

of the university magazine there were, as well as an article on late medieval Thomism, articles of a profound nature on 'the prolegomena to philosophy of nature', 'Norwid's view of war and tragedy', 'social and moral aspects of the housing problem in Poland; and 'the ethical act and its justification'. A 'philosophical week of the student' was devoted to the problem of evolution. Teilhard de Chardin is well known; though Bernard Lonergan is not. One cannot say that a new concept of the Christian society is likely to arise; they are not in a strong enough position, not sufficiently culturally independent, to achieve something so original. But the present crisis in Polish opinion will find them well-equipped. One only hopes that the number of such people can be increased.

One of the most admirable things achieved by the Poles in their present predicament is a boiling-down to essentials. A priest said to us, 'We will remain in Poland so long as there is work for us to do'. And a nun commented on the present complexity by saying, 'The main trouble is that we cannot do all the good that we would like to do, that's all'. Poland still may have something to teach the West from whom she has learned so much.

ANTHONY BLACK

### HEARD AND SEEN

#### Reach and Grasp: Bresson's 'Pickpocket'

OF all contemporary film directors, Robert Bresson is the one who has been most continuously tempted by the impossible: in his latest picture, *Pickpocket*, which has now reached London some nine months after it first opened in Paris, it is clear that the impossible has, often enough, eluded him. He has chosen a theme which is, on the face of it, capable of the liveliest visual and intellectual excitement—that of an arrogant, intelligent young man's choice of crime as a protest against the human situation—and has deliberately drained it of almost every possible element of sensationalism in the treatment, so that the ingredients of a story of conventional low-life adventure have been transmuted into an austere psychological exploration. The tremendous risk he takes in balancing scenes of extreme speed and manual dexterity in the actual robberies with long sequences where all the action, so to speak, takes place in the mind of Michel and is conveyed by the expressions flickering across his bony face, demands from the spectator a concentration and intelligence equal to that of the director himself—a challenge that is unlikely to be met by more than a smallish proportion of any audience.

Solitude, isolation, limitation, whether physical or mental—some type of nonconformity—has been the *leit-motif* of all Bresson's films. His anti-heroes fight their way through to a kind of solution largely through their resolute refusal to compromise, and in a way this is true of Michel (Martin Lasalle) too. He is a young man of potential promise, living on the edge of destitution, in rebellion against his own predicament; fascinated by the concept of stealing, he makes a first half-hearted attempt at the races, and is picked up by the police just as he is congratulating himself on his superiority, and so makes his first contact with an inspector (Jean Pelegri) who, in a detached

fashion, continues to interest himself in the sullen unresponsive creature opposing him. But in spite of everything Michel persists in his new way of life; he meets two professional thieves who instruct him in all their techniques—and brilliant indeed is the sleight of hand with which wallets, purses, handbags are spirited imperceptibly away from their owners. His old mother dies, and the tenuous relationship he has built up with the calm, fair girl (Marika Green) who keeps an eye on her is abruptly severed when he goes abroad for two years to add to his successes elsewhere. When he comes back to Paris, the girl, Jeanne, has had a baby by his friend, his two accomplices are arrested and so, soon, is he. The film ends with the two forlorn individuals looking, somehow, more serene than forlorn as they defeat isolation in what one feels to be a permanent victory by the fugitive touch of lips and fingers through the prison bars.

Much of this film is absorbing, with Bresson's recurrent images of clasped hands (he has said that this is really a film about hands, told largely through the movement of hands), trampling feet, forced physical contiguity, making one feel that Cocteau crying 'Pourquoi toujours Oedipe?' is not the only one to recognize personal obsessions, but here, as with Cocteau, they express more than pages of prose. The sound-track is, as ever, of the highest importance, the passionless Lully music alternating with emphasized commonplace noises—footsteps, traffic, background conversation—to make both of almost frightening significance. But when the director has tried to tell too much with too little movement; when his interiorization of the situation becomes too savagely economical, then the capacity of the spectator to absorb the message becomes dulled, the strain is too great, and the attention abdicates until, once more, Bresson gives a little help. I was enthralled by *Pickpocket*, and want to re-see it as one re-reads a difficult text, but it is certainly one of the most demanding pieces of cinema I have ever endured. As I said initially, this must really be counted one of the occasions when Bresson's reach has notably exceeded his grasp; but then, surely, he would be with Browning in asserting that this is how things should be.

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