

Robert Bresson, Possibly

interviewed by
Paul Schrader

In 1972 Robert Bresson, in response to my recently published book, *Transcendental Style in Film*, wrote me, "I have always been very surprised not to recognize myself in the image formed by those who are really interested in me" It's equally a shock for a critic to meet a director whom he has respected from a distance and whose films he has studied and interpreted. The critic-interviewer is often quite surprised to discover that "his subject" has a rather different interpretation of his films, their value and meaning. The director will explain patiently and emphatically, for example, that he used a particular tracking shot for an entirely different reason from the one the critic has proposed in two articles and a monograph-in-progress. The critic finds himself with the uncomfortable choice of becoming an obliging Boswell or trying to converse across a widening chasm.

It was with these trepidations that I interviewed Bresson last year—trepidations, the following interview demonstrates, which were fully justified. For I not only respect Bresson, but consider him the most important spiritual artist living (now that Rothko is dead)—a spiritual artist who has forged a style so singular it resists imitation. I had corresponded with Bresson several times from 1969 to 1972 and had fantasized that, upon meeting, we would burst like old friends into eager debate.

The interview indicates something quite different. Bresson was earnest, sincere, hospitable; he continually struggled to make his thoughts clear. Yet there was never the rapport I had hoped for. His answers were not in tune with my questions, or my questions with his answers. It felt as if each idea was fighting to assert itself through a fog of misunderstanding. Perhaps this distance was due to the peculiar nature of a first meeting, or perhaps it was a by-product of the barriers of age, culture, and language. But more likely it was because Bresson cannot (or will not) un-



Charles and his assassin in the graveyard.

derstand why I respect him, and I cannot (or will not) accept his interpretation of his films.

We talked for four or five hours and although we were rarely on the same wavelength, the discussion often became animated and passionate. I left with my respect for Bresson intact, eager to read the transcribed interview.

Several months later, I sent Bresson an edited copy. He wrote back saying he preferred not to have the interview published. *THE DEVIL PROBABLY* had been shut down for lack of funds, and he was despondent that "it is not possible to make a film in France without a major star or to make a film which is something more than an actor's performance." "Despite the fact that your questions were extremely pertinent," he wrote, "I find the interview flat and uninteresting. Without any doubt I was that day in crisis against everything regarding my profession and fighting against my disgust toward it."

A year later, after the release of *THE DEVIL PROBABLY*, and at the urging of Stéphane Tchaladjieff, his producer, Bresson relented and agreed to let *FILM COMMENT* publish the interview.

The interview was conducted on May 17, 1976 at Bresson's austere apartment on Quai de Bourbon, Ile St. Louis, Paris, overlooking the Seine and in the shadow of Notre Dame. Bresson was preparing to direct *THE DEVIL, PROBABLY*. I was in Paris for one day (my first), enroute to Cannes where *TAXI DRIVER* was to be shown. The interview was arranged by Richard Roud (for *FILM COMMENT*) and Stéphane Tchaladjieff. Roberta Nevers assisted as interpreter, although once Bresson began speaking in English he needed little assistance. After the interview I prepared to take a photo of Bresson, whereupon he picked up a tan upholstered Louis Quinze chair and pretended to hide behind it.

SAINTS WITHOUT THEOLOGY

I would like to ask you some personal questions, rather than professional ones. Questions I am trying to answer for myself. When I first saw your films, I felt I understood them immediately. No one needed to explain them to me. When Jost comes into the cell in *AMAN ESCAPED* and Fontaine decides not to kill him, I immediately knew that the film was about grace and redemption. That was the way I was educated. I saw it as a phenomenology of grace, that is: we must choose grace as it appears to us, and, therefore, we will escape, even though we are predestined to escape. (Predestined, because it says in the title he will escape.) We can't escape unless we choose the grace which is offered to us, in this case, the young boy. This seemed natural and logical to me. But in your last three films, the color films, *UNE FEMME DOUCE*, *FOUR NIGHTS OF A DREAMER*, and *LANCELOT*, I feel a new direction in your films which I don't fully understand and . . .

Because they are in color?

No. My supposition is that in the earlier films there was an effort to create, if not saints, the possibility of saintliness in a world without God, to use Camus' phrase, and I sense that in the most recent films that you are trying to create a kind of saintliness in a world without theology.

You can't say that about *LANCELOT*.

I feel that from *COUNTRY PRIEST* to *BALTHAZAR*, you were working off a given theology, and now you are foraging new terrain. I can understand creating a saint without God, but I can't understand creating a saint without theology. Does this make any sense to you?

No, no, because the more life is what it is—ordinary, simple—without pronouncing the word "God," the more I see the presence of God in that. I don't know how to quite explain that. I don't want to shoot something in which God would be too transparent. So you see, my first films are a bit naive, too simple. It is very hard to make a film, so I did it with great simplicity. The further I go on in work, the more I see difficulty in my work, the more careful I am to do something without too much ideology. Because if it is at the beginning, it wouldn't be at the end. I want to make people who see the film feel the presence of God in ordinary life, like *UNE FEMME DOUCE* in front of death. I think back to the five minutes before she is going to kill herself. There is something there ideological. That death is there and mystery is there, as in *MOUCHETTE*, the way she kills herself, you can feel there is something, which, of course, I don't want to show or talk about. But there is a presence of something which I call God, but I don't want to show it too much. I prefer to make people feel it.

Do you sense this change?

The change in my work? Of course. I said that in the first film it was too obvious. I don't want it to be.

Maybe that's what I mean when I say that in your later films, I don't feel a sense of theology.

Not in *LANCELOT*?

You seem to be creating your own theology rather than work off a previous theology.

I see another way to answer your question. Ideology is the moral. I don't want to be ideological. I want to be true, I want to have a certain way of being on top of life, and I don't want to show you anything, especially. I want to make people feel life as I do: that life is life, and in everything, the most ordinary, the most material, I see ideology.

In your book, *Notes on Cinematography*, you write that ideas derived from reading will always be book ideas. In the Godard Cahiers interview years ago, you spoke of Jansenism, and in an interview three years ago in *Transatlantic Review* you also spoke of Jansenism. Do you feel at this point that Jansenism is "book ideas"?

There are two translations of "Jansenism": Jansenism itself, the religious doctrine; or the style which is too cold and too strict. That's what they mean by Jansenism when they call me Jansenist. I don't agree with this at all.

When you spoke of Jansenism in the interviews?

I did? I don't remember.

Yes. You spoke of it in distinctly religious terms. You were talking about the concept of chance in *BALTHAZAR*. You said in *Jansenism* there is a concept of grace by chance.

Yes, I said I would rather be a Jansenist than Jesuit. I don't want to go too deep in abstract conversation. But I think there is predestination in our lives. Certainly. It can't be otherwise.

I believe that also. Is Jansenism among those "ideas derived from reading which will always be book ideas"?

I want to be as far from literature as possible, as far from every existing art. That's why I say books because I did take my ideas from books, Dostoevski and others, but I am a bit shy. I don't like to say it so much. It is not because of laziness, but because I wanted to work. It takes me two or three years of thinking to write a film. It takes too long. If I want to work quickly, I have to ask if the producer will take this idea. Until now, I have found only two writers with whom I could agree: Georges Bernanos, a little, not too much, and, of course, Dostoevski. I would like the source of my films to be in me, apart from literature. Even if I make a film from Dostoevski, I try always to take out all the literary parts. I try to go directly to the sentiments of the author and only what can pass through me. I don't want to make a film showing the work Dostoevski. When I find a book I like, such as *Country Priest*, I take away what I can feel myself. What remained was what I could have written myself.

SUICIDE

I want to ask you about *THE DEVIL*. PROBABLY because it's again about suicide.

How do you know?

Stéphane told me. Do you pass judgment on the suicide of others?

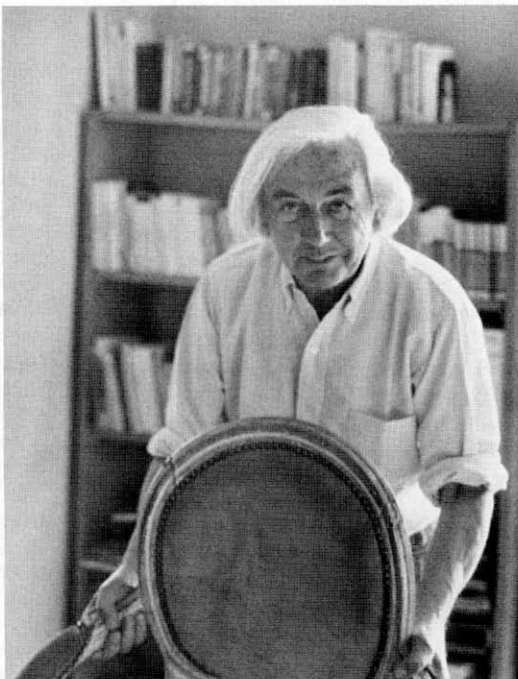
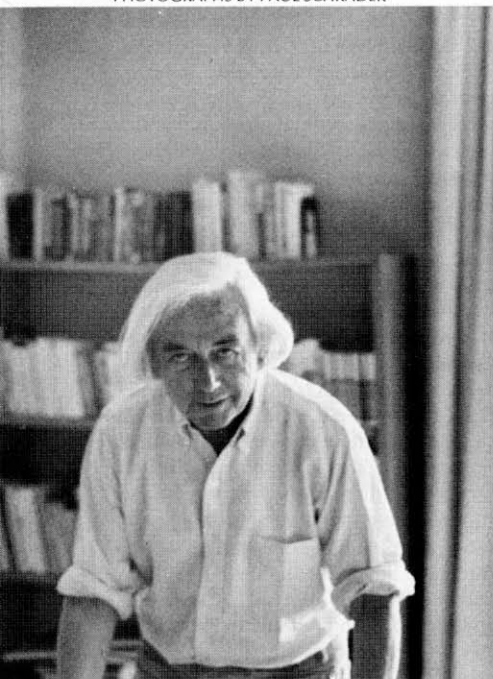
First of all, there are thirty different suicides for different reasons, and you could as well ask me if I could kill myself. If I agree with suicide, that's what you are saying.

Yes.

I don't know if I agree, but you know that for Catholics suicide was absolutely forbidden thirty or forty years ago. Priests would refuse to have sacraments if the person committed suicide. But now it has changed. I don't know if it comes from Rome, I am not sure, but I know they are much easier with it now. I try to understand people's sentiments aside from religion. For myself, there is something which makes suicide possible—not even possible but absolutely necessary: it is the vision of void, the feeling of void which is impossible to bear. You want anything to stop your life. I don't know so much about it, but I think two-thirds of the suicides come from this impossible way of living. For that I would be very understanding. There are still many other reasons. Because you are ill without any hope. I think these are very frequent. Somebody who can't bear the idea of dying at a certain date. Like Montelant, who was going blind, who was alone, he couldn't bear it; he lived a very lonely life. I don't know if I was going blind if I wouldn't commit suicide, but I think that the determination to kill yourself comes when it is impossible to do otherwise. I never thought about suicide so deeply, but now I could tell you that there is not one kind of suicide that I could not agree with. Like the young boy of about twenty or twenty-two who killed days ago in the street. But he killed himself after that.

Stéphane told me that your new film was going to be about a young man that kills himself—no, that arranges for his own death by protest. And I replied, I find it very hard to believe that any character in a film by Bresson would kill himself for anything other than internal reasons.

You know, there are young people who kill themselves for this same reason that he does in my film. I think in the whole world things are going very badly. People are becoming more and more materialistic and cruel, but cruel in another way than in the middle ages. Cruel by laziness, by indifference, egotism, because they think only about themselves and not at all about what is happening around them, so that they let everything grow ugly, stupid. They are all interested in money only. Money is becoming their God. God doesn't exist anymore for many. Money is becoming something you must live for. You know,



even your astronauts, the first one who put his foot on the moon, said that when he first saw our earth, he said it is something so miraculous, so marvelous, don't spoil it, don't touch it. More deeply I feel the rotten way they are spoiling the earth. All the countries. Silence doesn't exist anymore; you can't find it. That, for me, would make it impossible to live. The way this young person wants to die—he doesn't kill himself, himself—he makes himself be killed. The old Robin Hood people used to commit suicide with the help of friends. He kills himself for a big purpose.

Does he kill himself for personal reasons or to make the world better?

Yes, there is both in his reasons. Yes, to be an example. Yes, to be martyred.

I hope you will be able to see TAXI DRIVER because it is also about a man who realizes the void in his own life, and knows that life has no meaning, but he doesn't understand that he can kill himself, so he tries to kill the President, thinking that he will be killed in return. He fails, but the feeling is the same.

When we talked about void, I didn't mean when somebody thinks his life is nothing. The void is a total absence of something. You are talking about a feeling which I could very well imagine, if he thinks his life is nothing, that he asks for nothing, that what he does is absolutely uninteresting—there is a void in that. But the void I was talking about with people who commit suicide is something terrible.

A spiritual void?

Yes. But, of course when I do write something—I am not a writer, my friend, at all—but I make a great effort to write because making a film is not interesting if you don't write it yourself.

Perhaps I would make a mistake if I were a novelist. But this way of wanting to die is many things: it is a disgust with life, with people around you, with living only for money. To see everything which is good to live for disappear, when you see that you cannot fall in love with people, not only with a woman, but all the people around you, you find yourself alone with people. I can imagine living in disgust with so many things which are against you around you, and then you feel like suicide.

Does the void come from within or does the void come from without?

Both. The void around you makes the void within you.

In Notes, you quote da Vinci as saying in an artistic context that all that matters is the end. The ends of your films are very spare—A COUNTRY PRIEST, BALTHAZAR, LANCELOT—very simple, and, although Leonardo writes in an artistic context, it's also true in a religious context. In religion we are taught the only thing that matters is the end: how you die, like the thief on the cross. Which brings us back to the question of suicide. You are a man who seeks to completely control his artistic world, yet the most crucial decision, which is the end of life, cannot be controlled because it is, most often, whim or accident. One never dies in the way one hopes for one-self, and if the end is the most important, then suicide is an artistic decision as well as a religious one.

Perhaps, perhaps not. Because quite often what is important in the life of a man who creates, an artist, would not be the end of his life, but the middle, so the way he dies does not count so much. Let's take somebody I knew a little bit, Montelant. He thought that life was finished for him so he made it a little shorter

himself. I mean, his life was not in his death. His life was living. When he decided to die, he said, my life is finished.

One can control his life, yet the ultimate decision is never his own.

No, but if I would one day feel that all that is interesting in life is finished and I can't work any more, I'm not sure what I would do. But it has nothing to do with my new film. I am not twenty-two years old. You know there are more suicides among young people; they said this in the paper the other day. In France—I don't know why—when they are young, about twenty or twenty-two, they are much more fragile, sensitive. They have nothing to live on, especially religion. The collapse of the Catholic religion, this reason and others, can work very strongly on the mind of a young person.

The young man in my film is looking for something on top of life, but he doesn't find it. He goes to Church to seek it, and he doesn't find it. At night he goes to Notre Dame, to find God, alone. He says lines like this, "When you come in a Church, or in a cathedral, God is there"—it is the line of his death—"but if a priest happens to come, God is not there anymore." This is why, although I am very religious—was very religious, more or less—I can't go to church in the last four or five years when these people are making their new mass. It is not possible. I go inside the cathedral and sit down. There I feel God, the presence of something divine which doesn't exist anymore in the mass. The young man cannot feel God's presence in the daytime with people moving about and the priests there. He goes to find something



which he could rely on, but something happens. The police come. I am sure there are young people who commit suicide because they can't find this anymore.

What will happen to you when you die?

(Laughter.) You know, I can't take my mind off the fact that I believe you still feel things. You feel the loneliness, you feel the darkness of your coffin, you feel the cold. Resurrection is a most difficult thing to believe. The resurrection of the body: what is it? I don't know. But you know, I feel that I feel it. I have this certitude that there is something different than earth where we live which you can't imagine, but you can imagine that you could imagine. Sometimes I have had in my life, not now, something like a presence. Of what, I don't know, but I have felt it. It was very short, but I was very much impressed by it. It is something that I cannot explain. I go very often to the country on weekends when I feel the trees, the plants. I can't understand people who say there is no God. What does it mean? That everything is natural for them?

If you feel even for one moment that there is a presence of something else, then it is hard to believe that when you die, you will be completely lost.

Yes, except that one day you believe in the middle of the day and at night, you don't. You know what I mean, one day you believe and one day you don't. Faith is a shock. It is something you get; you don't know how. But belief is something else. Your intelligence tells you to do something. I think I am in the middle, between faith and believing. In my film, when the woman is going to die, I want it to appear there is something else after

death. That's why when people become so materialistic, religion is not possible, because every religion is poverty and poverty is the way of having contact with mystery and with God. When Catholicism wants to be materialistic, God is not there.

A good minister will say the same thing you say in Notes, which is: I am only a way to the mystery. Therefore, my personality and the personality of the actors are not important; it is only important that I enable you to see what there is. But then, most ministers are like actors. They are very bad and they are interested only in themselves.

I don't know what they are trying to do now, the Protestants. They are trying to explain what is not explainable. That is why many young people try to find something idealistic in Tao—because they need something to live.

CAMERA STYLE

Have you seen any of Ozu's films?

No, I don't go anymore to see movies. I may have seen one a long time ago.

Ozu's career is very much like yours. He was known as a comedy director, but as he grew older, he stopped moving the camera and he started closing in on the drama. Finally he made films in which the camera doesn't move, very similar to your films. He concentrates on the face, on the composition, on the flatness of life, and lets the intercutting of the events be the story. It is interesting that both he and you began in light comedy.

It was completely bad, what I did in comedy.

When Antonioni saw his first Ozu film, he walked out and said, "What is there for me to do?" So, perhaps it is better that you have not seen his films.

All the time, the camera moves, but very discreetly. I can't bear it in a film when you see it used as a broom. There are two things that are bad: when the camera moves—like this [making sweeping gesture]—or when you shoot something that is impossible for the human eye to see. What they all do very often.

You say in your book: make rules, but don't be afraid to break them.

Yes, yes. I don't think much of technique, or making technique a part of things. If you find a new way to catch life, nature, this could change details, but not the whole. I don't think so much of what I do when I work, but I try to feel something, to see without explaining, to catch it as near as I can—that's all. And that's why I don't move so much. It's like approaching a wild animal. If you are too brusque about it, it will run away. I think you must think a lot in the intervals of working and writing, but when you work, you mustn't think anymore. Thinking is a terrible enemy. You should try to work not with your intelligence, but with your senses and your heart. With your intuition.

I absolutely agree. Symptoms are universal, causes are particular. Symptoms are more interesting because we all have the symptoms, but we have different causes. Movies should be about symptoms rather than about causes.

It is very difficult to see things. So many times you go walking in the street, you look at things, but you don't see them. If you see the look in a man's eyes and at the same time see the reason why he is looking as he is, you are not touched.

If movies provide the symptoms truly, the viewer will supply the causes.

I want people to guess, to think. But it must be very clean and sharp, not fuzzy and confusing. Today movies make people want to know everything in advance, to be shown everything in a way I don't understand.

What I love about movies is that if you and I are here talking and if you re-cut so that we are now talking in New York, the audience will assume that somehow we got from Paris to New York. You can do the very same thing in spiritual ways. If you show a situation and if you cut to another place, the audience will make the leap with you. The audience will jump across the ocean with you.

PORNOGRAPHY

Yes, but if you don't show a succession of things exactly as they are in life, people stop understanding. Pornography has brought that to the cinema, that you must see everything. So the public is now conditioned to films where you show everything. It is terrible, I can't work anymore. If I can't make people guess, if I am obliged to show everything, it doesn't interest me to work.

I think that movies and pornography are different. I, personally, am not threatened by explicit movies. In Notes you say "the nude, if it is not beautiful, is obscene." Do you feel that the explicit is by its very nature wrong?

When it is explicit, it is not sexual. The same as mystery. If you don't make people guess, there is nothing there.

I believe that sex is mysterious whether you see it or not.

Yes, but when you see too much, it is not mysterious anymore.

Even if you see it all, it is still mysterious.

Only what is lovely—sexual life is beautiful—but how they do it in pornographic films is ugly and dirty.

But could you not show pornography—show people fucking—and also be mysterious? It is no less mysterious than watching me drink from the glass.

Not by showing things, but by my sensation of things. Making people feel how I feel. The most important and the most real is my way of feeling—to make people have the same sensation that I have in front of things.

Would you not agree that you learn no more about sexual feeling from seeing pornography than you learn about what cognac tastes like by watching me drink this?

You are quite right. There is no art in only showing things as they are, in a filmed succession of things. An idiot could see what is in front of his eyes and that's all. If you try to make people feel and think instead of hearing and seeing, then it is artistic.

Do you oppose pornography on moral grounds or on artistic grounds?

Not on moral grounds.

Artistic grounds?

Yes.

If you could use the new eroticism, would you?

No. Pornography is false sexual life.

But all films are false.

Not to love. Not with a work of art. I tried to see a few pornographic films, but I left because they turned sexual life into something horrible which doesn't exist. Perhaps for some people, but not for me.

VIOLENCE

It's like violence; it has to be used in a certain way. There is a parody of violence in *FOUR NIGHTS OF A DREAMER*. The suicides are always non-violent; why?

Because I do not like violence. When you see violence in a movie, you know that it is false. It doesn't touch me at all.

Suicide is a very violent act.

It's very violent inside you, but it's not very violent to watch.

For me, the notion of suicide is one of violence. It's the idea of blasting things out of your head which are destroying you; you don't really want to die, you want to destroy the way you are thinking. Suicide involves a lot of violence, a lot of blood, it's an explosion inside your head. I see suicide much more violently than you do. I'm moved when Mouchette rolls, when *Femme Douce* leaps, when Balthazar falls. I'm moved when the cross comes up in *COUNTRY PRIEST*, but to me, giving oneself to death is a very violent act, and I would never kill myself in a non-violent way.

I couldn't show violence, the blood, and those terrible things, because it would have been faked for the movie. People would say, "How did they do that?"

I understand your objection.

Sometimes you see things well done of this sort, but it is not moving—because you know it is false, because it is forced. But what you can do is have the sensation of death. You can be moved by death if you don't show it, if you suggest it. But if you show it, it's finished. The same thing about love. You don't feel love if you see two people making love.

ICONOGRAPHY

I sense a progression in your films: from the exterior to the interior life, from *Amore to Thérèse* in *LES DAMES DU BOIS BOULOGNE*, from the Countess to the Priest in *COUNTRY PRIEST*, finally to the object itself in *BALTHAZAR*, to purely the external like a graphic object. Ozu did the same thing: he turned to a vase. So many movies are based upon the two-dimensional image of the face—the icon of the face. One thing that bothered me about *LANCELOT* is that you don't see the faces.

I don't know what you mean.

This has to be a conscious decision, because many times in *LANCELOT* the frame line is just below the face. Then when you see the face, it is often covered by a helmet.

When he comes to pray in front of the cross, you see him entirely, you see his face. I don't see what you mean.

In your other films, one always remembers the faces, but in *LANCELOT*, one doesn't.

Because the face is not special. It doesn't work. His face was a very difficult face to take.

Are you saying that the reason the camera doesn't focus on Lancelot's face is because you weren't happy with the actor?

No, I didn't say that. I say that there are faces which are different from others.

I think it's very clear that you are not as interested in Lancelot's face as you were in Michel's, or Fontaine's, or even Joan of Arc's.

I understand what you mean, but it is not proof for me. I don't see how you can say that.

Are you less interested in faces?

On the contrary. I am more and more interested in faces. You say in *LANCELOT* you don't see his face?

So often the mask is over it.

The way it was photographed, perhaps. Maybe the difference between black and white and color.

I also have a sense that in past films you did actions in three's. In *LANCELOT*, everything was done in five's.

I don't understand what you mean.

You usually did things five times. If it was the jousting combat, you would see the lance five times. Or the horses' feet: in past films you would see a shot of the feet three times, in *LANCELOT*, five times.

It was unconscious. I needed it five times. I don't know why. Perhaps it was a hidden reason. I did not show it five times instead of three on purpose.

Do you love iconography?

I like to start with a flat expression, as flat as possible, so that the expression comes when all the shots are put together. The more flat it is when I am shooting, the more expressive it is edited.

CONCLUSION

When you come back from Cannes, are you going to pass by Paris?

No, unfortunately I have to get back. This is a strange trip for me because I was too busy, actually, to make it.

But you are pleased with your film, *TAXI DRIVER*?

Extremely.

Are you going to have the big prize at Cannes?

I think so.

You are pleased with it?

Yes. Although it is not directed the way I would direct it. I wrote an austere film and it was directed in an expressionistic way. I think that the two qualities work together. There is a tension in the film that is very interesting.

Why didn't you shoot it yourself?

I hope to direct shortly. I am still very young and it takes a while. In *TAXI DRIVER*, I had great faith in the director and the actor, who are friends. I believed in what they would do.

So I will and see it and write to you. ❀