

(The online version of this handout contains color images and hot URLs)

Cannes Film Festival 1983

Won Best Director (Robert Bresson tied with Andrei Tarkovsky for *Nostalgie*)
Nominated Palme d'Or Robert Bresson

DIRECTOR Robert Bresson

WRITTEN BY Robert Bresson (writer), Leo Tolstoy (novelette, "Faux Billet")

PRODUCED BY Antoine Gannagé, Jean-Marc Henchoz, Daniel Toscan du Plantier

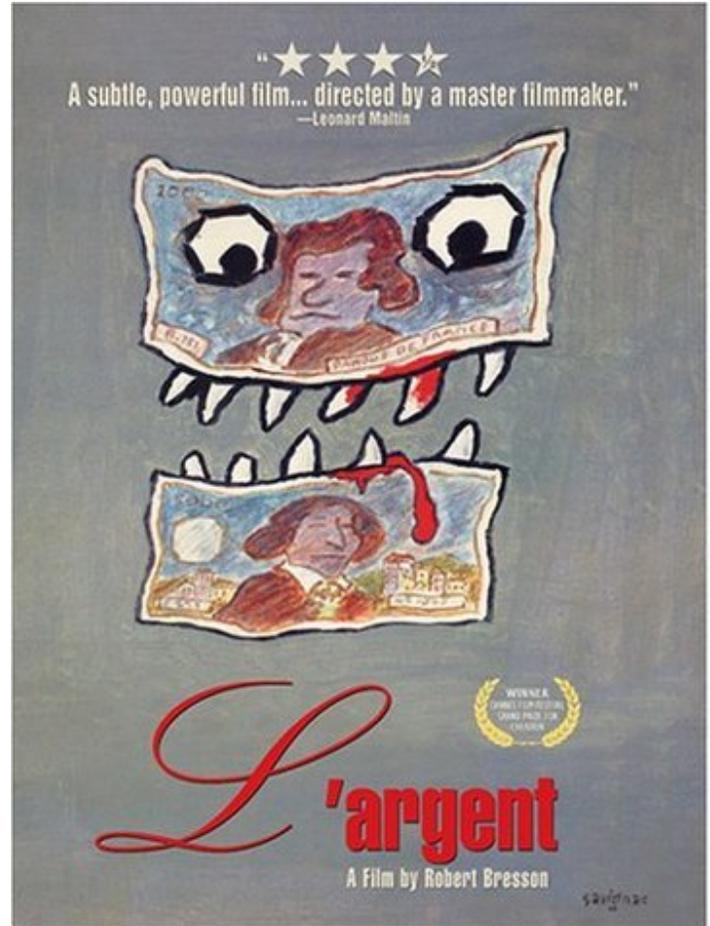
CINEMATOGRAPHY Pasqualino De Santis, Emmanuel Machuel

FILM EDITING Jean-François Naudon

CAST

Christian Patey... Yvon Targe
Vincent Risterucci... Lucien
Caroline Lang... Elise
Sylvie Van den Elsen... Grey-Haired Woman
Michel Briguët... Grey-Haired Woman's Father
Béatrice Tabourin... La photographe
Didier Baussy... Le photographe
Marc Ernest Fourneau ... Norbert
Bruno Lapeyre... Martial

ROBERT BRESSON (b. September 25, 1901 in Bromont-Lamothe, Puy-de-Dôme, France—d. December 18, 1999, age 98, in Paris, France) made only 13 films between 1943 and 1983, but that was enough to secure his position in the pantheon of legendary filmmakers. With a style that was inevitably described as austere, time and again Bresson accomplished on film that most difficult of tasks: evoking the feeling in the viewer that an individual on the screen is in fact undergoing a profound, transcendent spiritual experience. In school, Bresson studied Greek, Latin and philosophy and appears to have had a comfortable early life, of which—characteristically—little is known. Trained as a painter before moving into films as a screenwriter, Bresson made a short film (atypically a comedy), *Public Affairs* (1934) before becoming a German POW during



World War II. He made his full length debut with *Angels of Sin* (1943). His next film, *Les dames du Bois de Boulogne* (1945) would be the last time he would work with professional actors. From *Journal d'un cure de campagne* (1951) onwards, he created a unique minimalist style in which all but the barest essentials are omitted from the film (often, crucial details are only given in the soundtrack), with the actors (he calls them "models") giving deliberately flat, expressionless performances. The reclusive Bresson never travelled outside France, even when he was awarded the Best Director prize at Cannes in 1981 for tonight's film. Refusing to attend the ceremony, it was left to his admirer and co-recipient, Tarkovsky, to accept on his behalf. From the *Guardian*: "He was a proud man, but also the most singular of all directors, an indisputable cinematic genius whose comparatively modest output of one book, *Notes On The Cinematographer*, one comic short, *Les Affaires Publiques* (1934) and 13 features made between 1943 and 1981 carry a weight and influence belied by the mere 20 hours of screen time. He demanded 'not beautiful images, but necessary images.' The resulting body of work is rigorous, demanding and concentrated. He was the least bombastic of directors and the one for whom the word auteur is most apt." Bresson's austerity is most noticeable after the third film, *Journal D'un Curé De Campagne* (1950), when he finally rejected collaborators on his screenplays and eschewed the use of background music and used only one lens. In *Bresson on Bresson: Interviews, 1943-1983* the director stated: "Yes, I call my non-actors 'models,' like a painter or sculptor calls those who

pose for him his “models.” But I eliminate the pose—because I don’t want them to pose. I want them to be intact, virgin. What I want from them is the unknown. What’s interesting is that when I am judged, I’m judged against the same criteria as an ordinary director. I’m not a director. I don’t direct scenes. I am a filmmaker, if you like, but I don’t direct actors; I direct myself, and my contact with my models is a telepathic one.” In all but *Lancelot Du Lac* (1974) he relied on sparingly used classical music, normally integrated into the action and complex sounds. He is also credited as a photographer, and two works were exhibited at the Barbican in London in the late 1980s. He was also an accomplished pianist, playing until he “lost the nimbleness” in his fingers. Music remained a dominant interest in his life and he believed that aspiring film-makers should study music, painting and poetry—and not attend film school. Though Bresson once stated that tonight’s film “gave him the most pleasure” out of all his films, the French resented the implicit criticism in *L'Argent*. This final masterpiece proved to be his last film, although all the works continued—and continue—to be revived and reissued.

PASQUALINO DE SANTIS (b. April 24, 1927 in Fondi, Lazio, Italy—d. June 23, 1996, age 69, in Ukraine) is best known for his work on *Romeo and Juliet* (1968), *Conversation Piece* (1974) and *Three Brothers* (1981). The much younger brother of the noted director Giuseppe de Santis, Pasqualino gained a job as assistant camera operator on one of his brother’s productions after graduating from film school in Rome in 1948. This was the start of a long association with the cinematographer Piero Portalupi, a man with formidable practical skills who taught him that every problem had a technical solution. After World War II, de Santis became active in the Italian neo-realist cinema as assistant to Gianni di Venanzo, from whom he learned how to overcome difficulties by taking risks and experimenting. He shot part of Francesco Rosi’s bullfighting picture *Il Momento della verità* (1965) after Di Venanzo left due to illness and died shortly after. Continuously wearing a light filter around his neck that had belonged to Di Venanzo, De Santis then became Rosi’s regular cinematographer. He provided the serene images of the fairytale *C’era una volta* (1967), then adopted magnesium lighting for the First World War trenches of *Uomini contro* (1970), handling camera and harsh visuals for the rapidly paced corruption drama *Il Caso Mattei* (1972), and gangster biopic *Lucky Luciano* (1973). “He chooses the right light for the right place,” said Rosi. De Santis is known for his shots of interiors and for his ability to create moods by molding light and shadow to create a particular atmosphere. For *Romeo and Juliet* he used a lot of hand-held camera, blending locations with a backlot reconstruction of Verona’s piazza in the 15th century. The result won him the year’s Academy Award for Cinematography. Less active in the 1980s, at the end of the decade de Santis rejoined Rosi for another social drama film, *Cronaca di una morte Annunciata* (1987) as well as Rosi’s *The Palermo Connection* (1990) starring Jim Belushi.

EMMANUEL MACHUEL (b. June 12, 1934 in Neuilly, France) most notable films are *Ossos* (1997), *Van Gogh* (1991) and *The Young Girls of Rochefort* (1967). His understated, accurate imagery devoid of all hustle and glamor also underlined the staging style of other intellectual directors (such as Bresson) who favored a subtle, subtle staging style—most notably

Portuguese director veteran Manoel de Oliveira, for whom Machuel worked multiple times. In Marceline Loridan’s cautious, silent portrait of a former concentration camp inmate, *The Birch-Tree Meadow* (2003), Machuel shot on the Auschwitz camp grounds, the first time a crew has been granted permission to film on the Holocaust site. In 1992, Machuel received the César for his cinematography work on *Van Gogh* (1991). He also received the Camera Award at the Venice Film Festival for his work on Pedro Costa’s film *Ossos* in 1997.

CHRISTIAN PATEY is an actor with only three credits: *L'Argent* (1983), *August* (1988) and *Adieu Bonaparte* (1985).

VINCENT RISTERUCCI also has only three film credits: *L'Argent* (1983), *The Ultimate Accessory* (2013) and *Après L'Argent* (2014).

CAROLINE LANG starred in six full length features, twice as many credits as her fellow actors in tonight’s film. Her films are *Chronicle of a Death Foretold* (1987), *History* (1986, TV Movie), *A Man and a Woman: 20 Years Later* (1986), *Follow My Gaze* (1986), *Diesel* (1985) and *L'Argent* (1983).



Robert Bresson Alan Pavelin July 2002 Great Directors Issue 21

- b. September 25, 1901, Bromont-Lamothe, France.
 [Author’s note: Some sources list 1907 as the year of birth (one as 1909), but my research suggests that 1901 is correct.]
 d. December 18, 1999, Paris, France.

Robert Bresson’s 13 features over 40 years constitute arguably the most original and brilliant body of work over a long career from a film director in the history of cinema. He is the most idiosyncratic and uncompromising of all major filmmakers, in the sense that he always tried to create precisely what he wanted without surrendering to considerations of commerce, audience popularity, or people’s preconceptions of what cinema should be. And although it might be argued that his venture into colour from *Une Femme douce* (1969) onwards was probably against his better judgement, he shows mastery in its use.

Born in central France and educated in Paris, Bresson’s early ambition was to be a painter. He ventured into filmmaking with the short *Les Affaires publiques* (1934), a satire with nods to Clair and Vigo, which was rediscovered in the 1980s after being thought lost. After a year or so as a prisoner-of-war he was approached by a Paris priest with a proposal for a film about the

Bethany order of nuns, which became *Les Anges du péché* (1943). His next feature was also made during the Occupation, and filmmaking had by then definitely supplanted painting. The confusion over his date of birth, symbolic perhaps of his reclusive nature, caused reviewers of his final film *L'Argent* (1983) to marvel over how a man “in his late 70s” or alternatively “in his 80s” could show such youthful exuberance in his filmmaking.

Three formative influences in Bresson’s life undoubtedly mark his films: his Catholicism, which took the form of the predestinarian French strain known as Jansenism; his early years as a painter; and his experiences as a prisoner-of-war. These influences manifest themselves respectively in the recurrent themes of free-will versus determinism, in the extreme and austere precision with which he composes a shot, and in the frequent use of the prison motif (two films are located almost entirely inside prisons).

Three of his works take place in a wholly Catholic context: *Les Anges du péché*, a metaphysical thriller set in a convent, *Journal d'un curé de campagne* (1950), a rare example of a great novel (by Georges Bernanos) being turned into an even greater film, and *Le Procès de Jeanne d'Arc* (1962), inevitably overshadowed by Carl Theodor Dreyer’s 1928 classic *La Passion de Jeanne d'Arc*. The Jansenism manifests itself in the way leading characters are acted upon and simply surrendering themselves to their fate. In *Au Hasard Balthazar* (1966), for example, both the donkey Balthazar and his on-off owner Marie (Anne Wiazemsky) passively accept the ill-treatment they both experience, as opposed to the evil Gérard (François Lafarge) who initiates much of what causes others to suffer. Bresson seemed to become increasingly pessimistic about human nature: his penultimate two films suggest that he had more concern for animals and the environment than for people, while the characters in his astonishing swansong *L'Argent* are simply the victims of a chain of circumstance; money is the root of all evil.

One effect of the Jansenist influence is Bresson’s total mistrust of psychological motives for a character’s actions. The conventional narrative film, indeed the conventional story of any kind, insists that people have to have reasons for what they do. A motiveless murder in a detective story would be unacceptable. In Bresson, however, people act for no obvious reason, behave “out of character”, and in general simply follow the destiny which has been mapped out for them. Often a character will state an intention, and in the very next scene will do the opposite.

Characters who appear to be out-and-out rogues will unaccountably do something good, an example being the sacked camera-shop assistant in *L'Argent* who gives his ill-gotten gains to charity. At the same time it should be stressed that Bresson did not predetermine how his films would finally emerge; it was a process of discovery for him to see what would be revealed by his non-professional actors (“models” he designated them) after he trained them for their part.

Bresson’s second influence, his early experience as a painter, is manifested in the austerity of his compositions. A painter has to decide what to put in; a filmmaker what to leave out. With Bresson nothing unnecessary is shown; indeed he goes further, and often leaves the viewer to infer what is happening outside the frame. Thus we often see shots of hands, feet, doorhandles, and other parts of objects where any other filmmaker would show the whole. A Bresson film requires unbroken concentration on the viewer’s part, and I have occasionally felt literally breathless after watching one because of the concentration required. So rich in detail and events is *Balthazar*, for example, that it is easy on a first viewing simply to overlook sub-plots such as the child’s death and the long-running legal wrangle over land. It is for this reason that many of Bresson’s films are exceptionally fast-moving in their narrative (one exception is the almost contemplative *Quatre nuits d'un rêveur* [1971], where little actually happens; interestingly the central character is a painter). If *L'Argent* were remade as a Hollywood thriller it would have at least double the running-time and would dwell at length on the brutal violence in the last section which is merely elliptically hinted at by Bresson. The running-time of his films averages under 90 minutes, yet the viewer can be surprised at the amount that happens in that time.



Un Condamné à mort s'est échappé (1956) and *Procès* are the two prison-films, and Bresson often uses prison as a metaphor for spiritual imprisonment or, indeed, release. A classic case of the latter is *Pickpocket* (1959), where Michel (Martin LaSalle) finds redemption from his criminal career only by intentionally being caught, and in the famous final scene by telling Jeanne (Marika Green) from his prison cell “what a strange road I had to take to find you”.

A key ingredient of Bresson’s methods is his view of actors, his “models”. From *Journal* on he used solely non-professionals, and was even reported to be upset when two of his actors (Anne Wiazemsky from *Balthazar* and Dominique Sanda from *Une Femme douce*) went on to professional acting careers. Only one actor ever appeared in two of his films. (Jean-Claude Guibert in *Balthazar* and *Mouchette* [1967].) Actors were chosen not for their ability but for their appearance, often for an intense facial asceticism like the Curé (Claude Laydu) or the Pickpocket. He trained them to remove all traces of theatricality and to speak with a fast monotonic delivery. Indeed he rejected the word “cinema”, which he regarded as merely filmed theatre, and instead used the word “cinematography” (not to be confused with the art of camerawork). All movements of actors are strictly controlled by the director; when they walk they have to take a precise number of steps; and eye movements become extremely important – the lowering of the eyes towards the ground is almost a Bresson trademark. The result of this approach is that the viewer becomes involved not with a character’s appearance but almost with the core of his being, his soul. Bresson’s first two features use professionals, even “stars”, and though they are both

excellent films which anticipate the director's later themes, they would probably have been even more satisfying if "models" had been used.

Along with Bresson's painterly eye for what should and should not be shown, he makes exquisite use of sound. Off-screen sound is of key importance: the raking of leaves during the intense confrontation between the priest and the countess in *Journal*, the scraping of the guard's keys along the metal railings and the far-off sound of trains in *Un Condamné*, the whinneying of horses in *Lancelot du Lac* (1974), all serve to heighten the sense that a time of crisis has arrived for the central characters. Music is used increasingly sparingly as his career progresses; a specially composed score is used in the early films, but in *Un Condamné* there are occasional snatches of Mozart, in *Pickpocket* Lully, in *Balthazar* Schubert, and in late Bresson non-diegetic music is dispensed with altogether.



A plot-summary of most of Bresson's films would render them extremely off-putting for a lover of "feelgood movies". In most, the central character either dies (sometimes by suicide) or ends up in prison. Indeed the film with the only unashamedly "happy ending", *Un Condamné*, was his biggest commercial success. (There is a "happy ending" of sorts to *Les Dames du Bois de Boulogne* [1945], but the general tone of the plot would be regarded by many as decidedly gloomy.) Many of Bresson's films are not, however, meant to be in the realist mode. For example, *Balthazar* is basically a fable, while *Lancelot du Lac* is a highly stylised portrayal of a mediaeval legend.

All Bresson's features after the first have literary antecedents of one form or another, albeit updated. Two are from Dostoevsky (*Une Femme douce* and *Quatre nuits*), two from Bernanos (*Journal* and *Mouchette*), one from Tolstoy (*L'Argent*), one from Diderot (*Les Dames*), while *Un Condamné* and *Le Procès* are based on the written accounts of the true events. In addition *Pickpocket* is clearly influenced by Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment* and *Balthazar* has a similar premise to the same author's *The Idiot*. *Lancelot du Lac* is derived from Malory's Arthurian legends, while *Le Diable probablement* (1977) was inspired by a newspaper report, as is stated at the start of the film. A long-standing unrealised project was a film of the Book of Genesis (*Genèse*), but Bresson reportedly said that, unlike the human "models", he was unable to train the animals to do as they were told!

There is no critical consensus on which of Bresson's films is the greatest. *Sight and Sound*'s prestigious critics' poll placed *Mouchette* in the top 20 in 1972, but in 1992, from more than 200 critics polling for their 10 favourite films, it did not receive a single vote. In that year the leading Bresson film was *Pickpocket* with 6 votes, which would have just placed it in the best 40 of all films, followed by *Balthazar* with 4 votes and *L'Argent* with 3. At the time of writing the ongoing [Top Tens](#) section of *Senses of Cinema* places Bresson an astonishing fourth

in the directors' list, beaten only by Hitchcock, Godard, and Welles; none of his films makes the top ten, but *Balthazar* is not far off. The great French critic André Bazin, who did not live to see most of Bresson's films, championed *Journal*, in an essay hailed by his English translator as "the most perfectly wrought piece of film criticism" he had ever read. Like the novel this film is essentially a flashback, where we see not a series of events but *reflections* on those events, whether by the elderly priest who is

sent the diary or by the curé himself being for the viewer to decide. *Un Condamné* and *Pickpocket* are somewhat similar, in that they both rely on voiceover while, for the latter, an account is being written by Michel; again we are seeing either the actual events or Michel's later reflections on them.

Other critics regard *Un Condamné* as the peak of Bresson's art. With its alternate title, "The Wind bloweth where it will", the director expresses the

view that "God helps those who help themselves", and the film makes clear that it is through the workings of fate, of extraordinary strokes of luck, allied to his own efforts, that the hero is able to effect his escape. My own preference, marginally, is for the two great mid-period rural dramas *Balthazar* and *Mouchette*, a recent re-issue of which revealed its stunning photography. For a very different view of Bresson, I once heard a well-known academic in the field of French cinema opine that his films are "more interesting to read about than to see".

With his unique and wholly idiosyncratic methods and style, and general contempt for "cinema" as defined by himself, Robert Bresson was little influenced by other filmmakers. The critic and director Paul Schrader links him, not wholly convincingly, with Dreyer and Ozu, while Schrader's own films owe a thematic debt to him (the final shot of *American Gigolo* [1980] is a direct quote from that of *Pickpocket*). Films like Alain Cavalier's *Thérèse* (1986), Maurice Pialat's *Sous le soleil de Satan* (1987), and the Dardennes Brothers' *Rosetta* (1999) have been liberally described as "Bressonian".

A critic once wrote that Mizoguchi's *Sansho Dayu* (1954) "is one of those films for whose sake the cinema exists". For many of us, the same can be said of the work of Robert Bresson.

Web Resources

Compiled by Michelle Carey

[All Is Grace: The Films of Robert Bresson](#)

Tribute by Gary Morris as part of the *Bright Lights Film Journal* site.

[Notes on Cinematograph \(excerpts\)](#)

Excerpts from Bresson's definitive book are used here to eloquently illustrate his approach to editing.

[Robert Bresson: Depth Behind Simplicity](#)

Excellent article by Sarah Jane Gorlitz exploring the uniqueness of Bresson's cinema and arguing against the "minimalist" tag so often applied to his style.

[Bressonians on Bresson](#)

David Sterritt's review of James Quandt's book, on the Film-Philosophy website.

[Robert Bresson's Notes on Sound](#)

Some insight into Bresson's perspective on sound.

[Robert Bresson](#)

Strictly Film School's page with pieces on *Diary of a Country Priest*, *A Man Escaped*, *Pickpocket*, *Au Hasard Balthazar*, *Mouchette*, *Une Femme Douce* and *L'Argent*.

[Robert Bresson in Memoriam](#)

Lovely, appreciative page in Finnish.

[Célébrations Nationales: Naissance de Robert Bresson](#)

As the title suggests, this French page celebrates the centenary of Bresson's birth.

[Encountering Directors](#)

Charles Thomas Samuels interviews Bresson in the early 1970s.

[Fragments of Reality: The Cinema of Robert Bresson \(1901-1999\)](#)

Obituary by Rustin Thompson for *Movie Maker* magazine.

[Remembering a Master of Precise Gestures and Cinematic Emotion](#)

Obituary by Amy Taubin for *Village Voice*.

[Pressons-nous à Bresson](#)

Obituary (in French) by Philippe Azoury.

[Robert Bresson en Douce](#)

Obituary (in French) by Mathieu Lindon for *Libération*.

[The Dismaying Grace of Robert Bresson](#)

Essay to accompany the 1999 retrospective at the Harvard Film Archive and the Museum of Fine Arts.

[Robert Bresson Retrospective](#)

Another piece to accompany the retrospective, this time by Adriane Giebel.

[El cine Robert Bresson, una escritura de pies a cabeza](#)

Great article (in Spanish) by Bárbara Gallotta.

[The Journey Within: Robert Bresson](#)

Information on the retrospective in Portland, Oregon.

[French Filmmaker Robert Bresson \(1901-1999\)](#)

David Walsh's overview as part of the World Socialist Web Site.

[Robert Bresson, de Santos Zunzunegui](#)

Spanish-language article by Mauricio Alonso.

[Matchless Realism – A Man Escaped](#)

Review by Robert Stewart.

[A Man Escaped](#)

Francois Truffaut's 1956 review of the film, ending with the curious line, "...To think that Bresson will be an influence on French and foreign contemporary filmmakers seems highly unlikely."

[Pickpocket](#)

Review by Roger Ebert.

[The Means of Obsession – A Gentle Woman](#)

Review by Scott Tobias.

[L'Argent](#)

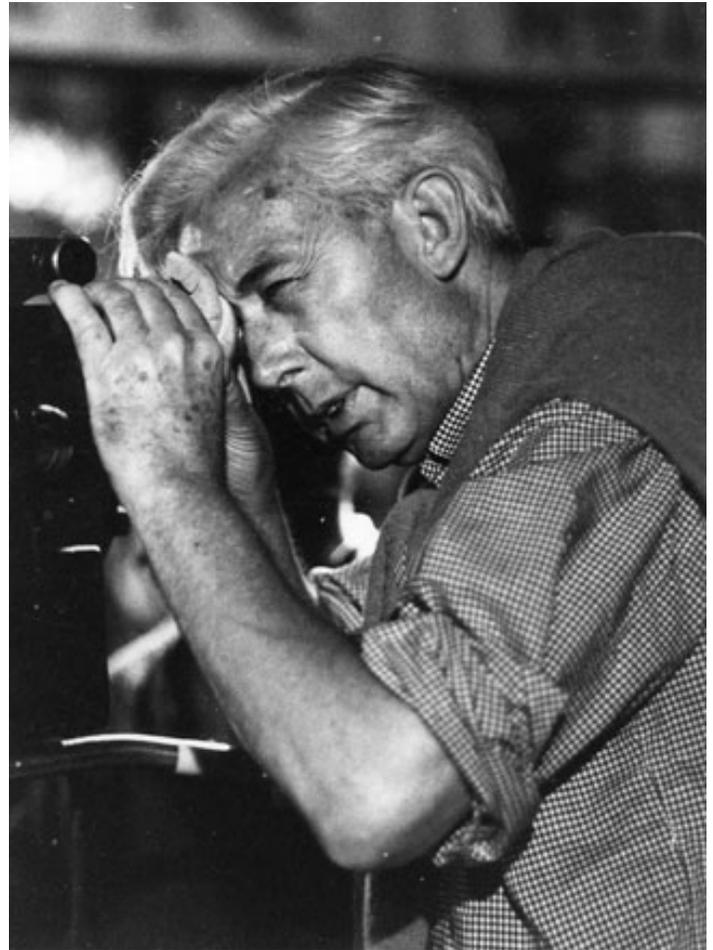
Review by Gregory Avery.

[L'Argent](#)

Sound analysis (in Dutch) by Ramin Farahani.

[Robert Bresson – Without a Trace](#)

Short review of this documentary.



Bresson on Bresson. Interviews 1943-1983. Robert Bresson. Edited by Mylène Bresson. New York Review of Books, NY 2016: "The Cinema is Immense. We Haven't Done a Thing." Interview by Serge Daney and Serge Toubiana Cahiers du Cinéma June-July 1983

CAHIERS DU CINÉMA My dear Robert Bresson, your film *L'Argent* will be shown at Cannes and this is an occasion for us. We would like to ask about the point of departure for the film—that is the adaptation of a short story by Tolstoy.

ROBERT BRESSON There are some very lovely short stories by Tolstoy. One of them, "The Forged Coupon," gave me more than a point of departure: the idea of a vertiginous propagation of Evil and a final surge of Good.

CC: How did you manage the transition between the story, which I assume dates to the beginning of the century, and modern-day Paris?

RB I immediately imagined the film in Paris. I made people speak the way they speak now, and live the way Parisians live, in the streets and inside their homes.

CC This isn't the first time you've taken inspiration from nineteenth or early twentieth-century Russian literature. Is there something that particularly interests you about Dostoevsky and Tolstoy?

RB The truth in Dostoevsky and the truth in Tolstoy.

CC This film, *L'Argent*—how long have you wanted to make it?

RB About three or four years ago I presented the project to the Commission of Advances or Receipts, and they denied me even the small amount I requested. At the same time I was looking for financing in the U.S. for a film I hold dear to my heart: *Genesis*, or really the opening of *Genesis*, from the Creation to the Tower of Babel. I will soon begin work on it.

CC Did you have an order in mind for the two projects? Did you want to make one before the other?

RB I've had the idea for *Genesis* for a long time. I was going to make the film with De Laurentis. I had spent seven or eight months in Rome to work on the script and begin my preparations. Things went bad between De Laurentis and me, and I returned to Paris.

CC What strikes me is that your film is only an hour and a half, which is a bit short for today compared to other major auteurs of global cinema. How did you determine the duration?

RB I wasn't counting. The film could have been ten minutes longer or shorter. I think there's a moment when the audience's attention will flag if we sk too much of it. There's an optimum length for a film, the way there's one for a poem, according to Edgar Allen Poe.

CC But it's as if you wanted to say something quickly, as if the message of the film was urgent and you took only the time you needed to convey it.

RB I used to be able to separate myself from the preoccupations of our times, but I can't any longer. I'm afraid this film, *L'Argent*, might be too tough. In reality, when you shoot for long enough, and you strive to give the best of yourself, you can't really have an opinion on what you've made. You're a worker, doing his best.

CC The story of the film is quite violent, but it's hard to say whether this is a pessimistic or optimistic film, because it inspires a kind of...

RB The word "pessimist" bothers me because it is often used in place of "lucidity." Cocteau spoke of cheerful pessimists. Perhaps that's what I am.



CC There is more than cheerfulness in your film, there is great virtuosity, a pleasure-taking in the cinema—playing, having fun—that reminded me a bit of *Pickpocket*.

RB For this film I worked in a way that was on the one hand more desperate, but on the other more detached, more impulsive and free. I like that you found it virtuosic.

Naturally, my non-actors, who have no experience when it comes to dramatic art, don't speak any more than necessary—and the human voice, the most beautiful of sounds, takes its natural place in the world of sound, which is analogous to the world of images. In my next film, the sound track will have more importance, I hope, than it does in this one. Or, at least, I'll give it more of my attention and sensitivity. I have both said and written—not so long ago—that sounds in film must become music. Today, I believe that the entire film must be music: a music, the music of daily life. I surprised myself with *L'Argent*—when I saw it projected during the edit, I perceived only the sounds. I did not perceive the images passing before my eyes.

CC It's quite rare, in cinema, for money to be filmed. You had already done it in *Pickpocket*. This time it's even more surprising. You call your film *L'Argent*. The title itself is very violent. Was that intentional?

RB Yes, but I'm sorry I wasn't able to be more extreme.

CC In your film, money is the thing that frees the characters' passions. Do you think we're willing to do anything, even murder, for money?

RB The news tells us so every day.

CC The idea of a forged banknote...

RB ...is the idea of a simple little forged banknote provoking an avalanche of Evil. Good prevails, in Tolstoy's story, much sooner than it does in my film. There's a whole religious section—evangelical—that takes up almost two-thirds of Tolstoy's story. In mine, the idea of redemption barely surfaces, and only at the very end.

CC But still, in the prison, a fellow-inmate says, "O money, visible god!" What does this phrase mean?

RB This money-god incites murder.

CC Does it bother you that people say *L'Argent* is an action film?

RB No. A film is continuous movement. It's the internal action that is the real Thread. It's possible that certain rhythms,

certain cadences, make this film seem more like an action film. That doesn't bother me; to the contrary.

CC We were wondering, considering how long it normally takes to edit a film...

RB Yes, unfortunately—alas!—I did have to rush because of Cannes

CC But how can you preserve your physical, impulsive engagement?

RB Camera angles and sounds are only preparations. It's in the editing room that things attach to one another. The image track and the sound track move forward in tandem like sisters: slowly, then more quickly, until finally, they are able to clasp hands.

CC Do you feel you're still discovering unknown zones, unexplored contents, in your work?

RB Yes, as long as I can put myself in a particular state: to just work, to not think about anything, to forget everything I've learned.

CC According to what your collaborators have told us, when you arrive on set you have nothing prepared. Is every shot a genesis for you?

RB It's true. I make a point of forgetting, the night before a shoot, what I'm going to do in the morning so that I'll have a very strong feeling of spontaneity. If work means discovery, nothing would ever come from preparing everything in advance. I believe in this instantaneity. There was a thing that shocked me, from my first steps in this terrible business: it was the habit of preparing every detail for a film, just like in the theater: actors studying their roles, etc. The way I film now, without actors, is a direct result of the first second of shooting my first feature film. It was as if the actresses (the film had only women in it) all of a sudden—perhaps because of their theatrical way of speaking, or their pointless gestures—were no longer people, and there was nothing left of what I had imagined.

CC Talk to us about your vision.

RB What we put in our eyes and our ears comes out through these two machines that are supposed to make perfect reproductions, but that don't reproduce anything. The camera only gives you a superficial and misleading image of things and beings. The audio recorder, on the other hand, renders the actual material of sounds, including the voices of humans and of animals. If the first of these machines, which can't give us the real, can manage to borrow a bit from the second (which evokes too much of it), our personal vision on the screen can be the

result—a vision that accords to our own sensibility, to multiple correspondences, equivalencies, transpositions of the audible

world to the visual one, and—above all—the visible world to the audible one, which is the more profound and varied of the two.

CC Your non-actors, your models: you choose them because when you look at them they seem to be interesting people?

RB I always do a screen test, for each one, just for a few minutes.

CC And you want to discover who they are.

RB I don't know them. Yes, I get curious. I used to say that I chose them for a moral resemblance. Today, as long as their physical appearance and their voice seem like they can make what I have imagined possible, my decision is easy.

CC You haven't shot a film in several years. Do you think the cinema has changed?

RB It has to evolve. It's treading water.

CC And yet, everyone is making movies.

RB The cinema is brilliant. But the audiences can't keep going to the cinema to see another actor "succeed," or listen to him modulate his voice. Someone said to me "We've done everything there is to do with cinema." The cinema is immense. We haven't done a thing.

Brian Baxter: "Robert Bresson" (*The Guardian*)

The image most associated with the French film director Robert Bresson, who has died aged 98, was that of an austere, pessimistic critic, a Jansenist at odds with the modern world. Living on the top floors of an elegant 17th-century building on the Ile St Louis in Paris, he was accused of an ivory tower existence outside the mainstream of cinema, refusing the slightest compromise.

He declined to travel outside France, despised the publicity machine and, when awarded an ex-aequo prize at Cannes in 1981, refused to attend—leaving his admirer and co-recipient, Tarkovsky, to accept on his behalf. This was for L'Argent (1981), a masterpiece for which many French people never forgave him—critical, as it was, of their obsession with a second god, money.

All of the above is part of the truth. But Bresson was grave not dour. He was unwilling to compromise only because he was secure in the belief—or knowledge—that his interior view of cinema had no application if modified.



He was a proud man, but also the most singular of all directors, an indisputable cinematic genius whose comparatively modest output of one book, *Notes On The Cinematographer*, one comic short, *Les Affaires Publiques* (1934) and 13 features made between 1943 and 1981 carry a weight and influence belied by the mere 20 hours of screen time. He demanded "not beautiful images, but necessary images". The resulting body of work is rigorous, demanding and concentrated. He was the least bombastic of directors and the one for whom the word auteur is most apt.

His films, from *Les Anges Du Péché* (1943) onwards, are instantly recognisable and constitute a pyramidal volume of work that is unique and unsurpassed. His refusal to compromise meant that projects and scripts remained unfilmed, and that producers and backers were difficult to find or hold on to. He never worked outside the cinema, and never taught or wrote for other people. Paradoxically, as purely a "cinematographer"—his word—he puts to shame the conventional aspects of movie-making.

The austerity is most noticeable after the third film, *Journal D'un Curé De Campagne* (1950), when he finally rejected collaborators on his screenplays, never again used professional actors, eschewed the use of background music and used only one lens. In all but *Lancelot Du Lac* (1974) he relied on sparingly used classical music, normally integrated into the action and complex sounds.

Bresson was born in Bromont-Lamothe. He studied Greek, Latin and philosophy and appears to have had a comfortable early life, of which—characteristically—little is known. After his first wife's death, he remarried.

He aspired to be a painter, but said that this made him "too agitated". He is credited as a photographer, and two works were exhibited at the Barbican, in London, in the late 1980s. He was also an accomplished pianist, playing until he "lost the nimbleness" in his fingers. Music remained a dominant interest in his life and he believed that aspiring film-makers should study music, painting and poetry—and not attend film school.

During the 1930s Bresson moved towards cinema and aimed at "seeing everything", with Charlie Chaplin a special favourite. He contributed to a screenplay, *C'était Un Musicien* (1933) and had contact with the director René Clair. He made a surreal comedy, *Les Affaires Publiques*, with backing from the art historian Roland Penrose. This oddity, starring a droll clown Bébé, was long suppressed, but he allowed two screenings during a season of his work at the National Film Theatre in London. Even then, he insisted that I introduce the programme and explain that—like his first two features—it was only there to "complete the retrospective".

Only after he had served 18 months as a prisoner-of-war did Bresson's cinematic career really begin, with *Les Anges Du Péché*, set in a Dominican convent. It had some dialogue by Jean Giraudoux and a melodramatic story concerning two women, one the saintly Anne-Marie, the other a murderess, Thérèse. It was an

extraordinary debut, unsensational, economical and serene. Although only a modest success, Bresson moved quickly to a second project—with dialogue by Jean Cocteau.

This adaptation of a section from Diderot's *Jacques Le Fataliste* became *Les Dames Du Bois De Boulogne*, again with music by Jean-Jacques Grunenwald and using established actors. The story concerned a woman's intended revenge on the lover who had rejected her. Told simply it sounds like a Sirkian melodrama, but the film had a cool elegance and the timeless quality that marked most of the later work.



Bresson waited several years before realising the project that established him as the foremost French director of the next three decades. Based on a

novel by Bernanos, *Journal D'un Curé De Campagne* (1950) was awarded the Venice Film Festival Golden Lion and became a commercial success. This was his last use of Grunenwald and any professional actors. Subsequently, he cast by face, gesture and even by voice over the telephone.

In 1956 Bresson made the film that became—and remained—his greatest popular success, *Un Condamné à Mort S'est Echappé* (*A Man Escapes*). This masterpiece concerns the true story of the escape by a French prisoner-of-war from a Nazi stronghold. The achievement becomes, in Bresson's hand, a miraculous journey and the most jubilant testimony to faith in all cinema. The blend of documentary realism and the director's insistence that the story has "no embellishments" is a wonderful contrast to its interior passion and complexity.

Although life for Bresson never became easy, this success led to six features in the following 15 years—*Pickpocket* (1959), *Le Procès De Jeanne d'Arc* (1961), *Au Hasard, Balthazar* (1966), *Mouchette* (1969) and his first films in colour, *Une Femme Douce* (1969) and *Quatre Nuits D'un Reveur* (1971), the last two taken from Dostoevsky.

Bresson's first use of Dostoevsky was more obliquely in *Pickpocket*, where the inspiration is *Crime And Punishment*. The film of Joan's trial is based on the actual transcripts of the period. His masterpiece *Balthazar*, ostensibly about a donkey, is rare for its circular movement, rather than his usual linear approach. *Mouchette*, another country-set story—Bresson moved confidently between rural and urban settings—also derives from a Bernanos novel. It is a severe, majestic work with a final suicide that results from an unsentimentalised accumulation of suffering and despair.

In 1974, Bresson completed a long cherished project. Once planned as an English-based film, *Lancelot Du Lac* was reissued in 1994 and still looked years ahead of its time, with its timeless quality and its concern with spirituality and earthliness. He followed this classical work with his most controversial one, *Le Diable, Probablement* (1977), inspired by a newspaper report of a student who committed suicide by proxy—paying another boy to shoot him. Bresson parallels the suicide with a materialist rush to oblivion that he foresaw in the modern world.

The French resented the implicit criticism—as they did in *L'Argent*, the film which Bresson once said gave him the "most pleasure". This final masterpiece proved to be his last film, although all the works continued—and continue—to be revived and reissued. In 1986 his logbook of discoveries was published, and remains for me the best book on cinema ever written.

Bresson's reputation has never faltered, and Jean-Luc Godard's comparisons with Dostoevsky and Mozart have been echoed a thousand times. He was a man of unflinching courtesy, happily receiving guests at his Paris apartment (but never at his retreat at Epernon) and sending handwritten notes in reply to any question



or concern. David Thomson wrote that Bresson's films "surpass beauty, in both intention and effect, and stress necessity". His fine essay echoes Bresson's own words, asking for "nothing too much, nothing deficient". His genius was in combining that lack of surface bombast with an interior complexity of unsurpassed richness.

In recent years Bresson's reputation has continued to grow, thanks to the reissue of several films, the adulation of fellow film-makers

and the publication of innumerable articles and books. Earlier this year, the Cinématique Ontario initiated a complete retrospective using new prints, which was repeated at the Edinburgh Film Festival and London's National Film Theatre to capacity audiences.

ONLY THREE MORE IN THE SPRING 2018 BUFFALO FILM SEMINARS XXXVI

April 24 David Lynch, *Mulholland Drive* 2001

May 1 Martin McDonagh, *Three Billboards Outside Ebbing, Missouri* 2017

May 8 Jacques Demy, *The Young Girls of Rochefort* 1967

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