Market* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2017), 11.

read Bresson's austere, minimalist tendencies as a product of his commercial photography work for Chanel and other companies in the 1930s, rather than through broader intellectual currents such as Brechtian distantiation discussed by Susan Sontag, or the influence of Byzantine art suggested by Paul Schrader?⁴ Does one influence necessarily occlude another because it is more directly connected to an artist's life and particular experience? Given how little we know about Bresson's life, any study invariably confronts these methodological questions about the degree to which the historical record should provide the final say in determining influence.

Late in his study, Burnett equally grapples with this problem of viewing Bresson as a product of the postwar, avant-garde cultural marketplace that produced him, while also seeing him as "adopting an outspoken, engaged, and even rebellious stance within cultural life."⁵ At the heart of this tension are two positions: a deterministic view of Bresson as one whose identity was forged at a particular place and time, and a view of him as a fierce iconoclast who rebelled against such reductive strictures. This tension emerges most sharply when Bresson is placed within the context of the realist theories of André Bazin and Georges Sadoul. Bresson's style goes to such extremes of anti-cinema that it, "made even other realist modes seem suspiciously artificial or removed from direct phenomenal experience."⁶ At least in this particular example, individual style is seen to trump the realist conventions of the period. Such deviations suggest that there is something unconventional, perhaps even ahistorical, at the core of Bresson's aesthetic, given the extent to which he pushes the conventions of realism to the limits of asceticism.

Because so little is known about Bresson, approaching his work is not unlike the position of art historians who attempt to understand ancient, medieval, or Renaissance artworks or artists. The problem of determining artistic influence, and the relationship between artist and history, has been much more extensively theorized in the field of art history. Georges Didi-Huberman criticizes the way a "euchronic" process is customarily preferred: decisions about the work of art are based on how well it has been made to *fit into* its particular historical moment.⁷ Such an approach is on display in the vast majority of art historical studies, whose golden rule is that "anachronism must at all costs be avoided, and one must not project one's

4 Ibid., 47.

5 Ibid., 189, note 9.

6 Ibid., 147.

7 Didi-Huberman, *Devant le temps*, 13.

concepts, tastes, or values onto past realities”.⁸ Didi-Huberman focuses on the abstract panel beneath Fra Angelico’s fresco *Madone des ombres* (*Madonna of the Shadows*, 1440-1450), in which, for scholars, only a document of that particular time period will permit access to the “mental tools” of the time, even if an artist’s contemporaries “do not seem to understand the work any better than those individuals separated in time”.⁹ Given our current fidelity to empiricism, such a document is seen to have the greatest truth value, even if just as many interpretative decisions are made, since scholars are trained to value scientific exactitude and specificity as the way to arrive at the greatest degree of truth: the more concrete the data we can amass about a particular object or moment, the more insightful and accurate our study will consequently be.¹⁰ Following Didi-Huberman’s reservations, this study actively resists such a one-to-one relationship between milieu and artistic creation, in order to keep past and present in a dynamic state of dialogue.

Why does Didi-Huberman spend so much energy advocating for the positive virtues of anachronism? As Jacques Rancière points out, the situation is rather unique in France for those who theorize about the study of history. Rancière questions the methods of the French *Annales* school established in the 1920s, and specifically such historians as Lucien Febvre, who insists that anachronism is the “worst of all sins, the sin that cannot be forgiven”, because fundamental to the historical process is the view that a “particular historical event or character must belong wholly to the time in which it or she is found”.¹¹ Rancière instead attempts to create what he calls “heretical histories”, as in his study of proletarianism, *La nuit des prolétaires: Archives du rêve ouvrier* (1981), by looking at individuals and events rather than cataloguing activities into larger social, economic, or juridical systems.¹² Anachronism thus contains a political force for Rancière, since the only possibility for radical change is by acknowledging the unusual,

8 Ibid.

9 Ibid., 15.

10 Even today art historians rely on Cristoforo Landino’s sixteen categories of art criticism to interpret Italian Quattrocento canvases. However, 30 years separates the death of Fra Angelico and Landino’s categories, and these concepts substantially changed in meaning over the course of those years, not to mention the significant linguistic and cultural differences between the two men. For Didi-Huberman, the foundations of art history are built upon such anachronistic practices. See Didi-Huberman, *Devant le temps*, 15, and Didi-Huberman, *Devant l’image: Question posée aux fins d’une histoire de l’art* (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1990), 52-53.

11 Tim Stott, “Introduction to Jacques Rancière’s ‘The Concept of Anachronism and the Historian’s Truth,’” *InPrint* 3.1 (2015), accessed 30 January 2018. <http://arrow.dit.ie/inp/vol3/iss1/2>.

12 Jacques Rancière, “The Concept of Anachronism and the Historian’s Truth (English translation),” *InPrint* 3(1) (2015), 46, accessed 31 January 2018. <http://arrow.dit.ie/inp/vol3/iss1/3>.

the exceptional, or the emergent, which can only come from the specific acts of those who are customarily ignored in such studies, rather than from a top-down conception of how the larger society must necessarily behave. The *Annales*'s concept of history thus ends up being profoundly anti-historical, since, by sealing off a particular time period, people and events can only reflect the larger *mentalités* into which they are born. Instead, Rancière ends his essay by gesturing toward the transformative power of the anachronistic in much the same spirit that emerges in the work of Didi-Huberman: "An anachrony is a word, an event, or a signifying sequence that has left 'its' time, and in this way is given the capacity to define completely original points of orientation (*les aiguillages*), to carry out leaps from one temporal line to another."¹³

While I thus welcome Colin Burnett's study as a necessary corrective to past Bresson scholarship, I also want to resist the implicit corresponding argument that the more details we learn about the events of Bresson's life or his epoch, the better we will be able to understand his films. Perhaps there are directions that Bresson took, styles he assimilated, or innovations he developed that have no direct connection to—or at least cannot be so easily explained by—where he worked, who he befriended, or what the prevailing French attitudes were toward cinema in his day. Perhaps one goal of Bresson's style is to be as anachronistic as the Fra Angelica described by Didi-Huberman, a Renaissance artist who employs a montage-like approach that draws on at least four radically different historical moments: a thirteenth- and fourteenth-century use of color; a fifteenth-century use of perspective; Byzantine, and even Gothic iconography; and the 20th century Abstract Expressionist style of Jackson Pollock.¹⁴ Didi-Huberman thus encourages a view of history that isn't a linear or straightforward cause-and-effect process, but rather the art object stands at the nexus of a variety of historical times that, "enter into collision, or are plastically based on each other, bifurcate, or become muddled together."¹⁵ The scholar struggles to smooth over such rough edges between history and artwork, presenting a seamlessness between particular artistic choices and the milieu in which he or she lived. Didi-Huberman instead encourages a movement in the opposite direction, creating new objects that are as revolutionary as the Surrealist juxtapositions between historical epochs. Such juxtapositions make us realize that there is no unidirectional line of progress in history,

¹³ Ibid., 47.

¹⁴ Didi-Huberman, *Devant le temps*, 16, 20-21.

¹⁵ Ibid., 43.

but rather time progresses like a “bretzel”.¹⁶ It is equally important that we do not view the object or image as having one assignable place for all times like the *Annales* historians, and precisely the motivation for Aby Warburg’s concept of the interval. The ultimate goal of such an approach, however, is not to deny history, or to promote an ahistorical perspective, but rather to dismiss the implicit abstractions of the historical method, ultimately to counter the ever-present assumption that there must be a one-to-one correspondence between an artist and the milieu in which he or she lived and worked.

Film Archeology: The Resistance to Chronology and Historical “Fact”

To provide the theoretical structure for such an approach to Bresson, I draw on the philosophical method of film archeology. Much like the approach of Didi-Huberman, film archeology shares a distrust of established history, especially works that build on the insights of Michel Foucault and Walter Benjamin to develop a more complex model for the relationship between past objects or events and present-day explanations of them. According to Erkki Huhtamo and Jussi Parikka, media archaeologists construct, “alternate histories of suppressed, neglected, and forgotten media that do not point teleologically to the present media-cultural condition as their ‘perfection’”, since inventions, styles, and ideas that did not survive also have equally important ramifications on present-day practices.¹⁷ Bresson’s films reveal a surprisingly wide range of subterranean connections to visual art practices in the fields of painting, sculpture, photography, theatre, and dance that span from the Middle Ages to postwar France. While I draw on previous Bresson studies, this project is based neither on established critical frameworks for understanding Bresson’s work, nor on the notion that cinema has a predetermined etiology. In this respect, the study’s precursors would include the work of the German art historian Aby Warburg, whose *Mnemosyne Atlas* (1927-1929) provides a catalog of shared visual motifs drawn from books, magazines, newspapers, and other popular sources, as well as André Malraux’s *Musée imaginaire* (1947), which encourages readers to find, “the persisting life of certain forms, emerging ever and again like spectres of the

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 155.

¹⁷ Erkki Huhtamo and Jussi Parikka, eds., *Media Archaeology: Approaches, Applications, and Implications* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), 3.

past”.¹⁸ These two projects do not delimit visual images according to shared epoch or genre, but first establish commonalities through resemblance. As a result, such an approach stresses intermediality by focusing on the way particular motifs shift and transform over time and across media.

Unlike many studies within the field of film or media archeology, however, this study does not unearth neglected or forgotten technological apparatuses for the insights they may shed on our understanding of media today. What this study instead shares is the desire to complicate a linear account of history by being receptive to a wide range of iconography and visual material. Such an approach illustrates what Eric Kluitenberg defines as the “fantasmatic” and what Janet Harbord terms “ex-centric cinema” in her study of Giorgio Agamben: hidden potentialities that indicate important clues to impractical, forgotten, or uncertain genealogies.¹⁹ Such an approach can, in the words of Huhtamo, correct unexamined or entrenched beliefs by bringing the “neglected, misrepresented, and/or suppressed aspects of both media’s past(s) and their present [...] into a conversation with each another”.²⁰ Similarly, Thomas Elsaesser makes an eloquent case for viewing history not as a unified string of events, but rather as a series of discontinuous, heterogeneous, and differently caused eruptions in time.²¹ He discusses the significance of obsolescence, the subjectivity of memory, and, “complex and contradictory relations of multiple causal chains, to seriality and repetition, to stochastic causality”²². In his essay on the relationship between eighteenth-century Dutch still life painting and contemporary European art cinema, Jacques Aumont employs Aby Warburg’s concept of migration to resist in a parallel way the view of history as progressive improvement, by being receptive to the emergence of obscure or underestimated influences in a film.²³ Aumont ends his essay with a call for greater attention to the

18 André Malraux, *Voices of Silence*, trans. Stuart Gilbert (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978), 24.

19 Eric Kluitenberg, “On the Archeology of Imaginary Media,” *Media Archaeology: Approaches, Applications, and Implications*, Erkki Huhtamo and Jussi Parikka, eds. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), 57; Janet Harbord, *Ex-centric Cinema: Giorgio Agamben and Film Archeology* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2016).

20 Erkki Huhtamo, “Dismantling the Fairy Engine: Media Archeology as Topos Study,” *Media Archaeology: Approaches, Applications, and Implications*, ed. Erkki Huhtamo and Jussi Parikka (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), 28.

21 Thomas Elsaesser, “Media Archeology as the Poetics of Obsolescence,” *Film History and Media Archaeology* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2016), 331-350.

22 *Ibid.*, 337-338.

23 Jacques Aumont, “‘Migrations’ ou le spectre de la peinture,” *Matière d’images* (Paris: Images Modernes, 2005), 41-83.

relationship between history and film studies that fully acknowledges the role played by the image, by facial representation, and by the visual register as cinema's genuine achievement.²⁴ Following Aumont's call, the present study unearths a wide range of figural and iconographic elements emerging from the Middle Ages to the early 1980s that cross disciplinary fields and reveal a complex overlapping of migrations within the visual arts.

It is not only this study's approach that reflects film archeology's interrogation of the way we arrive at historical truth, but equally the way that Bresson borrows from sources. His trajectory is characterized by obscure, often competing influences. One example is the way he incorporates religious characters, themes, and iconography into his work. We should not rely on Bresson's own religious faith to explain such choices, I believe, but rather should turn to religious painting, especially the following influences that I explore in chapters one and two: medieval icon painting, the visual hierarchy established in Renaissance painting between the earthy and the spiritual, the careful attention to light and shadow in the baroque, the oscillation between concealment and revelation that emerges in *UNE FEMME DOUCE* (1969) and the question of the invisible sublime, which Bresson alludes to as much through Alfred Manessier's lyrical abstractionist canvases as through Piet Mondrian's concept of the spiritual infinite.

Similar approaches toward determining influence have already been suggested by a small coterie of art historians who propose moving beyond the artwork's immediate historical milieu to consider other factors that determine why a particular style emerges on the canvas. Michael Fried focuses on the way a painting's figures oscillate between being intensely absorbed in a task, or directly announcing their presence to the viewer.²⁵ For Fried, the history of French painting from the Renaissance can be understood through this dialectic. Painting is most actively committed to the ideals of absorption in the eighteenth century through the writings of Denis Diderot and the paintings of Jean-Siméon Chardin, gradually moves toward the theatricality or direct "facingness" of Édouard Manet, and finally negotiates between the two poles in post-1970s photography.²⁶ The lack of

24 Ibid., 57: "Que cela demande une analyse capable d'accepter la part d'image, la part de figure, la part de visual que comporte l'oeuvre de cinéma, ce n'est pas pour me déplaire."

25 Michael Fried, *Absorption and Theatricality: Painting and Beholder in the Age of Diderot* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988).

26 Fried's research can be viewed as an interconnected effort to trace the changing historical dynamic between absorption and theatricality in painting and the visual arts, beginning with his essay "Art and Objecthood," (*Art and Objecthood: Essays and Reviews* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998)), and continuing through a series of historical studies of individual painters

drama and suspense in a Bresson film reveals a strong affiliation with the absorptive tradition, a relationship I explore in chapter one by comparing Bresson's iconography to that of the French baroque painter Georges de la Tour. Bresson also employs strategies to prevent the spectator's gaze from penetrating into a scene, as if to amplify the character's absorption and the viewer's distance. He instructs his actors to look down to avoid eye contact, and he introduces physical obstacles that separate the actor from spectator, such as by dressing his actors in medieval armor in *LANCELOT DU LAC* (1974) to stress their "blindness" to viewer response or identification.²⁷ As Bresson phrases it, the model "should reveal nothing, should not enter into communication with the outside world, should remain at all times firmly closed off".²⁸ Drawing on religious themes provides an additional method to distance the viewer by demonstrating a character's intense devotion to a spiritual realm by joining a cloistered community that has renounced the outside world. One can see through Fried's notion of absorption that Bresson's style and motifs fit within a long-established French painterly tradition.

The art historian Alexander Nagel develops an equally unorthodox model to account for the relationship between a work of art and its historical context. In chapter one, I draw on his book *Medieval Modern* to explain the way Bresson's films draw on medieval and early Renaissance works of art just as much as on modern ones. Nagel elaborates on the theoretical underpinnings of his approach in his subsequent *Anachronic Renaissance*, cowritten with Christopher Wood. The authors examine Renaissance works of art in which all marks of time have been removed, such that the work seems to intentionally hesitate between historical forms without definitively settling on one. To understand the nature of this hesitation, Nagel and Wood draw on Walter Benjamin's notion of the aura: "the possible gain in legitimacy conferred by the marks of time is easily offset by the risk of loss of aura through fixing in time. To fix an image or temple in time is to reduce

(and contemporary photographers) from the Renaissance to the present, including: *The Moment of Caravaggio* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010); *Absorption and Theatricality: Painting and Beholder in the Age of Diderot* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988); *Manet's Modernism: or, The Face of Painting in the 1860s* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1998); *Courbet's Realism* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1992); and *Why Photography Matters as Never Before* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008).

27 Fried notes that blindness is a frequent trope to illustrate painting's indifference to the observer, evident in Chardin's *Laveugle* (1753), Jean-Baptiste Greuze's *Laveugle trompé* (1755), Diderot's "Letter on the Blind" (1749), and portraits of the blind Roman general Belisarius. See Fried, *Absorption and Theatricality*, 149.

28 Robert Bresson, *Notes sur le cinématographe*. (Paris: Gallimard), 1975, 103.

it to human proportions".²⁹ Painting's uniqueness is thus to be found in the way it at times hesitates between past and present, or between auratic transcendence and the everyday, since an artwork is capable of holding "incompatible models in suspension without deciding".³⁰ An artwork's ability to escape human time thus reveals its "anachronic" qualities, which is linked to the divine, since theologians read sacred texts as "indications of a suprahistorical divine plan that suspended earthly time".³¹ The spiritual component of Bresson's films might equally be viewed as an effort to contrast historical time with a divine time that reestablishes some semblance of auratic wholeness.

This suspension between human and divine is perhaps Bresson's most important inheritance from painting. While filming, Bresson seeks out "constant anachronisms" on set, and constructs his films outside any single, identifiable historical moment.³² Bresson's two films set in the Middle Ages, *LE PROCÈS DE JEANNE D'ARC* (1962) and *LANCELOT DU LAC*, intermingle archaic, preindustrial elements with modern ones, which explains the inclusion of such modern props as a chessboard and a wooden tub in *LANCELOT*. According to Bresson, the goal while filming *LANCELOT* was to create a setting without "[...] time or place. While working, it never occurred to me that the armor could be from any other age than our own. The iron clothing is simply an object that makes sounds, music, rhythm".³³ By not being tied to a concrete historical moment, Bresson suggests, the viewer can more fully concentrate on the sounds and rhythms of the present, a similar sentiment voiced by Georges Didi-Huberman, who ends his study of the anachronistic in art with Barnett Newman's "The Sublime is Now" (1948).³⁴ In discussing *LE PROCÈS DE JEANNE D'ARC*, Bresson asks: "Is it not strange that in our films the more we distance historical characters from their époque, the closer they get to us, and the more true they are?"³⁵ Precisely by distancing Jeanne from any recognizable historical time or place, she becomes more authentic and believable. Bresson's pressing concern while

29 Alexander Nagel and Christopher S. Wood. *Anachronic Renaissance* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2010), 8.

30 *Ibid.*, 18.

31 *Ibid.*, 10.

32 Yvonne Baby, "Du fer qui fait du bruit," *Le monde* (26 September 1974), 15.

33 *Ibid.*

34 Didi-Huberman, *Devant le temps*. Didi-Huberman draws extensively on Walter Benjamin's conception of history.

35 Yves Kovacs, "Entretien avec Robert Bresson," *Cahiers du cinéma* 140 (May 1963), 410. Reprinted in Robert Bresson, *Bresson par Bresson: Entretiens 1943-1983*, ed. Mylène Bresson (Paris: Flammarion, 2013), 127.

in the director's chair is that too much historical detail will eliminate new possible directions, reducing the film's unique ability to capture the present moment. He succinctly sums up this idea in response to a question about an ambiguous plot point in *AU HASARD BALTHAZAR* (1966): "I would like it if all historic details were eliminated from a film."³⁶

Related to the notion of suspending historical events is Pierre Klossowski's notion of the "possible body" that I discuss in chapter three, which imagines new, nonproductive relationships outside authorized circuits of exchange. Such a desire to move beyond singular historical events or causes perhaps stems for both Klossowski and Bresson from the radical ambition of the Surrealists, who juxtapose past with present to subvert the linearity of historical time. A parallel approach to the historical is Giorgio Agamben's concept of potentialities, which equally stresses the nonproductive: "the inhabiting of one's impotentiality as a mode of resistance to the current imperative to be productive, compliant and identifiable as subjects in a system".³⁷ Bresson's films provide a similar resistance to historical chronology, especially in the way he disrupts a viewer's ability to make coherent sense of the narrative. The protagonist commits suicide in *UNE FEMME DOUCE*, for example, as if to release the viewer from the obligations of story by revealing the most important dramatic event at the start of the film. Bresson also subverts narrative chronology to problematize the notion of a clearly delineated before and after. In *UNE FEMME DOUCE*, he eliminates conventional flashback by shifting between the dead wife on display in the present, and past scenes of her when she is still alive in the past. Bresson claims that these scene changes do not indicate any movement between past and present: "It is not the rather banal story of a young married couple that attracted me. It is instead the possibility of a constant confrontation, a continual juxtaposition between two images: a dead young girl, and a living young girl [...] these are not flashbacks, but something else: the confrontation between life and death."³⁸ The constant movement between the dead and living protagonist reflects a consummate Surrealist interest in animating the lifeless body and killing the animate one, in addition to giving the gentle woman—and the film—a timelessness that transcends the artificial human categories of past and present.

36 Robert Bresson, "Un metteur en ordre: Robert Bresson." "Pour le plaisir" television series. Office de Radiodiffusion Télévision Française (11 May 1966). Reprinted in Bresson, *Bresson par Bresson: Entretiens*, 207.

37 Harbord, *Ex-centric Cinema*, 25.

38 Bresson, *Bresson par Bresson: Entretiens*, 248.

Bresson employs a related strategy to distance his films from their historical moment by juxtaposing the antiquated with the modern. André Bazin describes this contradictory movement as “the reciprocal interplay of seemingly incompatible elements” in *JOURNAL D’UN CURÉ DE CAMPAGNE* (1951), such as the tension between an eighteenth-century revenge tale and the modern focus on prostitution, or the contrast between a Denis Diderot script and the robotic movement of windshield wipers as they rhythmically glide across a car window in *LES DAMES DE BOIS DE BOLOGNE* (1945).³⁹ Building on Bazin’s insight, Luc Moullet introduces the term “bi-temporality” to describe this same tendency in *L’ARGENT* (1983):

...we begin to see that everywhere there is this alliance of contrasts: films juxtaposing modern elements (scooters, mopeds, the Citroën 2CV, shopping in Auteuil, credit card cheats in *L’argent*), and elements of a revolutionary past (in the same film, people still do their laundry at *lavoirs*, and Bresson’s contemporary rural films evoke instead a dignified countryside from the time of the filmmaker’s youth—always the idea of “youth”—or the end of the nineteenth century with all its stereotypes, bottles close to the edge of the table that are going to break, axe murders, no electricity, etc.).⁴⁰

Bresson is not the first to juxtapose the antiquated past with the hypermodern. Charles Baudelaire creates a much earlier example in *Les fleurs du mal* (1857) by superimposing archaic myth onto the present as a way of illustrating to what extent humanity has been evacuated from nineteenth-century Paris. Benjamin’s *Das Passagen-Werk* (*The Arcades Project*, 1927-1940), is similarly built on the implicit contrast between the arcades and then contemporary Parisian life and technology. Both Benjamin and Bresson thus situate their approach within a tradition that draws explicitly on the temporal slippages characteristic of the Surrealists’s outmoded visions. Miriam Hansen even describes the connections between Benjamin and the Surrealist method in these terms: “the return of archaic, cyclical, mythological time in the accelerated succession of the new (fashion, technology)”, on display for instance in depictions of the epoch of Louis VII within André Breton’s *Nadja*.⁴¹ By

39 André Bazin, “*Le journal d’un curé de campagne* and the Stylistics of Robert Bresson,” *Robert Bresson*, ed. James Quandt (Toronto: Toronto International Film Festival Group, 1998), 130.

40 Luc Moullet, “Robert Bresson: Think, You Fool,” *Robert Bresson (Revised)*, ed. James Quandt (Toronto: Toronto International Film Festival Cinémathèque, 2011), 512.

41 Miriam Hansen, *Cinema and Experience: Sigfried Kracauer, Walter Benjamin, and Theodor W. Adorno* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), 331.

examining objects removed from their historical context, Benjamin insists, the viewer comes to realize the arbitrary nature of material signification, and, as a result, the fantasy and emptiness of the commodity itself.

While the turn to mythological time recalls a Surrealist, even Marxist desire to employ the outdated and archaic to create new commodity relations, such an impulse grows out of an older, fine-arts, and religious tradition of balancing the auratic, spiritual work against one that offers markings of its age and time. Bresson and Benjamin's explorations of obsolete historical pathways open history to new possible lineages and offspring, and indicates just how fragmentary and precarious our own present-day notions of history remain through the collision between past and present. In *Exhibiting Cinema in Contemporary Art* (2013), Erika Balsom similarly traces the way such video artists as Matthew Buckingham, Tacita Dean, and Jerome de Rijke/Willem de Rooji emphasize nonsynchronous temporalities through such obsolescent technologies as the 16mm projector in order to counter the contemporary image assault by mass culture.⁴² But such an impulse toward what Balsom terms "mute facticity" is on display in Bresson's films beginning in the late 1960s, long before either the triumph of the digital image, or pronounced anxieties about cinema's obsolescence.⁴³ Bresson not only offers alternative historical trajectories to counter a cinema of narrative consumerism, but he articulates what Balsom describes as cinema's desire to return to a more authentic real—not by projecting images *inside* the museum like the contemporary artists she examines, but rather by staging scenes in the Louvre and in the Musée national d'art moderne, for example, in *UNE FEMME DOUCE*—in order to gesture toward similar strategies at work among the abstract painters of his day. Chapter two explores such strategies in detail, while I return to the question of Bresson's representation of the relationship between past and present in chapter five, connecting it to his ambivalent attitude toward the modern machine.

The Influence of the Avant-Garde: Surrealism and Constructivism

Surrealism and Constructivism are often viewed as occupying antithetical poles of the avant-garde, given each movement's approach. The former emphasizes nature, the unconscious, and the individual, while the later

42 Erika Balsom, *Exhibiting Cinema in Contemporary Art* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2013).

43 *Ibid.*, 81.

stresses the mechanical, the technological, and the collective. This study maintains that the two movements share a much deeper affiliation than is commonly acknowledged: both are grounded in utopian dreams and passions, and both share a similar interest in the merging of human and machine. In a rather lengthy parenthetical aside in her review of André Bazin's *What is Cinema?* (1967), Annette Michelson similarly suggests that Surrealism and Constructivism are more alike than might at first seem possible. She notes that the Surrealists and Constructivists had a deep admiration for each other, and points out the irony in the way each claims cinema for itself:

If, for Constructivism, montage could incarnate the Dialectic, for Surrealism it proposed the modalities of the Encounter. It is through their generative esthetic metaphors that Constructivism and Surrealism reach out towards each other, and it is in the area of cinema that they briefly join. We know that the Surrealists, who had not yet made their own films, greeted *Potemkin* on its appearance in 1925 as the first major achievement in the medium, while the Constructivists had already paid spontaneous homage to the early serials loved by the Surrealists. If each movement imperiously claimed film for its very own, it was because each perceived the manner in which its transforming qualities, esthetic and social, converged with an intimacy and impact that were radically poetic.⁴⁴

Surrealism and Constructivism are described less as distinct movements than as different cinematic “modalities”. Michelson suggests that, for both movements, imaginative transformation through highly poetic images is connected to the social—and therefore political—since the power of the imagination is required to produce a shift in how one views the world. As André Breton phrases the idea, the “revolution of the mind [...] was a precondition for revolution in the streets”.⁴⁵ Surrealist influences are especially difficult to disentangle from Constructivist ones in Bresson's work, because the two movements are so closely allied as distinct modalities of many of the same overarching themes and concerns.

One example of the close aesthetic affinities between Surrealism and Constructivism can be seen through an essay I discuss in chapters three and four: “Paolo Uccello, peintre lunaire” (1935). Written by noted French

44 Annette Michelson, “What is Cinema?,” *Artforum* 6.10 (1968), 70.

45 Quoted in Brian Price, *Neither God nor Master: Robert Bresson and Radical Politics* (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 2011), 113.

art historian Georges Pudelko, the article appears in the Surrealist journal *Minotaure*, and offers tantalizing links between Uccello's style and Surrealist painting of the 1930s.⁴⁶ Uccello's paintings suggest the Surrealist uncanny in the way the human is reduced to an inanimate automaton, while the horses are instead painted in a highly naturalistic style, especially in *The Battle at San Romano* (c. 1440). Such a depiction resembles the Surrealist enthusiasm for mannequins, statues, and the robot Olympia in E. T. A. Hoffman's "Der Sandmann" (1816), all of which animates the dead object and treats the human as inanimate, which reflects Bresson's treatment of objects, and his depiction of models as machine-like. According to Pudelko, however, who labels Uccello a "gothic constructivist", Constructivism similarly treats the human as machine, witnessed in Uccello's dehumanized representation of soldiers in the same painting.⁴⁷ Pudelko's insight points to the dynamic contrast between stasis and movement in Uccello that is equally common in Bresson's films, especially through the use of immobile paintings in *UNE FEMME DOUCE* (chapter one), the Surrealist automaton (chapter three), and the contrapuntal structure of Constructivism (chapter four). While each of these influences play an important role in Bresson's work, there is a porosity in terms of how they cross-pollinate and cluster around particular themes.

The most sustained overlap between Surrealism and Constructivism emerges in Bresson's interest in framing, and I investigate the way such framing practices grow out of painterly traditions, Surrealist preoccupations, and Constructivist concerns in subsequent chapters of this book. I link Bresson's juxtaposition between foreground and background space to the style of Paul Cézanne, to the Cubist fragmentation of space, and to the startling juxtapositions of time and space characteristic of Surrealism and Constructivism. Through his Dada creations, Marcel Duchamp comments on the way the frame perpetually reorients a spectator's vision. By presenting an artwork consisting of glass panes in a window frame, for example, Duchamp's *La mariée mise à nu par ses célibataires, même* (*The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even*, 1915-1923), serves as a self-conscious reflection on the way framing decisions construct our vision. By making the frame transparent and built of everyday materials, the construction becomes as important as the figures represented within it. Structuralist cinema further explores the possibilities inherent in framing and perspective, especially the work of experimental filmmaker Michael Snow, whose films offer a progressive interrogation of the relationship

46 Georges Pudelko, "Paolo Uccello peintre lunaire," *Minotaure* 7 (1935), 32-41.

47 *Ibid.*, 33.

between frame and surrounding world.⁴⁸ In *WAVELENGTH* (1967), a camera slowly zooms in across the space of an apartment for 45 minutes, disinterested in the human events taking place in the room, and stops at the end to focus on a photograph of the sea on the adjacent wall. At the same historical moment, the films of Richard Serra turn to Russian Constructivism and the work of Dziga Vertov and Sergei Eisenstein. Serra's *FRAME* (1969) and *RAILROAD TURNBRIDGE* (1976), for example, are concerned with the way framing and perspective are critical to the spectator's experience.⁴⁹ So what begins as Dadaist reflection in Duchamp's work later emerges in American avant-garde cinema, and subsequently emerges in the Constructivist-influenced short films of Richard Serra. The visual trope of framing has a rich, shared genealogy among the avant-garde that makes it difficult to ascribe ownership, or even to distinguish the characteristics of one manifestation from another. I discuss Bresson's particular framing practices in each chapter of this study, in a way that draws on each of the influences discussed above.

One possible critique of Bresson's work is that it cannot share a deep affiliation with the European avant-garde because it is too removed from the political, even revolutionary aspirations of the interwar period. Brian Price argues, however, that Bresson's films are meditations on the nature of radical political revolution, and, even more, as inquiries into why such movements ultimately failed.⁵⁰ Each film can thus be seen as a critique of capitalism through an exploration of ideology, even if left-wing revolution is ultimately portrayed as a botched effort—again, reinforcing the view that Bresson's work, much like the films discussed by Erika Balsom, focuses on failure and ruin.⁵¹ *UNE FEMME DOUCE*, for example, asks why May 1968 results in a return to repressive sexual politics depicted in the relationship between the pawnbroker and his wife. *LANCELOT DU LAC* ruminates on the impediments to collectivity and the startling increase in police force and student surveillance. *LE DIABLE PROBABLEMENT* (1977) observes the failures of militant left-wing terrorist groups. And *L'ARGENT* explores the problems with François Mitterrand's first term socialist experiment. Even though the actions of the radical left are not viewed as feasible solutions to the problems of the time, Price nevertheless convincingly argues that Bresson should not

48 Annette Michelson, "About Snow," *October* 8 (Spring 1979): 112.

49 Serra discusses the influence of 1920s Russian cinema on his films, and the importance of framing, in Annette Michelson, "The Films of Richard Serra: An Interview," *October* 10 (1979), 68-104.

50 Price, *Neither God Nor Master*, 95-96.

51 Balsom, "Ruinophilia," *Exhibiting Culture in Contemporary Art*, 91-101.

be viewed as the detached auteur, but rather as someone directly engaged with important political questions of his day.

Regardless of whether Bresson's films function as commentaries on revolution, it is undeniable that Bresson becomes increasingly politically engaged in the late 1960s. One sign of this shift can be seen in his desire to film in color, which happens long after the French film industry shifts to the new technology, and, for Price, has more to do with Bresson's desire to focus on the "relational properties of color itself".⁵² Bresson's most revolutionary experimentation with color and form happens at the same moment as his increased engagement with political issues of the day, such as his participation in the protest against removing Henri Langois from the Cinémathèque française in March of 1968.⁵³ Parallels are equally evident between the critique of environmental destruction in *LE DIABLE PROBABLEMENT*, the Marxist defense of the protagonist Yvon against his bourgeois tormentors in *L'ARGENT*, and the critique of capitalism and defense of collectivism, ecological rights, and class structure in those two films. Price turns to the Russian novelists whose work Bresson adapted, namely Fyodor Dostoevsky and Leo Tolstoy, to find an historical moment that parallels Bresson's response to such popular revolutionary tactics. Such connections correspond to my explorations of the way Bresson borrows from Russian Constructivism in the attention to color, line, geometric form, and *mise en scène*, especially in Bresson's last four films from 1975 to 1983. The turn to color invites more experimental visual strategies that draw on the revolutionary style of the avant-garde. I therefore do not believe it possible to divorce Bresson's increasingly bold formal innovation in color, line, and space from the overt political critique contained in the late films.

Automatism and the Machine

The notion of the human as automaton, or art as a machinic process, is a common theme among members of the European avant-garde. Hal Foster organizes his study of various European avant-garde movements according to the relationship between the human body and the machine, which he calls "the double-logic of the prosthesis".⁵⁴ By this, Foster means that, in each

⁵² Price, *Neither God Nor Master*, 95-96.

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ Hal Foster, *Prosthetic Gods* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2006), 109. Jennifer Wild similarly identifies "diagrammatic perception" in the work of such French Dadaists as Francis Picabia

avant-garde movement, technology is represented as either a constriction or extension of the human body. While for Constructivism the machine extends the reach and capacity of the human body, Surrealism instead mocks technology as a constriction based on dismemberment through broken automatons and fragmented mannequins.⁵⁵ Dada and Surrealism thus harbor an instinctive distrust of the military-industrial modern world, while such other movements as Vorticism, futurism, and Constructivism instead embrace the possibilities of technological man. Bresson appears to straddle both sides of the avant-garde's polarized attitude toward the prosthesis. He shares with Surrealism the distrust of the military-industrial complex, most clearly seen in the documentary sequences in *LE DIABLE PROBABLEMENT* that attest to the brutality and destruction that humans inflict on the natural and animal world, and an interest in the disabled or fragmented body, such as the female protagonists of *UNE FEMME DOUCE* or *MOUCHETTE* (1967). However, one is unlikely to find in even the earliest films the absurd Surrealist anti-machines, nonsense machines, or anthropomorphic machines described by Foster that parody human progress or advancement. Instead, the machines that appear in Bresson are filmed in a nearly reverential fashion. In this way, Bresson's films shift between extending and limiting the human body, which perhaps speaks to the contrasting influence of Constructivism and Surrealism, ultimately best explained through American Minimalist artists who reveal much the same contradictory relationship to the modern world.

Bresson's attraction to automatism and machine-like behavior not only links his work to Surrealism and Constructivism, but to almost every avant-garde artist examined in this study. His work resembles the French collective *l'Art Informel*, for example, to the degree that its practitioners create organic forms that suggest non-manipulated, found objects beyond any conscious effort at representation. Similarly, in Bresson's films and in *Le Nouveau Réalisme*, *bodies themselves* recount events. The nude models in Yves Klein's anthropometry canvases function as "living brushes" who roll across the canvas once blue paint is applied to their bodies, much as the various splotches of paint on Jacques's hand in *QUATRE NUITS D'UN RÊVEUR* (1972) reveals the autonomous actions of his body, revealing the

and Marcel Duchamp, both of whom create abstract machines that substitute lived, human relationships with the representation of abstract circuitry, diagrams, and mechanical processes. See Jennifer Wild, *The Parisian Avant-Garde in the Age of Cinema, 1900-1923* (Berkeley: The University of California Press 2015), 65-73.

55 Foster, *Prosthetic Gods*, 113-114.

way Bresson associates painting with a body's unconscious gestures and movements.

Allowing the body to speak for itself, however, is not the only route to automatism; artists also rely on the machine's impersonal rhythms and processes to *create* the work of art. In *Les tirs*, for example, Nikki de Saint-Phalle shoots a 22-caliber rifle at polythene bags of paint that explode on the canvas, so that the bullet effectively creates the work of art. At about the same moment, in Japan, the Gutai group use such machines as cannons, cranes, and helicopters to create involuntary art. And Nicolas Schöffer's *Lux 1* (which appears in *UNE FEMME DOUCE*) and *Spatiodynamic Tower*, emphasize mechanical, nonhuman rhythms and movements. In these examples, the mechanical apparatus restricts or eliminates direct human involvement, as if to insist that art is that which exists *beyond the limits of the human*. Simulating the distance created by Yves Klein's flame thrower, Nikki de Saint-Phalle's rifle, Shoso Shimamoto's cannon, or Jean Tinguely's robots, Bresson equally relies on cinema's mechanical operation to distance the viewer from the live event. I discuss this tendency in chapter five through Bresson's parallels with Yvonne Rainer, who shifts from dance choreography to cinema because the latter offers additional anti-theatrical and anti-narrational possibilities.

Russian Constructivist artists take the metaphor of man as machine even further. The connection to Bresson begins in revolutionary Russia with Lev Kuleshov's development of montage editing as a way of recording the movements and gestures of the human body, much as Bresson fragments the human body into a collection of isolated parts. Bresson's work similarly constructs meaning, not through one shot or scene, but rather in the way shots are organized to build on or contrast with one another. Bresson phrases the idea in the following way:

A film does not consist of images, it consists of the connections between images. And these connections give life. The same is true for color; in painting, a blue is a blue, but if you put it next to a yellow, it is no longer the same blue. Or, next to a red and a yellow, it is even less the same yellow, the same blue, and the same red. I would say that a film not only consists of elements that are images, but also sounds. And not only links, but also rhythm. In other words, the artist ultimately arrives at touch through form."⁵⁶

56 Bresson, *Bresson par Bresson: Entretiens*, 95.

Bresson's affinities with Constructivism are especially clear when placed next to the avant-garde theatre techniques of Vsevolod Meyerhold, who is less interested in narrative story than in rhythm, tempo, *mise en scène*, and color. Meyerhold's manipulation of his actors through gesture, static poses, and silence, his stark contrast between movement and stasis, and his emphasis on anonymity are equally evident in the way Bresson privileges form over individual human expression. As a result, the viewer focuses on impersonal rhythms and the overall movement of the composition, rather than on actors' communicative acts. Bresson emphasizes this lack of individual agency through anonymity, whether the use of armor in *LANCELOT DU LAC*, the use of uniforms in *L'ARGENT*, or the way crowds act as one unified identity in many of the late films. The painters Piet Mondrian and Kazimir Malevich go even further than Meyerhold in their explorations of geometrical form, using the circle, square, and cross to insist on a work's nonrepresentational value. American Minimalists in particular associate the work of art with the machine's rhythmic regularity, efficiency, and lack of interiority. Yvonne Rainer and Frank Stella develop an anti-expressive style that is remarkably close to that of Bresson in its staunch resistance to narrative form, and in the use of such machinic qualities as repetition, or the elimination of the private realm.

The Book Ahead

Each of the following five chapters examines a different artistic movement or visual style on display in Bresson's color films, and has been divided into two sections. Part I, "Classical and Postwar Painting", covers familiar ground in Bresson scholarship by building on previous studies of Bresson's use of painting to explore the ways in which he draws on the motifs, tropes, style, and iconography of particular painters from the Middle Ages to the present. These two chapters each begin with a discussion of *AU HASARD BALTHAZAR*, followed by subsections on *UNE FEMME DOUCE* and *QUATRE NUITS D'UN RÊVEUR*. Although *AU HASARD BALTHAZAR* is not considered a "late" Bresson film, it nonetheless reveals a dramatic increase in the use of painterly techniques and styles compared to the early and mid-career films. I therefore draw on it both to show how much Bresson begins to self-consciously allude to specific paintings or styles, and to serve as a point of contrast in tracing Bresson's evolution through the color period. Such a strategy indicates how much the canonical films share, and where they deviate with their lesser known color counterparts in the way they invoke the visual arts.

Chapter one, “Bresson’s Debt to Painting: Iconography, Lighting, Color, and Framing Practices”, explores parallels between Bresson’s films and innovations in the field of painting. To begin, I examine the techniques that Bresson carries over from the black and white films, in order to parallel or distinguish such methods from the approach of the color films. Subsequent subsections explore the painters and styles that influenced Bresson, including Paul Cézanne and Jean-Antoine Watteau in *AU HASARD BALTHAZAR*; religious painting in *UNE FEMME DOUCE*, ranging from the Renaissance frescos of Piero della Francesca to the canvases of Bresson’s contemporary Alfred Manessier that appear in the film; and what I call the “medieval modern” aesthetic as it is developed by Bresson in *LANCELOT DU LAC*, drawing on the work of Giotto and the baroque use of light by Georges de la Tour.

Chapter two, “The Turn to Postwar Abstraction: Action Painting, *L’Art Informel*, and *Le Nouveau Réalisme*”, explores the close connection between Bresson’s films and postwar, predominantly French innovations in abstract and gestural art occurring contemporaneously. This chapter also examines Bresson’s distinctive emphasis on the body, which parallels the innovations of other artists of the epoch. One reason for such a remarkable set of parallels is that by the postwar period painting moves from the canvas toward the time-based conventions of cinema by expanding *beyond the frame*, with an equally transformed relationship between artist and artwork, evident in the approach of Abstract Expressionism (and related manifestations of gestural art in France), *L’Art Informel*, *Le Nouveau Réalisme*, tachism, and lyrical expressionism. Bresson positions the protagonist Jacques in *QUATRE NUITS D’UN RÊVEUR* in much the same way as Jackson Pollock, Yves Klein, Piet Mondrian, or Nicki de Saint-Phalle might position themselves to create works that move from the canvas to occupy surrounding space through the mediation of the artist’s body. I am not suggesting, however, that Bresson consciously imitates such a diverse range of movements and styles. Rather, he shares a set of characteristics with avant-garde painters, sculptors, and installation artists of his day in his approach to line, color, lighting, and space. The chapter also explores Bresson’s similarities to the nineteenth-century nocturne as developed by James Abbott McNeill Whistler. Whistler occupies an intermediary position between painting and avant-garde experiment in his attention to color, light, line, and form. By comparing his nocturne style to that of Bresson in *QUATRE NUITS D’UN RÊVEUR* (1972), I position Bresson between painterly and avant-garde concerns.

Part Two, “Avant-Garde Experiment”, pivots to broader stylistic parallels between Bresson and the interwar avant-garde, focusing on three traditions: French Surrealism, Russian Constructivism and American Minimalism.

Chapter three, “Bresson’s Flirtation with Surrealism: Sexual Desire, Masochism, and Abjection”, explores both conventional and unorthodox manifestations of Surrealism. I examine the nature of the “Surrealist threshold” in *UNE FEMME DOUCE*, and I read the protagonist Jacques of *QUATRE NUITS D’UN RÊVEUR* (1972) as a flâneur, drawing on both Louis Aragon’s *Le paysan de Paris* (1926) and André Breton’s *Nadja* (1928) for comparable examples. I then explore the parallels between Bresson and the Surrealist-influenced work of Pierre Klossowski, whose sadomasochistic novels, drawings, and philosophical writings closely match Bresson’s themes, especially Klossowski’s interest in nonproductive perversity as an alternative to capitalist exchange. I end the chapter by comparing Bresson’s depiction of animals in *LANCELOT DU LAC* to the contemporary French “cinema of sensation” film movement, which draws on extreme violence, bloodshed, and the “unwatchable” as a way of reducing the human body to its animal state.

Chapter four, “The Design and Pattern of the Whole: Constructivist Painting and Theatre”, examines Bresson’s connections to Constructivism through a number of examples drawn from the late films: the kinetic light sculpture of Nicolas Schöffer in *UNE FEMME DOUCE*; the influence of the Suprematist paintings of Kazimir Malevich and the neoplasticism of Piet Mondrian in *LANCELOT DU LAC*; and Vsevolod Meyerhold’s approach to theater in relationship to Bresson’s method in *L’ARGENT*. Since Bresson borrows more overtly from Constructivist influences at the end of his career, I focus on his final three films in this chapter. I also examine the distinctive way in which color is employed in *L’ARGENT*, which is much more systematic and coordinated than in any previous film. What I term the “painterly gesture” in *AU HASARD BALTHAZAR* thus becomes a dedicated commitment to avant-garde and intermedial approaches in the color films. Such a progression reveals stylistic inclinations at particular moments in his life: *QUATRE NUITS* and *UNE FEMME DOUCE* reveal overt Surrealist symbols, themes, and attitudes that first appear in his black-and-white films, while Constructivist influences emerge more strongly in the final three films. I thus chart shifts in Bresson’s approach from the influence of Cézanne and conventional iconographic allusions in *AU HASARD BALTHAZAR*, to a Surrealist phase from 1968 to 1972, most evident in *UNE FEMME DOUCE* and *QUATRE NUITS D’UN RÊVEUR*, and to a period of clear Constructivist preoccupations from 1974 to 1983, on display in four films beginning with *LANCELOT DU LAC* (1976) and ending with *L’ARGENT* (1983).

By comparing Bresson’s work to American Minimalism in chapter five, “Between Constructivism and Minimalism: Bresson’s Ambivalence Toward the Modern”, I argue that Bresson’s affiliation with Constructivism

is necessary limited, since he translates Constructivist themes and tropes into a transformed postwar setting in much the same fashion as American Minimalist artists of the epoch.⁵⁷ I begin by examining Bresson's relationship to modernity, and find the same contradiction present in Minimalist art: an embrace of automatism and the machine, but an equally strong anxiety about the destructive aspects of a technological society run amok. Finally, I compare Bresson's style and themes to the dance aesthetic of Yvonne Rainer, focusing on their shared interest in a machine aesthetics, the use of hands, and the posed portrait, touching on parallel innovations in the work of Frank Stella and Andy Warhol.

57 Artists and art historians such as Barbara Rose, Robert Morris, and James Meyer—among others—have underscored Constructivism's direct influence on Minimalism.