



BIG SCREEN CLASSICS

Pickpocket

Pickpocket

Director: Robert Bresson
Production Company: Agnès Delahaie Productions
Producer: Agnès Delahaie
Unit Production Manager: Michel Choquet
Production Manager: Annie Dorfmann *
Administrator: Léon Sanz
Script Supervisor: O. Lemarchand
Screenplay: Robert Bresson
Director of Photography: L.-H. Burel
Camera Operator: Henri Raichi
1st Assistant Operator: André du Breuil
2nd Assistant Operator: J. de Saint Girons
Special Effects: Lax
Editor: Raymond Lamy
Art Director: Pierre Charbonnier
Costumer: L. Scatena
Music: Lully
Music Director: Marc Lanjean
Sound Engineer: Antoine Archimbaud
Thieves' Movements Technical Consultant: Kassagi
Cast:
Martin La Salle (*Michel*)
Marika Green (*Jeanne*)
Jean Pélégri (*police inspector*)
Dolly Scal (*Michel's mother*)
Pierre Leymarie (*Jacques*)
Kassagi (*1st accomplice*)
Pierre Etaix (*2nd accomplice*)
César Gattegno (*inspector*)
Dominique Zardi (*metro passenger*) *
France 1959
76 mins

* Uncredited

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Uncomplainingly jobless in late-50s Paris, Michel starts stealing from strangers, for reasons unclear even to himself. He spouts vague theories about exceptional individuals being above the law – but is he lost in another world, as Jeanne, a young woman he half-heartedly befriends, tells him?

Intentionally not a thriller but certainly not without suspense, Robert Bresson's film is profoundly ambivalent about Michel's ethics, sexuality (he seems aroused by his thefts), his capacity for compassion and his courtship of suspicion in others. His isolation, however, is undeniable. A riveting morality tale reminiscent of both Hitchcock and Dostoevsky, it's imbued with the director's distinctive rigour.

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In *Sight and Sound's* 2012 poll of the greatest films ever made, Robert Bresson had the highest number of any filmmaker listed: seven out of 250, three of them in the top 100. Impressive, considering that Bresson only made 13 films over the course of his whole career. But then this is the man of whom Jean-Luc Godard once wrote, 'He is the French cinema, as Dostoevsky is the Russian novel and Mozart is German music.'

The comparison with Dostoevsky feels particularly apposite to Bresson's 1959 film *Pickpocket*: there's something of *Crime and Punishment* in this tale of a middleclass young man moved to petty theft as a kind of intellectual game. Michel (Martin LaSalle) carries around a copy of a book about the 18th-century Irish pickpocket-adventurer George Barrington and engages in intense ideological debates with the policeman surveilling him (Jean Pélégri) about whether genius serves as a justification for criminal acts. Godard is right to reference Bresson's quintessential Frenchness, too: the film drips Gallic existentialism, with Michel's thefts functioning as a series of *actes gratuits* of the kind described by the likes of Gide, Sartre and Camus. With his long, hangdog face, intense gaze and tired but tidy suit, Martin LaSalle (who bears a striking resemblance to Henry Fonda) seems the epitome of the Left Bank intellectual.

Pickpocket is a literary film, then. But it's also profoundly cinematic. Bresson describes it as a 'film of hands, of objects, of looks'. His camera lingers on a handbag, left open; a wallet, slipped from a jacket pocket; a watchstrap, gently unhooked. Time and again we watch the face of Michel, deadpan yet wary, as he calculates the best moment to strike. He is picked up by a gang of thieves (including one played by real-life pickpocket Henri Kassagi, who coached the cast in sleight of hand and went on to become a stage magician); Bresson follows their elegantly choreographed routines through banks, cafés and station concourses with a combination of sweeping tracking shots and quick-cut close-ups, at times generating a suspense to rival Hitchcock. Nothing is wasted. The best films – the greatest films – are discoveries of the medium itself. Rewatching *Pickpocket*, I felt I was seeing the invention of a new type of cinema, one much copied but rarely equalled.

Bresson is most famous perhaps for his ascetic style, and notably his use of not actors but what he calls 'models', non-professionals whom he coached to deliver lines with the minimum of affect possible. In a terrifically charming

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Touch of Evil

Mon 27 Mar 20:45; Tue 4 Apr 14:30; Sun 9 Apr 18:30; Fri 28 Apr 20:45

Wild Strawberries (Smultronstället)

Tue 28 Mar 20:50; Wed 12 Apr 18:10 (+ intro by Geoff Andrew, Programmer-at-Large); Fri 14 Apr 20:50; Mon 24 Apr 14:30

To Sleep with Anger + Borom Sarret (The Wagoner)

Wed 29 Mar 18:10 (+ intro); Mon 10 Apr 12:45; Wed 12 Apr 18:00

Rio Bravo

Thu 30 Mar 20:20; Sun 9 Apr 12:50; Fri 21 Apr 20:20

Aguirre, Wrath of God (Aguirre, der Zorn Gottes)

Fri 31 Mar 21:00; Thu 13 Apr 21:00; Thu 20 Apr 18:15

Last year in Marienbad (L'Année dernière à Marienbad)

Sat 1 Apr 12:50; Mon 3 Apr 20:30; Sat 8 Apr 18:20; Tue 18 Apr 20:45

La Grande Illusion

Sat 1 Apr 13:00; Wed 12 Apr 20:40; Sat 15 Apr 18:00; Fri 21 Apr 18:15

The Godfather Part II

Sat 1 Apr 16:00; Sat 22 Apr 18:40; Sun 30 Apr 16:30

Nashville

Sun 2 Apr 17:50; Sat 8 Apr 20:00; Sat 29 Apr 16:30

The Passenger (Professione: reporter)

Wed 5 Apr 18:00 (+ intro by Geoff Andrew, Programmer-at-Large); Fri 7 Apr 20:20; Sun 16 Apr 18:15; Thu 27 Apr 18:10

Pickpocket

Thu 6 Apr 20:45; Tue 11 Apr 14:30; Mon 17 Apr 20:50; Mon 24 Apr 20:50

The Portrait of a Lady

Fri 7 Apr 14:30; Wed 19 Apr 17:50 (+ intro); Sat 29 Apr 20:15

Code Unknown (Code inconnu)

Sun 9 Apr 15:45; Wed 26 Apr 18:15

The Lady Eve

Mon 10 Apr 18:15; Sat 15 Apr 12:40; Sun 30 Apr 14:15

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documentary, *The Models of Pickpocket*, LaSalle and his co-stars describe being asked to repeat lines over and over until they became almost senseless. Bresson directed them 'like you would direct a child', says Marika Green, who plays Jeanne, a neighbour of Michel's mother. 'He told us where to look, when to blink.' The resulting neutrality, Bresson believed, allowed the viewer to make the film her own.

In this 52-minute documentary, directed by Babette Mangolte, following a chance encounter with Pierre Leymarie (Michel's friend Jacques), Mangolte tracks down the film's other 'models', principally Green and LaSalle, to ask them about their experience of making the film and its impact on their lives. None of the three had acted before; all were clearly deeply affected by the experience of working with Bresson. While Leymarie – whose father was horrified by the prospect that his son might be embarking on a career in 'whispered voice' acting – went on to a career in administration, retaining fond memories of his brief dalliance with the arts, both LaSalle and Green went on to make further films. Green, who was 16 at the time of filming, is deliciously gossipy, confiding that Bresson loved women, 'especially young girls', and that she was passionately in love with him. LaSalle – Martino to his friends – is an utter revelation: a jolly, bearded old thesp, now living in South America and holding forth on the joys of gardening. One can quite see why Mangolte says she needed some time to process the discrepancy between the man and the character.

Paul Schrader, along with Susan Sontag and André Bazin, was among the first to understand the spiritual aspects of Bresson's filmmaking, recognising that the manner in which he strips his films of visual ornamentation allows for the possibility of a certain grace. At the same time, Schrader notes, sound is very important. Bresson doubles his narration: showing Michel writing in his journal while he reads the words aloud as voiceover. The sparing use of J.C.F. Fischer's 1695 orchestral work *Spring Journal* to punctuate *Pickpocket's* action meanwhile lends the story a sense of timelessness.

Pickpocket was not the highest ranked of Bresson's films in the 2012 poll. Both *Au hasard Balthazar* (1966), and *A Man Escaped* (1956) were placed above it. They are more rigorous, rigid, grander films (the former takes the principle of models to a logical extreme in casting a donkey as the lead). It is, however, perhaps Bresson's most accessible film: its screenplay – Bresson's first original work – has a clear narrative structure and, at 76 minutes, the feel of a perfectly formed novella. The film's influence on generations of filmmakers cannot be overstated. In addition to Schrader (whose screenplay for *Taxi Driver* pays direct homage to *Pickpocket*), Christopher Nolan, Werner Herzog, Richard Linklater and Eugène Green have all cited *Pickpocket* as a formative film experience. The ending is directly paraphrased by the Dardenne brothers' *The Child* (2005) and John Michael McDonagh's *Calvary* (2014), both excellent works in their own rights. Still, while the imitators are many, there is only one original. Some 60 years may have passed, but Bresson's minimalist vision remains as singular and startling as ever, compelling proof that sometimes less is more.

Catherine Wheatley, *Sight and Sound*, September 2022