

SALVATION COMES ON FOOTSTEPS

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One pleasure to be had from watching lots of films is that you can make connections between them, often unexpected, and the connection can newly illuminate something you thought you already knew. So it was for me watching the Powell and Pressburger film *The Small Back Room* (1949). As it comes to an end, when Sammy looks imploringly at Susan, and Susan throws herself into his arms, I began to talk myself:

“Where have I seen that before?”

“Lots of times. There’s a hundred happy endings like that.”

“But this one’s got a redemptive element. That’s less usual.”

“Not that unusual.”

“Yes, but the way the film focuses on the faces as they look at each other, across a space – to break it down they had to embrace. Where have I seen this before?”

Thought processes are complicated and certainly not linear. It turned out that it was not this scene that triggered the connection, but one slightly earlier when Sammy returns to the office in London, having skilfully dealt with the smart bomb dropped on Chesil Beach in Dorset, designed to blow up even when picked up by an expert in bomb disposal: it had done for Sammy’s cheerful colleague, Stuart. On the stairs he has a conversation with Tilley and we then cut to the office where Susan, his lover with whom he has fallen out, waits for his return. She hears footsteps on the stairs, slightly syncopated, and knows that they are Sammy’s. Syncopated? Among Sammy’s troubles is that having lost a leg earlier in the war he now has a tin one and Susan therefore knows that footsteps can only be Sammy’s.

Now, all was clear to me. Lots of films end happily in an embrace, but only one other that I could think of uses footsteps in this way: Robert Bresson’s *Pickpocket* (1959). Towards the end, Michel is in his cell. The sound of the prison guard’s footsteps signals the arrival of Jeanne, come to visit him, even though he has abused her throughout the film. She tells him simply: “You are all I have.” Michel returns to his cell where he wrestles with thoughts of suicide. Footsteps – the footsteps that might signal Jeanne’s visit – come and then go. No Jeanne. Michel then receives a letter from Jeanne explaining why she has been unable to come and that she will visit and Michel’s voice-over tells us, “My heart pounded violently.” We see Michel in his cell again, we hear the guard’s footsteps, the door opens and light falls on Michel’s face. Jeanne has come and



SMALL BACK ROOM: Susan hears Sammy's footsteps

PICKPOCKET: Michel hears the footsteps of the prison guard bringing Jeanne's letter



SMALL BACK ROOM: Sammy realizes he needs Susan

PICKPOCKET: Michel realizes he needs Jeanne



SMALL BACK ROOM & PICKPOCKET: redemptive embrace

the stage is set for the redemptive ending: Michel entering the cell behind bars, Jeanne coming forward across a space, the two kissing through the bars, and Michel speaking the now-famous lines, “Oh Jeanne, what a strange road I had to take to come to you.”

So, is *The Small Back Room* a direct source for Bresson in the making of *Pickpocket*? The main sources are Dostoevsky’s ‘Crime and Punishment’, a fascination with the mechanics of picking pockets, and the workings of Bresson’s mind: could there be any place for *The Small Back Room* in the film’s genesis? The instinctive answer is no, but an important point about Bresson’s method, in my view, is that while it may feel esoteric and ‘difficult’, it is forged with the tools of the commercial cinema. To read Bresson’s theoretical work, ‘Notes on the Cinematographer’, is to sense he is saying, “Everyone is out of step except me,” but he can only reach that conclusion if he has studied closely the way everyone is marching. Now, *The Small Back Room* is released in the UK in early 1949, and presumably reaches France a year or so later (it was released in the USA in 1952). It seems to me perfectly possible that Bresson saw it, and while the ending may have been too commonplace for his attention, and despite the fact that it is expressively composed – the chiaroscuro, the exchange of looks, the move from medium shot to close-up – he may have dismissed it. But Susan as an angel of redemption could have struck a chord, and certainly the footsteps on the stairs off-screen would have struck him as admirable.

In the Bresson – Godard -- Delahaye interview of 1966, published in ‘Cahiers du Cinéma’, Bresson mentions that he is reproached with never going to see films, on which he comments, “absolutely true: I don’t go to see films.” This prompts a footnote from the Cahiers editors in direct contradiction: “Bresson goes to see all the films.” So, who is right? Well, while it may not be the case that Bresson went to see all the new films showing in Paris, my guess is that despite his comment he did get to see some of them, and I believe that in the period after the war, discovering his vocation as a film maker, he would have found going to see other films enormously stimulating.

So, *The Small Back Room* may have a part to play in the genesis of *Pickpocket*, and even if it doesn’t, it’s still a terrific film. As is Samuel Fuller’s *Pickup on South Street* (released 1953), which opens with a pickpocketing sequence on the subway. . . So, Samuel Fuller was an influence on *Pickpocket* too? That’s another story.