

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
Frederic Will, Ph.D.

A Man Escaped 1957

Robert Bresson. 1901-1999

STORY

Talk about a true story! Bresson deals with what happened, here, while at the same time infusing it with the mystery of human existence at all times. Perhaps he makes us think first of all of the wonderfully 'true' but allegorical fictions of William Golding, in *Pincher Martin* (1956). Bresson, like Golding, puts us momentarily in touch with the true mystery of being here.

Action. Where it starts is in the midst of World War II, in a Nazi prison camp in Montluc, in 1943. Or are we rather in the mind of a Lieutenant Fontaine, who faces a death sentence as one of the 7000 French members of the Resistance who were killed there during the war, as reprisals for their role in resisting the Nazi occupation. Fontaine is first seen in a paddy wagon carrying him through the streets of Montluc, on his way to the military prison there; and bringing down a bloody beating onto himself as he tries to escape, before the wagon reaches its destination. We have no idea whether he will prevail, but we know that he will fight to the max for his freedom. Apart from that, however, we know, and even in the end will know, little about this man; he is cared for enough that someone will send him a prison package, he is tough and determined enough to plan and carry through an extremely demanding prison escape. Escapes from Alcatraz, or the escapades of El Chapo can hardly hold a candle to the close observing, sharp thinking, action aligned strategies of Fontaine, as he strategizes his way out through a ceiling grate and over a couple of prison walls, into the freedom of a dark street.

Detail. It is truly all about detail, the greatness of this analysis of cool determination. Fontaine is faced from the start, as his bloody body is tossed into an empty cell with a seemingly intractable lack of advantages; alone, isolated, in solitary confinement, guards everywhere, very little time outside of the cell, the imminent prospect, as he knows, of death by firing squad. All these local disadvantages he somehow manages to put to his service: he trades clandestine messages and code tapings on the walls; he bends a window frame into a useful instrument for hooking an escape rope to; he tears up a package of clothes, which is sent him, into strips of escape rope; he accepts a second prisoner, thrust on him unceremoniously, as a potential ally, works with him in planning the escape, and proves to have wagered correctly on another human being.

Achievement. Clint Eastwood, in *Escape from Alcatraz*, 1979, creates a white-knuckle thriller, which calls on the ingenuity, guts, and perseverance of the incarcerated tough guy. The movie is a thriller. In that it is different from *A Man Escapes*: in *Escape from Alcatraz* we are on the edge of our seats, waiting to see whether the protagonist will make it, while in *A Man Escapes* our interest is absorbed by the way, step by step and item by item, Fontaine deals with the few useable items and strategies available to himself, as he makes his way toward a goal which is only slowly disclosing itself. The drive to escape may be the same in each film, and may testify to the same indomitable human force, but the manifestation of that drive is powerfully different in the two films. Fontaine fingers, contemplates, thinks through action stages with the careful attentiveness of a priest; Clint enforces the sense of panic that derives from taking a great risk.

THEMES

Care Fontaine assesses his setting, in the seemingly bare cell, with great care. He sees every object as a potential item for use in an escape attempt. He eyes the loose boards on his wall, the high shelf on his wall, from which he can peer out into the courtyard, and the metal window frame, from which he projects fashioning a utility device for holding escape ropes. No move or perception is random here.

Trust. The greatest personal decision required of Fontaine turns around the intrusion of Jost into Fontaine's cell. This young man is pushed into the cell, with a mattress and nothing more, and left there as the cellmate for the protagonist. This is awkward for Fontaine, to say the least, for he is in the midst of many planning issues toward his hoped for escape: he is busy cutting fabric, hiding escape implements, sweeping the corners of his cell—all so that he can keep his secret program invisible. The great challenge, for Fontaine, is to assess this newcomer, make sure he is not a Nazi plant, and if possible cut him effectively into the large program of escape. The question is whether or not to trust the man.

Freedom Fontaine already signaled, at the time of his arrest, his desperate desire for freedom. Though almost certain to be captured, he leaped out of the paddy wagon into the guns of Nazi soldiers. From the time he entered his cell, he examined everything and every aspect of daily life from the standpoint of whether it would further the return of his freedom.

CHARACTERS

Lieutenant Fontaine The protagonist, and center of our attention from start to finish, is Lieutenant Fontaine. His story, as Bresson presents it, was based on the text, *A Man Escaped*, written by Andre Devigny, a French officer who himself was imprisoned in and escaped from the Nazi prison in Montluc. Bresson, who had himself been a prisoner of war, worked with such real life reminiscences, to create a single-minded freedom-addict, whose devotion to escape motivated his every action. In creating this character he avoided all the traditional casting of 'actors,' and went for a relatively untrained candidate, who was as far as possible stripped of distinctive personal traits, and reduced to his bare human condition.

Blanchet. An elderly prisoner neighbor of Fontaine: the two meet when carrying their slops out to dispose of, on the side of the prison courtyard. In their interaction Fontaine learns that his tapping on this neighbor's wall, although the man had been too ill to respond, had given the man hope. Bresson often touches on a God-theme, which includes the notion that we are never sure when our behavior will have a saving effect on another person.

Reverend de Leiris. Is a Protestant minister. He is one of several men Fontaine regularly meets in the washroom. Leiris 'luckily' discovers that he has a Bible tucked away in his coat pocket; he shares it with Fontaine, who discounts the idea of 'luck,' seeing a God-plan in it.

FONTAINE

Character Lieutenant Fontaine is a relatively characterless military man, defined by his passion for escape, his growing care for others—Blanchet is an example, as is his trust in the new cellmate, Jost—and the calculating intensity with which he surveys the possible means to escape, as he finds them in his cell. His eventual escape, with Jost, is accompanied with a triumphant passage from Mozart, who is too subtle to trivialize Fontaine's achievement, and simply 'lifts our hearts.'

Parallels. Albert Camus' *The Stranger* (1942) explores the affectlessness of a young man for whom life has become a traitless sequence of events; a man who resembles Fontaine in the bareness of his human presence. Tolstoy's Ivan Ilyitch resembles Fontaine, in the bare capacity simply to hang in there, making that condition a form of trust.

Illustrative moments

Captured. From the outset of the film, Fontaine, handcuffed in the back seat of a paddy wagon, is tightly clenched in the hope of escape, and at the first opportunity flings himself out the door into the street. He is immediately captured, and treated roughly.

Tossed. Having been caught, Fontaine is tossed into his bare cell like a sack of potatoes. He is bleeding around the face, and is exhausted, but sets himself—after weeping briefly—to figuring out how to escape.

Encountered. Fontaine grows increasingly convinced that God has his hand in the small destiny turns which shape the individual life. Thus he finds striking meaning in the 'luck' which leads the pastor to discover a Bible in his coat sleeve. Fontaine, who 'prays irregularly,' and who is no deist, turns toward tweaks of luck, in interpreting his world.

Freed. Released from prison, by the ingenuity of his (and Jost's) escape plan, Fontaine goes like a silent spirit out into the night of the city. Because his planning for freedom has been strict and ascetic, he is able to embrace it with no hurrahs.

Discussion questions

Both Fontaine and the priest, in Bresson's *Diary of a Country Priest*, are minimal characters working through the asperity of daily existence toward some freedom. One, the priest, barely sees that freedom; one, Fontaine, carves that freedom out from the hard necessity of bare survival. Does Bresson speak to something distinctive and subtle about 'living at our time'?