CHAPTER 4

Stealing the Scene: Crime as Confession in Robert Bresson's *Pickpocket*

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Robert Bresson's 1959 film *Pickpocket*, ostensibly based on *Crime and Punishment*, begins with the declaration, "This is not a detective story."[1] And it is not. The titular thief, Michel (Martin LaSalle), confesses in the opening scene, so that viewers learn "whodunnit" before ever witnessing a crime. The only mystery left is motive: What drives Michel to steal, and to pick pockets, in particular? And how does it become so compulsive that he will drop everything, even romance, when a stranger with a handsome watch walks by? Studies of Bresson and *Pickpocket* are full of references to the inscrutability of the protagonist. T. Jefferson Kline quotes Bresson's cameraman, Léonce-Henry Burel, as saying, "I didn't understand what [Bresson] was trying to say. As I matter of fact I don't think anybody has ever understood, really. Who is this pickpocket, why does he steal, and so on?"[2] Keith Reader notes that it is hard to read the film as "a confessional autobiography," as the frame narration would suggest, due to the "extraordinary lack of psychological detail."[3] Susan Sontag thinks Michel's "psychological implausibility" is a "flaw" of the film, elaborating that she believes Bresson "does not intend his characters to be implausible, I'm sure; but he does, I think, intend them to be opaque."[4] As these evaluations suggest, Michel's own discussion of his behavior is far from coherent or insightful. In fact, his narration adds nothing to our understanding of the events unfolding on screen. *Pickpocket* is not a detective story, because the plot is not driven by the investigation of the crime, but by Michel's attempts to confess. What baffles us is not how Michel picks pockets—the technique is shown in minute detail—but why he cannot explain the impetus behind his acts.

Pickpocket belongs to the subset of confessional narratives reserved for criminals whose motives elude them, works like Fedor Dostoevskii's C*rime and Punishment* and Albert Camus's *The Stranger*, which serve as important intertexts for Bresson's film. This chapter explores the relationship of *Pickpocket*

with these earlier texts and elucidates Bresson's engagement with the problems of confession, particularly of confession in the context of modernism, with its rejection of determinism and accompanying breakdown in causality. I will approach the film as a study of confession taking place at the nexus of religion and existentialism, the lineage Bresson claims by placing *Pickpocket* in dialogue with Dostoevskii and Camus. I will show how Bresson addresses both the disruption of causal connections and the problems of confession without God by suggesting a new mode of confessing, in which the crime of picking pockets itself becomes a confessional act. Bresson's engagement with confession in turn elucidates his approach to adaptation in *Pickpocket*, as he draws the film's intertexts into a multi-authored confessional project composed of numerous interdependent iterations and multiple voices.

Pickpocket, Bresson's fifth feature-length film, in many ways typifies the director's distinctive style and ideology. The spare sets, minimal dialogue, and rare (though significant) use of non-diegetic music are characteristic of Bresson's asceticism. As usual in his films, the major roles are played by non-professional actors who have been meticulously drilled on their smallest gestures and expressions.[5] *Pickpocket*'s relationship to *The Stranger* and *Crime and Punishment* reflects an interest in adaptation and intertextuality that spans the director's career. Bresson frequently experiments with the boundary between adaptation and allusion, and eleven of his thirteen features are based to some extent on a hypotext composed by someone else. The films reveal varying approaches to adaptation, from a very literal treatment of the hypotext in *Journal d'un curé de campagne* (*Diary of a Country Priest*, 1951), which preserves the setting and events of the novel by Georges Bernanos on which it is based, to his much looser updating of Lev Tolstoi's 1904 short story "The Forged Coupon," the first part of which, transposed from tsarist Russia to 1980s France, provides the basis for Bresson's final film, *L'Argent* (*Money*, 1983).

The relationship between *Pickpocket* and its most obvious source text, Dostoevskii's *Crime and Punishment*, is much more complex than it appears at first glance and serves both as part of the mechanism of confession in the film and as an element of Bresson's metacommentary on confession. Bresson borrows extensively from Dostoevskii in *Pickpocket*, so that viewers familiar with *Crime and Punishment* will recognize it as the source of numerous plot elements, characters, and motifs. Despite this, *Pickpocket* cannot be treated as a straightforward "retelling" or a transposition of Dostoevskii's novel. Instead, Bresson's flaunting of the Dostoevskian connection serves as a red herring, inviting the literate viewer to take the novel as a key to the film, when in fact its role is quite different. *Crime and Punishment* exists within *Pickpocket* as a not-quite-assimilated hypotext, acting, as we will see below, as a non-explanation for Michel's puzzling behavior by suggesting a comparison with Raskolnikov, Dostoevskii's protagonist, that ultimately falls flat. The relationship between

novel and cinematic hypertext thus establishes a central concern of *Pickpocket*, namely, the state of knowing what has transpired without understanding why, which for Michel is realized as a confession of deeds that does not comprehend a motive. Furthermore, *Crime and Punishment*, in conjunction with Camus's *The Stranger*, connects *Pickpocket* to a lineage of literary works that engage the problems of confession, contextualizing the film as a new response to an established aesthetic and philosophical problem.

Bresson's references to *Crime and Punishment* and *The Stranger*, the former concerned with the possibility of redemption and the latter with freedom from conventional morality, locate the director's own engagement with confession at the border between religion and existentialism. In doing so, Bresson connects himself with a tradition that simultaneously acknowledges the Christian view of confession as a means of reconciliation with God and man and moves past it. Such a context is consistent with the investigation of faith and doubt that characterizes all of Bresson's films, a tension captured in *Pickpocket* in the relationship between the amoral Michel and Jeanne (Marika Green), the Christian woman who loves him. Though much has been written about Bresson's interest in Catholicism, and specifically in the Jansenist theology of predestination, his religious views remain ambiguous. Recent scholarship has been increasingly hesitant to accept his religious affiliations without question. Jonathan Rosenbaum describes Bresson's Jansenism as "alleged and at times avowed," preferring to call him a materialist.[6] Raymond Durgnat reminds us of Bresson's alleged statement in 1974 that he was "a Christian atheist."[7] René Prédal points to the ultimate ambiguity of the films: There may be a God, and there may be fate, but "the Bressonian hero can scarcely hope to find in the sky precise signs of destiny."[8] In other words, Bresson continuously makes films on Christian themes, about characters who should be paragons of virtue—Joan of Arc, Lancelot du Lac, the priest of Ambricourt, a saintly and suffering donkey—yet with no final affirmation that their faith was justified. Like Dostoevskii, he poses questions of faith but allows no supernatural proof. This lack of absolute assertions and allowance for doubt are what bring Bresson's films closest to the vision of the existentialists. Christian and atheistic philosophies converge in Bresson's work without contradiction or superficial resolutions. In *Pickpocket*, this means that he works out his aesthetics of confession without a guarantee either of redemption or of a knowable, cause–effect chain of motivation within the human psyche.

PICKPOCKET AND ITS INTERTEXTS

A central difficulty of *Pickpocket* is discovering how Michel understands and communicates the motives behind his crime, if in fact he does. The recipients

of a confession expect to hear more than a simple list of actions. Confession has historically been both a religious genre and a literary one. While modern confession has not preserved all of the redemptive and didactic functions of works like St. Augustine's *Confessions*, the audience (or readership) still expects a modicum of self-examination or self-justification. To put it into terms more suited to *Pickpocket*, a satisfactory confession must address both the criminal act *and* the underlying motivation, whether those are theological (original sin) or psychological. Michel manages to tell what he has done, but he cannot give a convincing explanation as to why.

Both of the film's two major intertexts, Dostoevskii's *Crime and Punishment* and Camus's *The Stranger*, set up this problem, as they depict crimes with unclear motivations. In *Crime and Punishment*, the protagonist, Raskolnikov, murders a moneylender and robs her. Though he has rationalized the crime by arguing that one should be allowed to kill a useless, spiteful old woman if her wealth is then used to benefit others, Raskolnikov never actually uses any of the money that he steals. This crime is further complicated when Raskolnikov is unexpectedly forced to kill the pawnbroker's innocent sister. As a result of his failed experiment, he spends the rest of the novel wrestling with his conscience and trying to discern his true motives, and in the end he turns himself in to the police. In *The Stranger*, the typically placid Meursault is condemned to death for killing an Arab on the beach almost without provocation. (In fact, he does so shortly after talking his friend Raymond out of shooting the same man.) In court, he can explain only that it was "because of the sun."[9] In prison, he mulls over the judgment against him and his own detachment and alienation, at last making peace with the "gentle indifference" of the world.[10] His epiphany has little to do with the motive behind his crime, other than to render the notion of motive meaningless.

Pickpocket contains clear references to both works, though it draws far more material from *Crime and Punishment*. In fact, the basic plot follows Dostoevskii's quite closely, though the murder has been replaced by a series of thefts. Michel and Raskolnikov both engage in games of cat and mouse with tenacious police inspectors. Both have aging mothers whom they are arguably exploiting, Raskolnikov because his family makes huge sacrifices to support him, and Michel because he has actually stolen from his. They are aided by friends, Razumikhin and Jacques, who help them find work (and whose help they refuse), and they fall in love with virtuous (though fallen) women who inspire them to reform. Sonia, a prostitute who is the sole support for her alcoholic father and step-siblings, convinces Raskolnikov to confess and goes with him to Siberia. Jeanne, who works to support her sister and their alcoholic father, also takes care of Michel's mother, her neighbor. When she is seduced by Jacques, who abandons her with their illegitimate child, Michel is inspired to seek honest work so that she will accept his support. Though she does not

urge him to turn himself in, she does visit him in prison, just as Sonia visits Raskolnikov.[11]

Bresson also includes many smaller details from *Crime and Punishment*. Michel's cramped room looks just like Raskolnikov's, down to the dust on the books and their secret hiding place near the floorboards. Some lines of dialogue are almost exactly preserved, especially in interviews with the police. Bresson repeats the stair motif from *Crime and Punishment*, frequently framing his protagonist in a stairwell, as in the scene of his first conversation with Jeanne. Dostoevskii's novel opens with Raskolnikov hesitating on a staircase, and stairs become so associated with his crime and the police that he even has dreams set in his stairwell.[12]

Allusions to *The Stranger* are less overt, but they are present. (If nothing else, it would be difficult to make so many references to *Crime and Punishment* in post-war France without reminding viewers of the novel, one of Camus's well-known responses to Dostoevskii.) The scene of Michel at his mother's funeral, which has no analogue in *Crime and Punishment*, is the most direct reference: interestingly, Michel weeps, while Meursault cannot. *The Stranger* also shares a number of elements with both *Pickpocket* and *Crime and Punishment*, since the latter serves as a common source for both of the French works. Meursault has moved his mother into a nursing home, so he shares Raskolnikov's and Michel's uneasy family obligations. His girlfriend, Marie, visits him in prison, though she is less saintly than Sonia and Jeanne and eventually stops coming to see him. (While not especially moral from a Christian standpoint, she is neither an unwed mother nor a prostitute—though her name alludes to both.) Like the other two works, the novel ends with a "conversion" scene in prison, though in Meursault's case it is not a religious conversion but a triumph over religion. Unlike Raskolnikov and Michel, he experiences his revelation when he is alone.

The philosophical struggles of Raskolnikov and Meursault, which visibly impact the clarity of their confessions, provide some insight into Michel's difficulties with motive and causality. The two works frame the development of existentialism over almost a century. They also capture the transition from confession before God and man to confession without God, and with only a tenuous connection to the rest of humanity. Dostoevskii's focus on themes like self-determination and freedom, which are central to the French existentialists, strongly influenced the movement's development. Jean-Paul Sartre and André Gide both acknowledge a debt to him, and Camus, in his 1955 article "Pour Dostoïevski," writes that, "without Dostoevsky, twentieth-century French literature would not be what it is."[13] In *Camus: The Challenge of Dostoevsky*, Ray Davidson argues that "Camus's work appears to be conceived in a profound spirit of debate and dialogue with the Russian writer," with whom he engages extensively in his essays, especially *The Rebel* and *The Myth*

of Sisyphus.[14] The crux of the debate, according to Davidson, is that Camus rejects the notion that stable social structures, human relationships, and enjoyment of life require faith in God. He believes that, in reality, "faith … is the true obstacle to passionate experience of the world."[15] The same disagreement over the necessity of faith for a meaningful existence is illustrated in the opposing trajectories of confession in *Crime and Punishment* and *The Stranger*. Raskolnikov confesses in order to reconcile with mankind, after he tries to win freedom by denying moral absolutes. Meursault begins free from rules, is rejected by society, and writes himself into an epiphany about his total freedom, including freedom from God. Even without its religious force, confession remains a valuable tool, guiding Meursault to self-knowledge along a path Michel cannot quite follow.[16]

For Raskolnikov, the crisis in confession accompanies a trial of his freedom from moral law. His crime, and his theory, test the idea more famously formulated by the character Ivan in *The Brothers Karamazov*: "If there is no God, then everything is permitted."[17] In other words, if social justice and the advancement of mankind are the only standards for what is good, then one hundred people could be sacrificed for the prosperity of millions, provided the person sacrificing them had a discerning vision of the future. For Raskolnikov to prove he had the right to kill, he must demonstrate two things. First, he has to show that his theory is correct. Second, he has to in fact be a person of vision, the so-called extraordinary man.

Doubts on both fronts complicate his attempts to confess. He flirts with the idea of admitting everything to the police almost from the moment the crime is committed. In fact, within a few days he has confessed all of the details to a police clerk, but he plays it off by saying that it was all a joke and laughing at the clerk for believing him. At the same time, even after his trial, when he is in Siberia, he is not positive that he was wrong. At worst, he thinks, he made "a simple *blunder* that could have happened to anyone."[18] The very fact that he does not mention the extraordinary man theory at his trial, giving poverty as his only motive, suggests that his feelings toward it are unresolved. On the one hand, it is a gesture of humility not to claim a grand justification for his crime. At the same time, he avoids publicly denouncing the theory and subjecting it to scorn.

Even more problematic, though, is his assessment of his own application of the theory. Raskolnikov suffers from an overabundance of possible motivations, and cannot be sure why he killed the old woman: To help his family? To escape poverty? To better society? Or just to see if he could? It is the last option that he dreads the most, and it is the last one that he brings up when he confesses his crime to Sonia in Part Five: "I wanted to find out […] whether I was a louse like all the rest, or a man? […] Am I a trembling creature, or do I have the right … "[19] Shocking in its arrogance, this particular reason is also

horrible because it means that he has failed a priori: while an extraordinary man pursues his cause without thinking twice about the cost, Raskolnikov concocts elaborate and fatal games merely to test his own status. Obsession with extraordinariness is a mark of the ordinary, and Raskolnikov's own theory would thus condemn him to suffer like a typical criminal.

Aside from his fevers and obsessions, another element adds to Raskolnikov's difficulty in pinpointing the reason why he kills. The extraordinary man theory is about erasing boundaries, or shattering them. "Would I be able to step over, or not!" Raskolnikov wonders.[20] The Russian word *prestuplenie* ("crime") in the novel's title refers etymologically to the act of stepping over a line. In essence, Raskolnikov wants to escape all the normal boundaries and restrictions on human behavior. In abandoning traditional rules, though, he destroys the standards by which he would have judged himself. Behavior does not map to character as it once would have: The philanthropist and the murderer become one, and he is left outside of every system of evaluation until he confesses and submits to punishment. The same sense of being alienated by one's own transgressions may apply to Michel, who, tellingly, can connect with Jeanne emotionally and physically only as they kiss through prison bars, which both literally and figuratively close him back into a defined role within society.

In *The Stranger*, the central question is not "What is permitted?" but "What is determined?" The novel challenges the idea that it is relevant to talk about motivation at all. Certainly Meursault displays no interest in *why* he kills (or why he does not cry at his mother's funeral, or why he might love one particular woman instead of another). Similarly, he does not form expectations of others based on what the "normal" reaction to a situation might be. For example, after getting into a fight with a police officer, Meursault's neighbor "asked me if I'd expected him to hit the cop back. I said *I wasn't expecting anything*, and besides I didn't like cops."[21] Fittingly, Meursault's crime is the only one of the three not committed with any expectation of financial gain. Camus chooses not to offer money even as a red herring.

Meursault's narrative thus departs from the traditional confession not only by not elucidating his motive but by dismissing the very ideas of motivation and causality. He has completed the rejection of determinism that the other two works explore as well, though from more stable ground. For example, Razumikhin in *Crime and Punishment* flies into a rage at the socialist idea that "crime is a protest against the abnormality of the social set up" and that, in a well-ordered society, "all crimes will at once disappear."[22] The viewer of *Pickpocket* will recognize this as Jacques's idea about crime: that some acts are justified, depending on the environment. (Jacques in *Pickpocket* is a mere foil for Michel, far less sophisticated than his Dostoevskian counterpart.) Razumikhin argues that you must leave room for the "*living soul*"[23]

when talking about human behavior. In other words, people do not react in accordance with unbreakable laws. To borrow an image from *Notes from Underground*, one cannot look up a few factors in a scientific table and predict what a person will do.

Meursault has embraced the fact that a total rejection of determinism means you cannot scrutinize your own motives or predict your own behavior. With this acceptance, which he accomplishes on the eve of his death, comes a freedom both absurd and powerful. It is absurd, because the world is such that you can go for a walk on the beach and come home a murderer, with no greater impetus than the heat of the sun. Powerful, because it puts him outside of all constraints, allowing him to see the artificiality of traditional customs and beliefs. Of course, it is the same freedom that hopelessly alienates him from society, causing him to be labeled an "Antichrist" and to be condemned to death, but only in the face of that condemnation does he discover that he is truly alive. Comparing himself to the priest who tries to convert him at the last moment, Meursault says, "He wasn't even sure he was alive, because he was living like a dead man."[24] His confession does not lead toward a moral epiphany but away from morality altogether. In addition, rather than reconciling him with humanity, as Sonia believes Raskolnikov's confession will, Meursault's epiphany concerns freedom in alienation and liberation from social—and causal—constraints.

It is worth noting that Bresson rejects this approach to the problem of causality and confession. He does not allow Michel to embrace incoherence and absolute freedom, either because Bresson himself finds the idea untenable, or because Michel would simply not be capable of moving beyond the confusion and paralysis such a revelation would cause. Perhaps Michel's confusion comes from currents of existential angst that he only partially understands, enough to be disoriented, but not enough to take responsibility for himself as a new, free man. Michel thus inherits the difficulties of Raskolnikov and Meursault, but the solution that he comes to is neither Christian reconciliation nor existential freedom. Instead, he communicates his own disorientation and confusion about his motives through the act of picking pockets, an intimate and immediate approach to confession that remains both psychologically and philosophically ambiguous, more impenetrable than Raskolnikov's and Meursault's confessions.

PICKPOCKET AND THE BREAKDOWN OF CONFESSION

Pickpocket follows Michel's attempt to narrate a coherent confession and exposes the limits of the traditional first-person confessional narrative. The film is structured around shots of his hand recording the confession in a

notebook interspersed with dramatizations of the events that he is narrating. Though it is unclear how much time has elapsed between the events portrayed in the film and Michel's decision to write his confession, by the end of the film the viewer knows that Michel has already been arrested for picking pockets and has admitted his guilt to the police, and that Jeanne, the woman he loves, is aware of his crimes. Presumably, Michel is not risking much by composing a full account of his crimes, and yet his confession is utterly unsatisfactory. It comes off as flat, even insincere, and strangely incomplete.

Michel's narration begins with an acknowledgment of the unlikeliness of his confession. "I know that those who have done these things usually keep quiet," he writes, "and that those who talk haven't done them. And yet I have done them." This preface raises immediate questions about the confession to follow. In the first place, what has happened to make him break the silence his fellow thieves preserve? Is there something unusual about him, or are we to understand that he has abandoned his former life? Perhaps religious conversion prompts him to confess and renounce his crimes. At the same time, our awareness that Michel's confession is (according to him) largely unprecedented suggests that he may face narrative difficulties. To confess he must break taboos and find the words to explain a secret world to viewers on the outside. Complicating matters is the fact that he is a criminal whose life's work has been illusion and stealth. Speaking openly and honestly requires a total break with the past, a recounting of old actions in an entirely new, antithetical spirit. Michel's project is imperiled in its very conception.[25]

It is not surprising, in light of these difficulties, that Michel fails to make a satisfying confession. Though he provides a full account of the thefts, including details about his failures of nerve, near misses, and run-ins with the police, his motives both for becoming a pickpocket and for writing a confession remain obscure. In fact, his narration displays a complete lack of interest in motivation and causality. He begins with the moment of his first theft and provides no back story, other than the fact that he "had made [his] decision some days before." As he identifies, stalks, and finally robs his victim, the voice-over continues to be so terse that it provides almost no information. Michel's entire commentary on the three-minute scene consists of the following five lines: "I had made my decision some days before … Would I have the nerve? … I should have left … I was walking on air with the world at my feet … But I was caught right away." As will be the case for the rest of the film, Michel provides minimal information about the state of his nerves but none at all about what compels him to steal or how he himself evaluates the morality of the act.

This scene, which takes place during a horse race, also establishes a tension between image and text that will continue through the entire film. Bresson often employs extensive voice-over narration juxtaposed with on-screen actions nearly devoid of dialogue. *Diary of a Country Priest*,[26] released in 1951,

relies heavily on this technique, to the point that image and text begin to render one another superfluous. This lends the otherwise straightforward narrative a charge of irony. In *Pickpocket*, Michel's narration is laconic enough to avoid redundancy with the on-screen action. Instead, the juxtaposition of image and text reveals the inadequacy of the latter, exposing deep flaws in Michel's written confession. As mentioned above, the voice-over fails to supply significant insight into Michel's psyche, and one feels that it has little role in the film other than to remind us that Michel is *attempting* to confess. Worse, what little information we do glean from it is not always supported by the visual component of the film. This is especially the case when narration of Michel's thoughts or state of mind plays against an image of Martin LaSalle's mild, expressionless face. (Susan Sontag describes his performance as "convey[ing] something wooden, at times evasive."[27]) For example, at the racetrack, Michel (as cited above) asks, "But would I have the nerve?" Nothing in his face demonstrates a crisis of courage, though his downcast eyes are perhaps slightly preoccupied. We do feel his hesitation, but it is broadcast through his stillness, in contrast with the crowd that swarms around him. Later, when he says he is "walking on air," it is with almost the same expression, only he is looking straight ahead, and his mouth is slightly open: He can breathe freely for the first time in the scene. It is a very slight alteration for the exhilaration "walking on air" implies, and this is precisely the problem with Michel's gestures and expressions. It is not that they are implausible—after all, a thief cannot wear his intentions and emotions on his face. It is that his reactions are so muted, so interior, that viewers cannot bridge the gap and feel any connection with him. Even if, at moments, we worry for him, we can never identify with him. Unable to draw us into Michel's experience, his narrated confession falls flat. He may be telling the truth, but it is a truth to which we have no access, a confession devoid of revelation or cogency. We listen with reservations to an account that cannot be verified.

The same problems—an inability to describe his motives, and a general lack of conviction—underlie his reluctance to confess during the course of the events recounted in the film. Unlike Raskolnikov, Bresson's protagonist never chooses to turn himself in to the police.[28] He confesses to them only when caught red-handed. Even then, the narrator tells us, he plans to retract the confession. Before his arrest, Michel does give two partial explanations for his crime, one to the police inspector investigating his case and one to Jeanne. He tells the police inspector about a theory that he claims to have developed, though it is borrowed almost verbatim from *Crime and Punishment*. (He himself says, "It's nothing new.") He believes in a category of people who are above the law. "Can we not admit," he asks, "that certain skilled men, gifted with intelligence, talent, or even genius, and thus indispensable to society, rather than stagnate, should be free to disobey laws in certain cases?" When

the inspector asks who or what will distinguish these "supermen," Michel replies, "Themselves, their conscience."

Any viewer familiar with Dostoevskii will immediately recognize this as a reiteration of Raskolnikov's "extraordinary man" theory: the notion that certain figures, inspired by a "new idea" that will benefit humanity, should not be restricted by laws and customs enforced by and for people of lesser vision. Such "extraordinary men," akin to Hegel's concept of the world historical figure, tend to be rejected by their contemporaries but acknowledged retrospectively for their daring and brilliance. (Raskolnikov gives Napoleon and Mohammed as examples.) Like Michel, he uses the theory to justify certain categories of crime, asserting in an article, "[A]n 'extraordinary' man has the right … that is, not an official right, but his own right, to allow his conscience to … step over certain obstacles."[29]

The difference between them is that, when we hear Raskolnikov's theory, we penetrate to the core of the novel and his psyche; when we hear Michel's, we doubt that he himself believes it. Raskolnikov is utterly obsessed with the idea of the extraordinary man and has staked his soul on it. The viewer of *Pickpocket* never sees such doubt and torment in Michel. At times he is nervous, at others mildly puzzled, and little more. Despite his ominous voice-over during the café scene ("Stupidly, I greeted him"), he presents his theory to the chief inspector dispassionately.[30] Perhaps he has come up with the idea solely out of propriety, having the vague idea that a student turned criminal needs a clever, socially conscious defense. Lacking a concrete understanding of his own motives, he has pilfered one from Raskolnikov, picking the pocket of his predecessor. The stolen goods are worth less in their new context: Michel's theory of the superman could be omitted from the film with little effect, while reading *Crime and Punishment* inevitably entails entering the debate about the extraordinary man.

When Jeanne asks Michel why he steals, he gives a simpler response. "To get ahead," he explains. "I was frustrated getting nowhere." This is plausible, but it does not explain the way his behavior escalates, until he appears to be addicted to the act of picking pockets. Merely wanting to escape poverty would not, for example, explain what happens the day Michel goes out with Jacques (his friend, who resembles Razumikhin from *Crime and Punishment*) and Jeanne. When he spots a passerby with an expensive watch, Michel is overcome with such a strong urge to steal that he abandons the other two on a carnival ride to pursue his mark. They find him later in his room, bleeding because he fell while being pursued. Michel is a successful enough thief at this point that there is no need for him to go after watches at random to get by. Similarly, during the two years he spends in London, he claims to have made a great deal of money but squandered it on women and gambling. (This statement recalls the moment when Michel explains to the police inspector

that the "supermen" would stop stealing once they had acquired the resources they needed. The inspector replies, "They don't stop.") It is clear that the compulsion to steal comes from something more complex than a mere desire to be financially solvent. Neither during his career as a criminal, nor later as he reflects upon it, is Michel able to elucidate this complexity.

CONFESSION THROUGH CRIME: BRESSON'S SLEIGHT OF HAND

Having established the problems of narrating a satisfactory confession, Bresson presents a solution that is embedded in Michel's criminal acts. By picking his victims' pockets, Michel forces them to experience the same breakdown in causality that makes it impossible for him to explain his motives. For example, in one scene Michel steals from a woman who is standing in line with her purse tucked under her elbow. He eases the purse out from under her arm and replaces it with a rolled-up newspaper of approximately the same size. The woman feels nothing. The audience does not witness her eventual discovery of the crime, but she surely perceives it as the work of a magician: The purse, which she has held firmly this whole time, has been transformed into a worthless scrap of paper. It is an effect without any possible cause. Confronted with the breakdown of causality, she must experience a disorientation very close to Michel's confusion about his own actions.

The merging of crime and confession suggests that Michel's choice of crime is motivated in part by his need to confess, and that his desire to confess is not a straightforward result of having committed a crime.[31] Picking pockets enables Michel to express something about his existential state that he cannot put into words. This explains why Bresson's film is focused on a comparatively petty crime, though its major intertexts deal with murder. Neither Raskolnikov's nor Meursault's murder accomplishes the same disruption of causality, as they confront their victims face to face. It is specifically the element of sleight of hand inherent in picking pockets (along with the fact that the victims survive to be puzzled by the crime) that makes it effective. Fittingly, the film fixates on pickpocketing techniques. Michel practices unhooking a watch from a table leg and plays pinball to improve his dexterity, and his accomplice, played by professional sleight-of-hand artist Henri Kassagi, demonstrates numerous tricks of his trade.

Bresson draws attention to Michel's odd confessional technique through some sleight of hand of his own. Effectively picking his viewers' pockets, he pushes his famously spare style to an extreme by eliminating connective material and would-be climactic scenes from *Pickpocket*. The scene of Michel's first theft at the racetrack, described above, is full of such instances. Consider, for

example, the presentation of the horse race during which Michel steals from a woman's purse. During the race, the assembled crowd focuses intently on the track, but the film's viewers miss the spectacle. The camera stays on Michel as he inches his hand into the purse. We experience the race only through the crowd's reaction, as they turn their heads to follow it, and through the sound of cheers and hoof beats. In other words, we witness certain effects and are left to imagine their cause. The scene serves a dual purpose: the viewer, "robbed" of the thrill of the race, begins to understand how the pickpocket exploits the misdirected attention of the crowd. Simultaneously, we become aware of how much work we ourselves will have to do to put the pieces of Michel's confession together.

When Michel leaves the races followed by detectives, the audience must once again provide their own causal connections, this time between scenes. Here it happens because we are not allowed to see the moment of Michel's arrest, which in a typical detective film would be the climax of the racetrack adventure. Instead, just after the detectives appear, the voice-over narrator ruins the suspense of the moment by saying, "But I was caught right away." Bresson then cuts from a shot of the detectives reaching for Michel to an image of Michel seated in the back of a police car. Though it is not difficult to imagine what happened in between, skipping the arrest deflates the dramatic tension that has been building since Michel selected his mark. Significantly, we are not allowed to experience the interpersonal conflict of the arrest: Bresson carefully rations direct confrontations and genuine interactions in the film. This cut also "bares the device" of film editing, to use Viktor Shklovskii's term, by making the viewers realize how much they contribute to a film's coherence by inferring causal connections between scenes. The upshot of Bresson's trademark minimalism, in *Pickpocket*, is precisely this awareness that the viewer actively negotiates gaps in causality, and that narratives are, in general, fragile constructions.

By employing pickpocketing as a narrative device, Bresson legitimizes Michel's confessional technique, but he also provides a context that completes it. Even when picking pockets, Michel is still making only half a confession at a time. In writing, he is able, barely, to say what he has done. When he steals, he leaves a clue about why. His victims likely share his confusion; they do not know exactly what has happened to them, or who is to blame. The pieces of Michel's confession come together only when they are presented to the viewer, by Bresson. That is to say that the only successful confession in *Pickpocket* is the one completed when an audience watches the film. Michel cannot tell his whole story until it has been taken out of his hands. In this we see the cost of confession through picking pockets. The recipient of confession has access to the confessor's psychological, and existential, state in an unprecedentedly direct way, having been forced to share part of his or her experience. For

this shared confusion to be meaningful, though, or even to be recognizable as a confession, it must be presented in a broader context, with additional information about the crime. As the confessor can no longer contextualize the information on his or her own, confession by picking pockets requires multiple confessors, and multiple, incomplete attempts to confess.

What emerges in *Pickpocket* is a view of confession as no longer a narrative in itself, but a moment of disorientation that must be given narrative and context. The film and its intertexts provide a framework for Michel's mute gestures of shared disorientation, knitting these repetitive, fragmentary acts into what the viewer can recognize as a story. The idea of a coherent, univocal confession, like Augustine's or Jean-Jacques Rousseau's—or even Meursault's—is a thing of the past. Michel's written confession is unsatisfactory because it is an attempt at exactly this kind of univocal, first-person confessional narrative, but a pickpocket confession requires third person and polyphony, a plurality of voices to surround the moments of silent confusion at its core. Michel's sleight of hand only becomes meaningful to the viewer when tied to his face, to his biography, and to a certain social and cultural milieu by the other elements of the film: images, music, sounds, the preface ("Ce film n'est pas du style policier"), and the puzzling voice-over narration.

In this respect, of course, *Crime and Punishment* is an especially significant intertext, as it is an early example of a work about confession moving into third person to resolve narrative problems. As Olga Peters Hasty points out in the previous chapter, Dostoevskii originally drafted the novel in first person, as a diary and then as a confession, but rewrote it in the third person.[32] Though the impediment to Raskolnikov's confession is a number of competing narratives, rather than a lack of narrative, the novel anticipates Bresson's view of fragmentary confessional acts pieced together by a narrator and other elements. Already in the novel there is a sense that Raskolnikov's motives are too complex to be narrated satisfactorily, but his conception of the crime and subsequent moral and psychological torment still loosely fall into a cause–effect narrative in a way that Michel's experience does not.

Intertextuality and adaptation play a double role in this new aesthetics of confession. Robin Feuer Miller describes confession in Dostoevskii's works as an act of "indecent exposure," characters displaying their basest qualities as "a form of vanity [...] that depends upon the existence of an audience to outrage."[33] Confession in *Pickpocket* is given a similarly sexualized metaphor in the image of Michel's hand slipping stealthily into the purse of the woman at the race track, but this is a clandestine and furtive indecency, not one that invites the eyes and the outrage of the public. His fragmentary confessions involve too little exposure rather than too much, and the scene at the racetrack hinges on his misdirection of the public's attention, revealed by the camera's redirection of the viewer's eye toward this stealthy penetration. The film's

intertexts, similarly, serve both to misdirect and redirect the audience. They act as red herrings, as described above, by suggesting ultimately unsatisfactory explanations for Michel's behavior and creating the illusion that his confession might, after all, be a coherent narrative. As that illusion crumbles, they fold *Pickpocket* into a broader context of confessional narratives, and even into a broader narrative about human beings trying to confess.

By working with these intertexts without fully assimilating them or settling into an easy relationship, *Pickpocket* creates clear borders that the viewer must actively negotiate, just as he or she negotiates the gaps left by missing connective material. Confession has been stripped of its most recognizable features, the overt statement of motive and deed, and then had them partially restored. The act of confessing is no longer identical with the narrative itself but a mute gesture inscribed within the narrative, so that the confessional genre now relies on what was once its antithesis: that which is not and cannot be articulated. Ultimately, the viewer still gets some information about motive and causality, but we can no longer have them without recognizable borders. We examine those boundary lines, the meeting points of film and literature.

In conclusion, Bresson uses his intertexts to create a form of confession that is influenced by, and yet distinct from, those of Dostoevskii and Camus. Like his predecessors, Bresson does not deal with criminal motivation as a matter of simple, psychological cause and effect. Instead, he approaches confession as something that eludes straightforward narration, something around which a narrative must be built, but which acts exactly where the surrounding narrative is least forthcoming, and where causality gives way to bewilderment. Confession in *Pickpocket* is itself transgressive and illicit and works through acts of theft, through the stripping away of expected elements, so that the reader stumbles in the gaps. It is about realizing what we do not understand and cannot say, but it is also about the construction of narratives in spite of, or even as complements to, those aporias, so that confession becomes a chain of voices, perspectives, and texts simultaneously exposing and ordering the moments of wordless, stealthy contact at their core.

NOTES

1. "Ce film n'est pas du style policier."
2. Kline, "Picking Dostoevsky's Pocket," 300.
3. Reader, *Robert Bresson*, 291.
4. Sontag, "Spiritual Style," 65.
5. Bresson rejected the term "actor" and worked with "models," whom he instructed not to act or emote at all, in an attempt to keep the actor's interpretation of the role from obscuring his or her spirit and skewing the effect of a scene. Set out somewhat cryptically

in *Notes on Cinematography*, Bresson's theory of models has been extensively analyzed. See, for example, T. Jefferson Kline's analysis in "Picking Dostoevsky's Pocket."

6. Rosenbaum, "The Last Filmmaker," 21.
7. Durgnat, "The Negative Vision," 411.
8. Prédal, "Robert Bresson," 89.
9. Camus, *The Stranger*, 103.
10. Ibid., 122.
11. The extensive parallels between the ending of *Pickpocket* and the epilogue of *Crime and Punishment*, both ostensibly conversion narratives, deserve to be the subject of their own, separate analysis. To give a brief picture of their similarity, both stories end with the protagonists being visited in jail by their love interests, who have been absent for some time due to illness. Each visit culminates in a moment of realization. As Michel kisses Jeanne through the cell bars, the narrator says, "Oh Jeanne, to reach you at last, what a path I had to take." Literally locked into a place in society, he appears to genuinely connect with and need another person for the first time. In a comparable gesture, Raskolnikov suddenly flings himself at Sonia's feet. She realizes "that he loved her, loved her infinitely, and that at last the moment had come … In [their] pale, sick faces there already shone the dawn of a renewed future, of a complete resurrection into a new life." Dostoevsky, *Crime and Punishment*, 549.
12. Given the numerous allusions in the final version of the film, it is fascinating to recall that Bresson claims not to have had Dostoevskii in mind when he began working on *Pickpocket*. Despite this, he is clearly very familiar with the Russian writer's work, and returns to it twice more as a source for *Une femme douce* (1969), based on "The Meek One" ("Krotkaia"), and *Quatre nuits d'un rêveur* (1971), analyzed in Chapter 2 of this volume, which follows the premise of "White Nights" ("Belye nochi").
13. Davidson, *Camus*, 3.
14. Ibid., 1.
15. Ibid., 2.
16. Peter Axthelm considers this a key characteristic of the modern confessional novel. He suggests that, without the hope of redemption or rebirth, the "intense self-examination" of confession is the only way for an existentialist protagonist to "seek meaning." Axthelm, *The Modern Confessional Novel*, 55.
17. At least, this sentiment is twice attributed to Ivan. In Book Two, chapter six, Petr Aleksandrovich quotes Ivan as saying that "were mankind's belief in its immortality to be destroyed, not only love but also any living power to continue the life of the world would at once dry up in it. Not only that, but then nothing would be immoral any longer, everything would be permitted, even anthropophagy." Ivan does not deny it. In Book Eleven, chapter eight, Smerdiakov quotes "everything is permitted" back to Ivan. Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, 69, 625.
18. Dostoevsky, *Crime and Punishment*, 543 (original italics).
19. Ibid., 419.
20. Ibid.
21. Camus, *The Stranger*, 37 (my italics).
22. Dostoevsky, *Crime and Punishment*, 256. The idea is repellent to the Underground Man, and to Dostoevskii, as well.
23. Ibid., 256 (original italics).
24. Camus, *The Stranger*, 120.
25. The phrase "these things" already sounds vague and evasive, especially in contrast to the blunt label of the film's title.

26. *Diary of a Country Priest* is also a study of confession, though in a more overtly religious context.
27. Sontag, "Spiritual Style," 63.
28. Readers never find out whether Meursault in *The Stranger* is captured or turns himself in, as the narrative jumps from the murder to events after his arrest.
29. Dostoevsky, *Crime and Punishment*, 259.
30. In contrast, Raskolnikov and his interlocutors boil over with emotion. The following descriptions from their conversation about Raskolnikov's article illustrate the passionate nature of the debate: "Raskolnikov did his best to look as abashed as possible"; "Raskolnikov could not help himself, and angrily flashed a glance at him, his black eyes burning with wrath"; "Raskolnikov grinned awkwardly"; "Razumikhin all but flew into a rage"; "Porfiry could not sit still." Nothing could be further from the inscrutable calm of Michel in the café, who betrays no emotional or intellectual engagement with his claims. Dostoevsky, *Crime and Punishment*, 250, 251, 252, 257, 264.
31. Camus, *The Stranger*, 121. Here again we see a complication of the linear cause–effect relationship.
32. See the chapter "Dostoevsky" in Peter Axthelm's *The Modern Confessional Novel* for a discussion of the confessions in *Notes from Underground* and *Crime and Punishment*.
33. Miller, "Dostoevsky and Rousseau," 85.