

chambers we access rooms of projection that consistently envelop us empathetically, for in these chambers we sense the depth of an intimate experience. Resting on the border of the screen of projection, this particular “feeling into” the space can become a mutual boundary to cross. And thus, safely positioned at a distance, we too can engage our own perilous history of projection: a voyage to—and a view from—home. ■

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Always a Face to Remind You Bettina MATHESES

The idea that the surface is the level of the superficial is itself dangerous...for it is on the surface that depth is seen, as when one's face breaks out in pimples on holidays.

—Jacques Lacan, “The Direction of the Treatment”

In thinking of the psychology of mysticism it is usual to concentrate on the understanding of the mystic's withdrawal into a personal inner world of sophisticated introjects. Perhaps not enough attention has been paid to the mystic's retreat into a position in which he can communicate secretly with subjective objects and phenomena, the loss of contact with the world of shared reality being counterbalanced by a gain in terms of feeling real.

—D. W. Winnicott, “Communicating and Not Communicating”

If I were a film, it would be Robert Bresson's 1951 *Journal d'un curé de campagne* (The Diary of a Country Priest). Based on the novel by George Bernanos, this quiet and detached film about the loneliness and eventual passing away (dying would be the wrong word here) of a young priest speaks to me like no other. Why? Perhaps because Bresson knows how to protect his characters. Beneath the surface of this tenderly austere black-and-white feature there is an ongoing private conversation that never gets communicated but makes itself felt throughout the film. Bresson is a believer, not a psychologist. He doesn't analyze his characters. He moves them. But we don't get to know their motivation. Observing the priest—we never hear his name—I learn to love the surface. Not the superficial but the face. His face! For that's where he comes to life on the screen, where he shines, and falters. This face. What a contrast to the black habit of a Catholic minister with which he covers his body. Hide + seek. And somewhere in between faith can be lost and found.

The vocabulary of psychoanalysis doesn't always appreciate the surface. Words like *Tiefenpsychologie* (depth psychology) and *Unterbewusstsein* (subconscious) suggest that psychoanalysts are people who penetrate our mind like a surgeon cuts through the skin: laying bare what ought to remain hidden. Scary. Neither Lacan nor Winnicott were fond of those words—for a reason. For, as Winnicott writes, when we relate to others, we engage in “a sophisticated game of hide-and-seek in which it is joy to be hidden but disaster not to be found.” What Winnicott is saying here is that the places where we hide are not (must not be) the places where we are found. Psychoanalysis has a word for this paradox:

transference. The transference is a space where both patient and analyst can find each other as intimate strangers; where they are free to imagine one another. For some patients the transference is the first experience of being imagined without being invaded or used. A space where silence can be a retreat *and* an invitation (a call) to the analyst to tend to the surface, a space where we can be found without the danger of being found out, violated, raped. Lacan is right: “The idea that the surface is the level of the superficial is dangerous.” Depth reveals itself on the surface, no need to dig deep, no need to penetrate. Why not? Because. As every infant knows, in the beginning is the face—the mother's face. We need a surface on which to appear. We need an other to form an image of who we are. We need to be imagined to feel real. Is that why we cry at the movies? This is what I know: although transference is more than projection, *The Diary of a Country Priest* tells me something important about this need to be imagined.

If I were to write about this film, that face, that surface, it would have to be in the form of a diary—the perfect form to accommodate the wish to be found and to remain hidden at the same time. My heart is racing.

Friday, June 14—00:02:05

/AMBRICOURT/ letters. a road sign, then a dissolve into a close-up of the young priest's face—white as a sheet. the direction of the *curé*, and, perhaps, the direction of the cure? this is his first parish: *mon paroisse, mon première paroisse!* and i know he's not well. though there are no pimples breaking out on this otherworldly, saintly face. so pale, so innocent, so tender. so sad. like a mirror that's never seen a reflection. a wounded soul. unknown. incommunicado. an unwritten page. the whitest pain you've ever seen. feel the coolness of my gaze! i wish he could. will someone answer him, receive him, find him when he gives himself over? that morning as he arrives in his parish, i see him lose his faith, before my very eyes. so he clings to signs, letters, nameplates, words on a page. his diary! something calm and reassuring to hold on to, to hook him to the world.

this is his project: “*I don't think I'm doing anything wrong in jotting down, day after day, with absolute frankness the very simple and most insignificant secrets of a life lacking any trace of mystery.*”

Saturday, June 15–00:33:17

ink like blood will have to keep him going. keeping track of a life without any trace of mystery, that's a meager diet, and he knows it. he calls it *faire face*, face up to the world. he may not be aware of it but he lives for the close-up, that most wondrous of all cinematic framing techniques: when the face fills the screen—huge, larger than life, so close, we are newborns. and so is he. the blankness of his face, the searching eyes, hoping for a mirror. when Bresson gives me a close up of the priest's face—and he gives me many!—the intimacy he conveys is one of withdrawal, detachment, disappearance. as the camera zooms in on the priest's face, the image is drained of its sound. momentarily still, i lose him. i see him withdraw, watch him retreat into himself; i hear his voice, listen to his diary. he is speaking to himself, and i am his witness. the priest's first-person narration—the sharing of his journal containing only insignificant secrets—is his way of shutting me out and keeping me interested. *someone like me*.

Sunday, June 16–00:03:02

he knows a secret when he sees one. the count and the governess: furtive glances, stolen embraces in the park. they know that he knows...they don't like it...and he can't help it. he's a trouble-maker. taking everything to heart, too hard. *when you walk away, you show me how*.

Tuesday, June 18–00:17:45

i know an unwelcome child when I see one. always slightly out of place, out of time, out of touch. why is he here, if no one receives him with love? what a strange question, his mentor the priest of Torcy scolds him, it's a job. you are the priest, you shouldn't expect love. so he tries. so he contacts the count, pays a visit to the mansion. but the count forgets the appointment. so he meets the countess, an inconsolable, depressed, and unforgiving woman, absorbed in the memory of her dead son, a sweet boy who passed away at the age of five. it is their first encounter. *the shyness in his eyes*. she questions him. he can't answer her. dizzy, nauseous, unable to hold the conversation, fainting . . . and then something happens between them: he is that lost son, a foundling in need to be taken in. suddenly she is a mother all over again. what is with you? she asks, her cool hand on his feverish forehead. where does it hurt? i know it before he says it: here...in the pit of my stomach. the anguish on his face... is mine. *someday out of the blue it will find you!*

Wednesday, June 19–00:25:28

when a face doesn't inspire faith. *nuit affreuse*, awful night! no dreams, no prayer. *does he cry out in his sleep?* the words, they don't come easily. always out of breath.—we can write and not breathe, but try to speak and hold your breath. breathe in, breathe out—the letter reaches us from the outside but the word, the voice, originates inside us. he just can't take that risk. our hidden thoughts, he writes, poison the air others breathe. really? i wish you could hear my

music. it would hold you, resonate in you, with you. but no! you are a prisoner of the holy agony.

in the morning, as he leans out of the window, he would do anything for a word of kindness and compassion. the characters in his diary, immutable, each one an isolate, *pulling everything apart*, no longer give the consolation he needs. he arrived at the written word long before he was ready for it. *watch him unravel...*

Thursday, June 20–01:09:00

so much pain, and no one there to share it with. his hunger, his secret. it's eating him up! /STOMACH CANCER/ the diagnosis feels like a verdict. the disease of the undernourished; the illness of the starved child. the idea of this thing inside you makes you feel ashamed.

Friday, June 21–01:09:00

listen. the closing of a window. the roar of a motorcycle going by. the crisp rustling of dry leaves on a lawn. sounds that have no image. what we hear is rarely what we see. he is falling into that void. *to disappear completely*.

Saturday, June 22–01:12:24

i could see it coming. he is running out of words to write...the shadow of a cross on a white wall...the last signifier...not all is grace. FIN. *who wants to die on a saturday?*

Sunday, June 23–00:41:00

face
faith
cure
curè
parish parish heart hard heard word speak
like a child.

Tuesday, June 25–00:01:05

i like to believe that the priest needs me as much as i need him.
i like to pretend that Bresson made this movie so that the priest could be imagined—for the first time.
sometimes going to the movies is an act of love.

always a face to remind me.

for Nicola, and the fox in the snow. ■

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