

Creatural Cinema

On Robert Bresson's Animal Images

In one of the last entries of his aphoristic “Notes on the Cinematographer”, Robert Bresson writes: “Equality of all things. Cézanne, who paints a fruit bowl, his son, the mountain Saint-Victoire with the same eye and the same soul.” For Bresson, there is no aesthetic hierarchy between men, nature and everyday objects in Cézanne – all things coexist on the same level of sensual-intelligible evidence. According to Bresson, this egalitarian affinity to the materiality of the physical world is not so much based on the technical nature of a medium; it is rather founded on the specific mode of an aesthetic sensibility, which can be realized by painting as well as by film. In an earlier entry, Bresson explicitly connects this indifferent archiving of things to the “Alles spricht” (Everything speaks) of romantic poetics: “Visible speech of bodies, of objects, of houses, of streets, of trees in the fields.” Bresson’s commitment to the romantic equalization of all things, which automatically incarnates itself in the “scrupulous indifference” of a mechanical camera eye, is revived in the film aesthetics of the French philosopher Jacques Rancière.

According to Rancière, film as the inheritor of the romantic de-stratification of all things, belongs to an aesthetic regime of art, which operates along the following egalitarian postulate: “It presupposes that anything and everything in the world is available to art.”¹ This radical equalization of things breaks with the representative regime of art, in which a rigid system of inclusion and exclusion decides on the aesthetic value or non-value of an event: The life of kings is the subject of great tragedies, but the life of the infamous man is not worth of art. According to Rancière the romantic project of aesthetic equality constitutes a political aesthetics, in which these hierarchical partitions between the significant and the insignificant, the sacred and the profane, the heroic and the infamous are suspended.

Film as the most technical of all arts is at the same time the aesthetic art par excellence, because film reveals the equality of all things through the indifference of an automatic eye. Liberated from a subjective will to art, this automatic eye makes no difference between men, animals, nature and objects: „For the machine makes no distinction. It does not make men equal by virtue of some scientific or technological vocation to ensure a democratic conciliation of noble and base conditions. It simply makes them prone to sharing the same

¹ Rancière, Jacques: *Film Fables*. Oxford/New York: Berg Publishers 2006, S. 9

image, an image of the same ontological tenor.”² Rancière’s idea of an egalitarian worldliness of film updates a classical film theoretical motif, which grounds the aesthetic power of film in its affinity to the contingent, the low and the ephemeral: the photograph of a nameless fisher girl in Walter Benjamin, the reflections on a wet sidewalk in André Bazin, the “trembling of the leaves in the wind” in Siegfried Kracauer.

But the political potential, which Rancière discovers in the filmic affinity to the insignificance of the physical world, seems to be an apt theoretical figure to throw a new light on the films of Robert Bresson. Maybe like no other director, Robert Bresson engraves Rancière’s “splendor of the insignificant” into a materialist cinema of the body, which reconfigures and disfigures the sensual partitions between men, animals and things.

It is no coincidence that Bresson’s films occupy a central role in Rancière’s writings on film, because Bresson exemplarily stands for a filmic dialectic in which the aesthetic singularity of the real and the narrative causality of fiction permanently “thwart” each other. Constitutive for this dialectic are “... moments of suspension that punctuate fiction films and that invest the constructed verisimilitude of the action and the story with the naked truth, the meaningless truth of life.”³ In Bresson’s films *Procès de Jeanne d’Arc* and *Mouchette* this meaningless truth of life is embodied in an animal creature. In the final scenes of both films, man, animal and matter are led into a zone of indistinguishability.

Procès de Jeanne d’Arc

For the first time in the film, Bresson leaves the closed interiors of court and prison. The static rigor of the interrogation scenes, in which Jeanne d’Arc enters and exits a fixed frame in parametric repetition, gives way to a moving camera. A long tracking shot nestles to the body in motion. While the lifeless dynamic of the earlier court sequences forces the film into a strict uniformity, suddenly the moving camera gives Jeanne d’Arc’s body a sensuality, which does not submit to any form. The sensual body stands as an objection against a clerical sovereignty, which tries to destroy Jeanne’s vivid spiritual experience in the name of a dead power of the letter. But unlike Carl Theodor Dreyer’s famous “Passion de Jeanne d’Arc” Bresson does not search the expression of life in the affection image of the passionate face. Rather, Bresson’s fragmenting framing focus on the metonymic image of feet; her feet

² Rancière, Jacques: *L’Inoubliable*. In: *Arret sur histoire*. Paris: Éditions du Centre Georges Pompidou 1997, S. 51. Zitiert nach Garneau, Michèle: *Film’s Aesthetic Turn. A Contribution from Jacques Ranciere*. In: *SubStance* 103, Vol 33, Nr.1, 2004, S.114.

³ Rancière, *Film Fables*, S. 17.

becoming the bearer of a creatural sensibility, which transcends the real historical figure of Jeanne d'Arc.

In the movement image of her feet, Jeanne d'Arc becomes a nameless animal. While in other films of Bresson like *"Pickpocket"* the autonomy of hands transfigures the body into weightless beauty, in *Jeanne d'Arc* the gravity of the body sinks into the feet. Feet, which are part of a concrete body, but at the same time, de-individualize this body. Feet, which are kicked by other feet of the anonymous crowd, but straighten up themselves. According to Gilles Deleuze life manifests itself not in triumph but in fall and disfiguration. In this Deleuzian sense, this physical contiguity of body and matter insists on a vitalism in the moment of falling. As an expression without inwardness Jeanne's naked feet embody an affect, which is at the same time singular and universal, individual and collective. This is what Deleuze calls a "dividual affect".

The camera captures Jeanne's whole body in a medium long shot, when she climbs up the stairs to the stake and is tied up by two men. Jeanne closes her eyes and the camera films her frontally, in a slight low angle shot.

Now there follows a cut without any logical causality. A dog follows the way that Jeanne's feet have gone before, then the dog stops for a while, trots a few steps further, stops again and raises his head. Bresson cuts to a close-up of Jeanne's feet and slowly pans up from her feet to her face. Shot and Reverse-Shot stitch this images to a POV-Shot of the dog, which stares at Jeanne's body with almost haptic attentiveness. The film seems to stop for a moment, and as if to intensify the meaning of this apparently meaningless moment, Bresson fades out the impassive noise of the crowd until we can hear only the breathing of the dog. Jeanne does not see the dog, but the dog sees her. While in the sadistic gaze regime of the court sequences the judges gaze at Jeanne from above, it is the first time in the film that a creature gaze at her from below. If there is a divine gaze in this film, it is not the gaze from above, but the gaze from below: A gaze in somatic solidarity with creatural life. In Bresson's "materialism from below" (Kracauer) the mimetic gaze of the dog stands for the trace of a mute life against the clinical coldness of a mortifying gaze. The mastery relation between gaze, scripture and speech is only suspended in this apparently incidental moment of animal mimesis.

In a second animal image Bresson condenses this insignificant significance in an even more minimalist manner than in the first one. After the image has almost disappeared under the smoke of fire, Bresson cuts to the roof of the judge's tribune. A low angle shot shows a transparent roofing, where the silhouettes of two doves are fluttering back and forth. Different from the gaze of the dog, this shot is not motivated through POV structures.

For a second time, a comparison with Dreyer's *Passion de Jeanne d'Arc* is interesting: While in Dreyer, the flight of the doves around the cross of the church is a clear symbol for Jeanne's salvation death, Bresson hollows out the christological meaning of the doves in an "any-image-whatever", to paraphrase Deleuze's "any-space-whatever": "In Bresson, the birds are birds: there they are, make of them what you will.", the film critic Jonathan Horton once wrote about this scene.⁴ As silhouettes the doves are pure indexical signs of the "splendor of pure reasonless being."⁵ Mary Ann Doane has written on this insignificance of filmic indexicality: „The index is reduced to its own singularity; it appears as a brute and opaque fact, wedded to contingency... It is pure indication, pure assurance of existence."⁶

Bresson reduces the overdetermined semantics of traditional filmic animal images to the meaningless presence of life. Bresson's animals are stripped of any metaphoric value.

In Bresson's under-determination of human and animal body images in *Procès de Jeanne d'Arc* appears an aesthetic equality of the non-aesthetical, exactly in Rancière's sense. The splendor of infamous life is sensually burst open in the materiality of Bresson's images. Becoming animal and becoming human engulf each other in the truth of suffering flesh.

In his book on the painter Francis Bacon also Gilles Deleuze thinks the equality of man and animal in the affection of a creatural body: "Bacon does not say: Have mercy with animals, but rather: every man who suffers is pure flesh. This is not a bringing together of man and animal; this is no similarity, but a zone of indistinguishability, which is deeper than any soulful identification. The suffering man is animal, the suffering animal is man." (own translation from "Logic of Sensation")

If in *Procès de Jeanne d'Arc* the animal equalizes itself to the suffering man, in the famous final suicide scene of Bresson's *Mouchette*, man equalizes himself to the animal.

Mouchette

In *Mouchette* the borders between nature and civilization seem to be floating, and with one step the adolescent protagonist finds herself in the forest. Like so often in Bresson it is the brutality of an off-screen sound, through which the real penetrates the image. *Mouchette* is scared up by a gunshot. She becomes witness of a hare hunt, which has a famous film ahistorical ancestor in Jean Renoir's "*The Rules of the Game*". About the death of the hare in Renoir's film, André Bazin once wrote: "The actor as such can be absent from it, because

⁴ Horton, Robert: The Trial of Joan of Arc. In: *Film Comment* 1999, S. 53

⁵ Rancière, *Film Fables*, S. 8.

⁶ Doane, Mary Ann: *The Emergence of Cinematic Time. Modernity, Contingency, The Archive*. Cambridge & London: Harvard University Press 2002, S. 94.

man in the world enjoys no a priori privilege over animals and things.”⁷ Also for Bazin, the filmic equality of things exceeds the human form.

The hunted hares in *Mouchette* are the incarnations of a bare life reduced to creatural agony. The montage surrounds the hares, the sound of the gun cuts through the silence of nature. Deadly wounded, the hares break down and die. *Mouchette* comes closer to a dead hare and stares down to the ground, but Bresson rejects the reverse shot on the animal. *Mouchette*'s gaze at the dead hare is complementary to the gaze of the dog in *Jeanne d'Arc*. The mimetic gaze of *Mouchette* at the hare is the objection to the hunter's sadistic gaze. In this mimetic gaze *Mouchette* equalizes herself to the suffering animal. Gazing at the dying rabbit, she is affected by the corporeality of a “bare life” which is, in fact, nothing but her own. The death of the hare prefigures the final suicide.

But this suicide is marked by a mysterious ambivalence: *Mouchette* puts on a white dress and rolls down the slope of a pond, like playing a childlike game, as if even in this miserable life there is an aesthetic possibility. Bresson seems to suggest that even the life of infamous man retrieves a beauty, which exceeds the conditions that produce this life. In the distance a tractor slowly drives over the field and in a last attempt to break up her isolation in the communication with others, *Mouchette* waves to the driver. But the driver just turns around for a second and impassively ignores her gesture. The failure of the gesture is followed by the final fall of the body. *Mouchette*'s body gives over to the gravity of matter and she twice rolls down the slope until she finally falls out of frame. The nearly parallel high angle shot eliminates every deep focus out of the image and presses her body into the ground. The body is disfigured into an object, as if the earth would incorporate the suffering creature again. And even the sacral music of Monteverdi cannot transfigure this total reduction to the corporeal into a christological redemption death.

Like in *Jeanne d'Arc*, the final scene of *Mouchette* abolishes the “borders between human and inhuman, living and dead, animal and mineral”⁸ in an aesthetic zone of indistinguishability and establishes a fundamental equality of all things. Against hegemonic representations of animality in cinema, Bresson's animal images “thwart” the anthropological regime of similarities, projections and identifications through their insistence on disjunctive synthesis, non-natural mimesis and positive contradictions. Bresson's animal images open a new distribution of the sensible, where like in the credits of his film *Au hasard, Balthazar*, the beauty of a Schubert Sonata and the braying of a donkey are absolutely different, yet also absolutely equal.

⁷ Bazin, André: *What is Cinema*. Berkely 1967, S. 106.

⁸ Ranciere. Jacques: *The Future of The Image*. London 2007 (forthcoming)