

# Image as Ideas, Poetry as Film: Speculations and Poetic Acts (an essay film)

**Murat Nemet-Nejat**

The milk lotus won't bloom in water, go figure. \*  
that's why waiting for this moment is beautiful  
*as if one single sparrow left its tail flying.* (Sami Baydar)

the door's lament

i'm tired  
of opening and closing. (Birhan Keskin)

The Fall of a Sparrow

I am water,  
a tiny pool.

A bird's passing by  
and me saying, "a bird is passing by."

Water, waterbed, pebble  
they always quarrel.  
"shhhh" is the white uproar  
they make.

The rest's an expanding drop, standing still. (Camels & Weasels)



No one  
has lived

of the life

w  
o  
r  
d  
s

Talking about you

you'd think  
it

is  
talking

of a  
river

I'm  
roof moss

inside dictionaries

fallen  
for you. (*Camels & Weasels*)



I.

"Raechel's Walk (and A Few Quotes from Robert Bresson)

Raechel<sup>1</sup> could not tell she was a replicant because she could not see herself walk. The sea of doll like anxiety in her heart, *that she was not real*, was purified by the short, toy like steps she took.

'The models<sup>2</sup> mechanized externally, internally free.' R. Bresson

'The thing that matters is not what they show me but what they hide from me and, above all, *what they do not suspect is in them.*' R.Bresson.

'Don't run after poetry. It penetrates unaided through the joints'  
R.Bresson

(Murat Nemet-Nejat, *The Spiritual Life of Replicants*, 2011)"

The distinction between walking, which is an act that *extends* (*tener*<sup>3</sup>) from the totality of one's being, a fusion of the body and the mind; and acting, which is an act imposed by the outside that frames it. Robert Bresson's cinema is about the elimination of that frame that liberates the spirit, the soul. For him, the film frame (i.e. what to the spectator is visible at any given moment) basically hides as much as it reveals. A Bresson movie is a dialectic between what is visible and invisible; hidden or maybe only heard, the sound of liberation, of the spirit. Bresson's basic filmic act is the erosion of the filmic frame, what Deleuze calls "the movement-image." Even Bresson's sharply focused images, for example, on the pickpocket's nimble, thieving hand in *The Pickpocket*, implies the moral human being "outside" doing the act. Bresson's act as a cinematographer is contra-filmic, contra film as visible movement-image; towards a "purer cinema" of liberated spirit, the soul, Deleuze's "time-image." If Godard's mysterious dictum "cinema is life" has any meaning, it has to be in the sense that life is not only the acts one commits; it is the spiritual and moral space/time dimension in which his/her consciousness/soul exists. Bresson's anti-film liberates that spiritual space, opens its motions and sounds to the viewer's mind. It creates a film of thought.

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<sup>1</sup> Raechel is a major female character in the film *Blade Runner* on which the poem *The Spiritual Life of Replicants* (Talisman House: Massachussets, 2011) is based. She/It is a replicant (android), but does not know it: having been injected at its creation with human consciousness.

<sup>2</sup> A "model" is the non-actor Bresson always required in his films to reveal his/hers/its essence in gestures.

<sup>3</sup> "Tener" is the Indo-European root of "to extend." The same root becomes "tantra" in Sanscrit: the physical warp and weft of threads, which becomes a weave (the warp and weft) of traditions. The walk, an image visible on the screen turns into an invisible image, a movement (music) of ideas, toward a new kind of consciousness.



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Poetry as Cinema must enact a parallel, its own anti-poem, breaking down the chiselled poem-unit as a distinct, framed poetic act and words as units with distinct sounds and framed meanings into a mental territory of changing thought --*the tissue of thought in distinct moments of consciousness* -- the poem occurring as much in the mind of the reader (outside the frame of the page) as on the page, the link being the reader's eye scanning the page, partly liberated from the syntactical exigencies of language, experiencing words as porous symbols interacting with each other within the visual space of the poem, a space of consciousness in motion following its own necessities.

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Bresson insisted on using "models," non-actors, in his films. Devoid of the craft of the actor, the non-actor may visually appear awkward, stiff on the screen; but he or she, "mechanized," in essence becoming an "it," is liberated *and* fated to enact itself. Bresson is interested in this submerged potential for *being* to reveal itself beyond roles or technique: "The thing that matters is not what they show me but what they hide from me and, above all, what they do not suspect is in them." Bresson's anti-film/anti-actor poetics is geared to that purpose, *a film, a poem that discovers its own self despite itself*, in a profound sense going against its grain: "Don't run after poetry. It penetrates unaided through the joints."

Bresson's vision of spiritual freedom is interior. It occurs in consciousness, in stillness, almost always ending pointing to the full mystery of dying. Bresson's minimalist film exists in the crevices, disjunctions the screen image creates, in the questions it gives rise to. The film continues its existence on the mind of the viewer that responds to these questions.

The words the questions embody represent the part of the film that escapes the framed filmic image. They embody its freedom, a freedom that opens up the sensory images on the screen to verbal images of thought. The final habitation, the essence where a Bresson movie finds itself is a poem.

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A screen frame and a single poem are essentially cages. The purpose of what Bresson calls cinematography (distinct from cinema) and of poetry is to break down that cage or transform it into a room (home) of saturated consciousness while still sustaining a bedrock link to the physical body.

Robert Bresson's *A Prisoner Escaped* (1956) takes place inside the protagonist's cell in a Nazi prison, except for a final short sequence outside and two or three short sequences narrowly focused on prisoners' hands, water pouring over them in a communal bathroom. In the bathroom sequences the hands act as Bresson's models. In the rest of the film, as if tracing and embodying the steps of a Loyolan (or Hindu or Zen) meditation



the film accounts in meticulous detail the steps the protagonist must take (almost always involving his hands) to open his prison cell door and escape. Visually, the camera records these steps. A voice-over running through the film explains or merely describes the action occurring on the screen. But, unlike in non-cinematographic cinema or usually in life, the voice-over and the visual act do not occur in synchrony, simultaneously. They keep anticipating or following each other, as if counterepoints in a fugue. This split constitutes the austere, silent music of the film, its emerging sound of the spirit. In the final scene, freed, the prisoner walks (*not runs*) away across a bridge. That is the Bressonian walk of liberated soul.<sup>4</sup> All through the film the protagonist and the viewer hear the whistle of a train at specific times like a metronome and undefinable tap-tap sounds. At the end, himself outside the frame, the protagonist sees the train passing (and hears the whistle), *the eye re-unified with the sound*. The tap tap is seen to be the tap tap of a blind man's cane hitting the ground being led by a seeing-eye dog along the prison wall: a blind Tieresias being guided by his dog:

### A Man Escaped

The frame of a Bresson movie is a jail  
the escape is going outside that jail  
it all starts with the noises one hears,  
becoming one, knowing what the noises are  
that's freedom.  
There is an act and the demonstration of an act.  
the demonstration occurs in speech.  
its act precedes or follows it in the frame,  
step by step, painstaking step one after another,  
the door opens itself.  
the painstaking step is the expression of time as now  
the future always, recurrent outside the frame  
which becoming one knowing what the noises are  
is escape. (Camels & Weasels<sup>5</sup>)

### To L.C.

The whole thing is about sex, and the body's relation  
to consciousness. You stay to my left  
and listen to breathing. As he breathes  
and you breathe, and you imagine a bird is flying in the room

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<sup>4</sup> Bresson might describe that state as a state of grace.

<sup>5</sup> "A Man Escaped" is part of the poem *Camels & Weasels*. The title refers to the mad-scene in Act II of *Hamlet* where Hamlet compares the shapes of clouds to camels and weasels. The poem constitutes Part VII of the seven part poem *The Structure of Escape* in which *The Spiritual Life of Replicants* is part IV (Talisman, 2011), *Animals of Dawn* is part V (Talisman, 2016), *Io's Song* is part VI (Chax, 2019) and "Steps" (*Mirage*, 2006) is part III. Part I (*Prelude*) and Part II (*The Disappearance of Time*) have not appeared in their entirety in book form yet, but sections from them appeared in magazines and chapbooks *Zen Monster* and *Both/Both*.



And you tremble in anxiety, and think that  
At the center where you are, at the umbilical facade  
Of this room, which at first seems a library –  
or its stacks- a loveliness is breathing  
and the bird flying in the room  
is reading all these books  
to our exquisite regret & love's appreciation.  
In this mathematical motion of consciousness  
the room echoes in its own sounds.<sup>6</sup> (*The Spiritual Life of Replicants*)

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### Why Does Total Freedom Always Involve Death?

The protagonist escapee in *A Prisoner Escaped* walks across a bridge.

Bresson describes the model as: "mechanized externally, internally free." Why "mechanized" and not merely "awkward" or "stiff"? Simply, "mechanized" implies the "infernal machine," fate. Bresson's concept of the non-actor (the model) points to a way to freedom despite the roles (manacles) imposed on the actor from outside. The freedom Bresson is referring to is internal and occurs in consciousness, the realm of the soul, not necessarily dependent on specific physical acts. This apparent fault-line between freedom and fate has dogged Western thought from its origins. How can the human being be free and subject to fate at the same time? For instance, the protagonist Oedipus is prophesized at birth to kill his father and marry his mother, and his life is spent acting, escaping from the prediction while in effect moving (in the sense of "walking into a trap") toward it. The chain is mechanical and ironic -- infernal in the traditional sense. Sophocles' emblematic play *Oedipus Rex* starts where the predicted acts have already occurred. Facts are facts though the hero is unconscious of their relevance.

At this moment in the play Oedipus is very much like a Bressonian model: mechanized externally (though he may not know it). Sophocles is interested in Oedipus's character as the healer of Thebes and as the culprit who caused its plague, while he is undigging the cause of the plague. Oedipus is a willful, persevering, hot-tempered man (his temper flaring as implacably as the machine guiding him). He reveals, is himself in full bloom in two places in the play. First, as the healer, when angrily he forces Tiresias to reveal the secret about Oedipus's past when Tiresias virulently resists. Second, when he re-lives, (re)enacting his angry retort against "the stranger," i.e. the act of killing his own father, this time in full rising consciousness of his action as his fate.<sup>7</sup> The healer and the culprit are the same. Both scenes, particularly the reenacting of the murder in the mind of the teller in real time before the viewer, have an ecstatic quality to them. They are moments of inner freedom. Fate and freedom (embodied in the consciousness of fate in the

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<sup>6</sup> Birds (as animals!) are messengers of an alternate (or transformed!) consciousness.

<sup>7</sup> Simplified and purified by the protagonist wearing a mask, the two scenes possess a cinematographic clarity. They reveal Oedipus's inner freedom -- his implacable will and accompanying anger -- in full bloom. The mask functions like Bresson's model.



*ecstatic fullness* of the person) are the same. "Know thyself," Sophocles is saying. In this knowledge the person is free (enlightened) and doomed (subject to suffering and ultimate death)<sup>8</sup>.

In Bresson, this process goes through a Christian filter, resonating with the idea of Original Sin. In The Old Testament, God forbids Adam and Eve to eat of the tree of life and knowledge. They disobey. Surprisingly, God's response is not to their forbidden act (the act is not mentioned); but to their consciousness of their nakedness, their impulse to hide their private parts: as Bresson says, "the thing that matters is not what they show me but what they hide from me." God punishes them with suffering and *death* (more specifically, the consciousness of their mortality) and expels (more specifically, *liberates*) them from Edenic innocence.

In Bresson what is salient, what he highlights and focuses on is the suffering and ensuing death. *That is what the screen shows*: "the impulse to hide." The freedom underlying it is pushed to the peripheries, to a melody of the mind, ultimately occurring on the mind of the viewer -- while the models act out their suffering, the sinful/culprit part of the equation.

In *Hamlet*, the active part of fate is split from the consciousness of it. Hamlet is assigned a classical part to play: to kill the king. He is a reluctant assassin. His consciousness constantly veers beyond/or against its assigned part, into explorations of suffering and death. The heart of the play is its meanderings, the *split* in the structure of its surface; the way what is visible and heard on Bresson's screen splits away into the silence (Hamlet says, "the rest is silence"<sup>9</sup>), the music resonating in its peripheries and beyond its frame.

## II. Dying

Silence points to the animal. The model moves in silence, its voice detached from its acts.

land(e)scapes seascape

wasping insects

colors graze waves

nailed

to the here.

*after*

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<sup>8</sup> Though Sophocles does not directly focus on it, Oedipus's second guilty act also, marrying his mother, is related to his knowledge of man. He marries the widow queen (his mother) because he is able to answer the Sphinx's riddle relating to the nature of man: "what is that creature who walks on three feet first, on two feet second and on three feet third"). That answer saves Thebes from the cannibal Sphinx and makes him king.

<sup>9</sup> "The rest of silence": Hamlet's last words before death.



hereafter

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In a single long-shot *Au Hasard Balthazar*<sup>10</sup> records Balthazar's death, a donkey, which can be nothing but itself. *Death, liberated, emerging before the eye. Act and will one.*

This is the mystery of the film. How does Bresson do it? A model, a non-actor dying. *This question is the film for me. Words spilling in tears:*

*Oh Bresson, Bresson,  
did ye, did ye*

*have to poison Balthazar for your film,  
to let loose its inner nature,*

*nature's  
vertiginous  
cruel  
necessity*

...

The camera remains static. In the middle of a field Balthazar lowers its front legs, squats and remains still. A few lambs enter the frame on the right from nowhere and begin grazing. They move to Balthazar's legs, sniff them and continue grazing around them, simultaneously as Balthazar's head imperceptible -- slowly lowering, drooping (*the camera does not freeze*). The scene goes on while Balthazar remains totally still while the sheep continue grazing. The scene continues around Balthazar's stillness. The film ends....

My mind almost missed it, there is a three-second cut into to the hereafter, the camera shows Balthazar. Lies isolated sideway with stiff legs

in the field  
the lens this time nearer slightly to the right of the corpse. denoting an alternate dimension.

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*Calligraphy*

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<sup>10</sup> *Au Hasard Balthazar* (*Balthazar Let Loose / Balthazar at Random*) opened in 1966.





Noticing one day

that an insect

changed its location,

something, as if it knew

I realized objects

're free

of error.

Their fact's their will. ("Sites of Consecrated Objects," Camels & Weasels)

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#### The Revealed Sounds and Acts of a Model

Balthazar's sound is its bray. Our words. The first occurs right after the credits for a few seconds in three heaves. Balthazar's bray resonates in the auditorium. Its body is invisible. The bray floats into deep-flat air. Second, Balthazar's quick five-second trot (the sound of its hoofs on the asphalt bursting from the screen, when neighborhood brats stick a branch in its ass). (*Pardon my pun! coincidental - into the ass's as*). That is the Bressonian walk, sprung from the body's necessity. Its freedom. Then there are scenes when harnessed to a farmer's loaded cart Balthazar is pulling, slowky walking, or harnessed to the master's buggy it is trotting along. Externally mechanized, politically, being in this harness is Balthazar life. Being manacled by external forces, one can say, is Balthazar's fate. But Bresson is saying, jumping in a quick trot from the brats' stick, those few seconds of spurt emanating from its necessity, those brays are its freedom, walking, trotting, walking towards death, towards stillness, that weight, that dimension. Being animal is Balthazar's true fate. Liberated, freed, sealed from human language, only a b-r-r-a-y. A sound. Balthazar joins the circus. Finally in its own cage, surrounded by other animals in their own cages each with its own wondrous look (alternate, unknown universes!}, we meet Balthazar as who he's. Only eyes, totally silent, looking at us. A silence approaching mortality.

As if a mirror, we are reflected back to our own language -words, the alien language of nature -- in itself -- of itself. A wall. Outside of it, humbled by its its infinite size we will weep.

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To this day



I'm humbled and unable to answer how Bresson catches with his lens this almost imperceptibly slow downward swoon of death of Balthazar's head, as the sheep are moving milling around Balthazar's feet (the totally silent, slow movement toward stasis fused with daily quotidian movements of the sheep), an infinitesimally short span when life and death are co-present. Or is the head already down and out and still, and is it only my mind imagining the movement?

weightness  
revealing itself

*maybe the melody from the meadows of dark matter, the world's  
gravitational field aburst*

a *thing*  
in its dynamic nature?

and the wondering  
lamb coming from nowhere thinking,  
*to our deluded hearts,*  
Balthazar to be a flower?

to be eaten or left alone  
at will?

Whose will?

*What will?*

the lamb  
I  
or the flower

or  
or steps coming echoing from the basement of the house.

camera still, recording recording (Camels & Weasels)

Finis





Murat Nemet-Nejat is a poet, translator and essayist. He edited and largely translated *Eda: A Contemporary Anthology of Turkish Poetry* (2004), translated Orhan Veli, I, Orhan Veli (1989), Ece Ayhan, *A Blind Cat Black and Orthodoxies* (1997), Seyhan Erözçelik, *Rosestrikes and Coffee Grinds* (2010), Birhan Keskin, *at the bifurcation/ they part/ Y/ why* (2012). He is the author of "Questions of Accent" (1993), *The Peripheral Space of Photography* (2004), the memoir/essay "Istanbul Noir" (2011) and the essay "The Structure of Escape": *The Linearity of the Arc* (2012), the poems "steps" (2008), "Prelude" (2009), "I Did My Best Work During a Writer's Block" (2009), "Disappearances" (2010) and "Alphabet Dialogues/Penis Monologues" (2010), *The Spiritual Life of Replicants* (2012), *Animals of Dawn* (2016) etc.