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ROBERT BRESSON: *Au hasard Balthazar* 1966. 95 min.

Directed by Robert Bresson

Written by Robert Bresson

Produced by Mag Bodard

Original Music by Jean Wiener

Non-Original Music by Franz Schubert (from "Piano Sonata No.20")

Cinematography by Ghislain Cloquet

Film Editing by Raymond Lamy

Animal trainer: Guy Renault

Anne Wiazemsky....Marie

François Lafarge....Gérard

Philippe Asselin....Marie's father

Nathalie Joyaut....Marie's mother

Walter Green....Jacques

Jean-Claude Guilbert....Arnold

Pierre Klossowski....Merchant

François SullerotBaker

Marie-Claire Fremont....Baker's wife

Jean Rémignard.... Notary

ROBERT BRESSON (25 September 1901, Bromont-Lamothe, Puy-de-Dôme, Auvergne, France—18 December 1999, Paris, natural causes) directed 14 films and wrote 17 screenplays. The films he directed were *L'Argent/Money* (1983), *Le Diable probablement/The Devil Probably* (1977), *Lancelot du lac* (1974), *Quatre nuits d'un rêveur/Four Nights of a Dreamer* (1971), *Une femme douce/A Gentle Woman* (1969), *Mouchette* (1967), *Au hasard Balthazar/Balthazar* (1966), *Procès de Jeanne d'Arc/Trial of Joan of Arc* (1962), *Pickpocket* (1959), *A Man Escaped* (1956), *Journal d'un curé de campagne/Diary of a Country Priest* (1951), *Les Dames du Bois de Boulogne/Ladies of the Park* (1945), *Les Anges du péché/Angels of the Street* (1943) and *Les Affaires publiques/Public Affairs* (1934).

Ghislain Cloquet (18 April 1924, Antwerp, Belgium--November 1981) shot 55 films, among them *Four Friends* (1981), *The Secret Life of Plants* (1979), *Tess* (1979, won Oscar), *Love and Death* (1975), *Mouchette* (1967), *Loin du Vietnam/Far from Vietnam* (1967), *Mickey One* (1965), *Le Trou* (1960), *Nuit et brouillard/Night and Fog* (1955).

Anne Wiazemsky (14 May 1947) has acted in 42 tv and theatrical films. The first was *Au hasard Balthazar*; the last *Ville étrangère* (1988). She married French director Jean Luc Godard and appear in his *Sympathy for the Devil* (1968), *Week End* (1967), and *La Chinoise* (1967). With only a few minor exceptions, all other members of the cast of *Au hasard Balthazar* appeared in no other films.

from World Film Directors V. I. Ed John Wildman. The H. H. Wilson Company. NY 1987. Entry by Brian Baxter

The French director and scenarist, was born in the mountainous Auvergne region. [September 25, 1907] He spent

his formative years in the countryside until his family moved to Paris, when he was eight. Between thirteen and seventeen he studied classics and philosophy at the Lycée Lakanal in Sceaux, intending later to become a painter. Although Bresson abandoned



painting around 1930 because it made him “too agitated,” he remains a “painter” to this day.

He rejects the term “director: and uses “cinematographer.” He believes that cinema is a fusion of music and painting, not the theatre and photography, and defines “cinematography” as “a new way of writing, therefore of feeling.” His theories are precisely given in his book *Notes on the Cinematographer*. His films have resolutely followed these beliefs, and are dominated by his Catholicism.

When Bresson decided to abandon painting he moved towards cinema. During the following decade he was on the fringes of cinema and “saw everything.” Of this period nothing of importance exists. His work was mainly as a “script consultant,” first on *C’était un musicien* (1933), directed by Frédéric Zelnick and Maurice Gleize, then on Claude Heymann’s comedy *Jumeaux de Brighton* (1936) and Pierre Billon’s *Courrier Sud* (1937), and fleetingly with René Clair. His only significant work was a short film, financed by the art historian Roland Penrose, made in 1934. Called *Les Affaires publiques*, this comedy has long been lost and little is known of it...Bresson admits to liking the work of Charles Chaplin—especially *The Circus* and *City Lights*—and he was earlier linked with the surrealist movement in Paris.

In 1939 Bresson joined the French army and was a prisoner of war between June 1940 and April 1941. His imprisonment profoundly affected him, even though he was not confined like many of his protagonists (notably Fontaine, in *A Man Escaped*). “I was set to work in a forest, for local peasants who—luckily—fed us. After a year or so I simulated a fever and with other prisoners who were sick I was released. I returned to Paris.”

In occupied France, at the height of the war, Bresson began preparing his first feature, *Les Anges du péché / The Angels of sin* (1943), based on an idea by a friend, the Reverend Raymond Brückberger, and inspired by a novel. Bresson wanted to call the film “Bethanie”—the name of the convent where the action is centered. He wrote the screenplay and then asked the playwright Jean Giraudoux to supply the dialogue.

Although Bresson regards his debut film and the two works that followed as incomplete and spoiled by the intrusion of conventional music and actors, rather than the “models” (in the sense of artists’ models) he subsequently used, *Les Anges du péché* remains one of the most astonishing first features in world cinema. It not only displays complete mastery of the medium, but puts into practice many of the theories Bresson later refined and distilled. He says: “I knew at this stage what I wanted, but had to accept the actresses. I warned them immediately to stop what they were doing in front of the camera, or they—or I—would leave. Luckily they were in nun’s habits so they could not gesticulate.”

Les Anges du péché proved a great commercial success and won the Grand Prix du Cinéma Française. It tells a basically melodramatic story set in a convent devoted to the rehabilitation of young women...In Raymond Durnat’s words, Bresson’s vision “is almost mature in his first feature.” It already shows his preference for a narrative composed of many short scenes, as well as his fascination with human skills and processes, observing in detail the nuns’ work and rituals. On the other hand, we also see his characteristic use of ellipsis, as when Thérèse, buying a gun, is simply shown receiving it over the counter.

Bresson resolutely proclaims himself a painter, not a writer, the task he finds most difficult of all. For his second film,

Les Dames du Bois de Boulogne, he sought more literary inspiration, a novel by Diderot, *Jacques le fataliste*. Actually he used only one chapter and for the second and last time he sought help with the dialogue—from his friend Jacques Cocteau, who nonetheless stuck closely to the original. It was Cocteau who later said of Bresson, “He is one apart from this terrible world.”

Bresson’s films are unique. Most of them deal with the religious themes of predestination and redemption, but in terms of tightly constructed dramatic narratives. However, Bresson scorns the easy pleasures and illusions of the storyteller’s art, and is quite likely to leave out what others would regard as a dramatic high point. We may simply be told that the event has taken place, or shown only a part of it, while being treated to all the associated activities that mere storytellers take for granted—people coming in and out, opening and closing doors, going up and down stairs. Recognizing the great persuasive power of the film image, its ability to make us believe what we see and feel what the image suggests, Bresson deliberately subverts this power by directing our attention to a world beyond that of his narrative. What is left is not the illusion of “realism,” but what he calls the “crude real” of the cinematic image itself, which for Bresson carries us “far away from the intelligence that complicates everything”; that is why he calls the camera “divine.”

Bresson prefers to work on location and if possible in the actual settings prescribed by the script.

His third film, and the one that established his international reputation, came six years later and can be seen now as a transitional work. Based on the famous novel by the Catholic writer Georges Bernanos, *Le Journal d’un curé de campagne* (*Diary of a Country Priest*, 1951), this is a first-person account by a young priest (Claude Laydu) who is given a rural parish in the village of Ambricourt, in northern France....In a contemporary review, Gavin Lambert commented on the “inner exaltation” of the film, and in a famous essay André Bazin, describing it as a masterpiece, adds that it impresses “because of its power to stir the emotions, rather than the intelligence,” which is exactly Bresson’s avowed aim in all his films....

Several years elapsed before the emergence of the first uncompromised and definitive Bresson masterpiece, a work that remains among his most highly regarded and best-known films. *Un condamné à mort s’est échappé* (*A Man Escaped*, 1956) was inspired by an article in *Figaro Littéraire*. It was written by a former prisoner of war, Commandant André Devigny, and describes his astonishing escape from Montluc Prison in Lyons while awaiting execution by the Germans. Bresson wrote the screenplay, the sparse dialogue, and the commentary that counterpoints and illuminates the action. He eschewed a conventional score and used—sparingly—excerpts from Mozart’s Mass in C Minor. With this film Bresson achieved the complete control he sought by the use of “models”—nonprofessionals with no dramatic training who are taught to speak their lines and move their bodies without conscious interpretation or motivation, precisely as Bresson instructs them—in effect, as one critic wrote, Bresson plays all the parts. The hostility this often provokes in the hapless models creates a tension of its own, without destroying the director’s conception of a shot.

Bresson prefaces the film with two sentences. The first—an alternative title—is Christ’s admonition to Nicodemus: “The wind bloweth where it listeth,” Then comes the comment: “This is a true story. I have told it with no embellishments.” It is

true that by shooting at the actual prison, by painstaking reconstruction of the methods and instruments of Devigny's escape, Bresson brings an absorbing verisimilitude to the surface of a story whose outcome we already know. This surface, said Amedée Ayfre, stems from "the precise choice of details, objects and accessories, through gestures charged with an extreme solid reality"—what Eric Rohmer called "the miracle of objects." Bresson himself said: "I was hoping to make a film about objects that would at the same time have a soul. That is to say, to reach the latter through the former."...

Bresson gives us an almost documentary portrait of a prison, its relationships, its routine: the clanging pails, the clinking keys. From these bare bones, he builds one of the most profound interior examinations of a human being ever shown. This work, which brought Bresson the award as best director at Cannes and several other honors, established him internationally and confirmed his stature as, in Jean-Luc Godard's words, "to French cinema what Mozart is to German music and Dostoevsky is to Russian literature." No higher accolade could be given to Bresson, who regards Dostoevsky as "the greatest novelist," to whom he is indebted in no fewer than three of his thirteen films. This debt is expressed in Bresson's next work, *Pickpocket* (1959), which derives from *Crime and Punishment*.... Like its predecessor, *Pickpocket* has a convincingly "documentary" feel to it and a delight in human skills (here those of a criminal), using locations and—importantly—a professional pickpocket to help achieve this verisimilitude and the moments of suspense that are so much part of the film.

As usual, Bresson used nonprofessional "models" and collaborated only with trusted associates (his most frequent collaborators have been Pierre Charbonnier as art director, Raymond Lamy as editor, and until 1961, Léonce-Henry Burel as cameraman). Bresson believes that in cinematography "an image must be transformed by contact with other images," that there is "no art without transformation." He therefore favors a relatively inexpressive or "neutral" image, of maximum versatility in combination with other images. Hence his preference for the medium shot, with the camera straight on its subject to produce a "flattened image." The music, used sparsely for its "spiritual" qualities, comes from the work of the seventeenth-century composer Jean-Baptiste Lully.

Characteristically, the film is short (under 75 minutes), reflecting Bresson's compression of narrative and his desire to make one image "suffice where a novelist would take ten pages." As Godard noted, he was now "the master of the ellipsis," which he uses for a variety of purposes—for economy, to avoid the titillation of violence, often to unsettle the viewer by denying his narrative expectations. For some critics, however, Bresson had gone too far in this direction; Robert Vas even accused him of self-parody.

Unmoved, Bresson carried compression even further in *Procès de Jeanne d'Arc* (*The Trial of Joan of Arc*, 1962), the effect of which, as Derek Prouse simply but effectively noted, was "like being hit over the head by a sledgehammer." In little over sixty minutes Bresson shows us the imprisonment, trial, and the execution of Joan, splendidly "modeled" by Florence Carrrez."

Importantly the film is not an historical "reconstruction" (Bresson deplures such films), but he uses the costumes (for the English), documents, and artifacts of the period to convey the sense of "another time." We see Joan on the rack but Bresson characteristically spares (or denies) us any explicit scenes of

torture. The use of models, the startling compression, the lack of ornamentation and the continued striking of exactly the "right note," give the film a timeless strength. Again the images are "flattened," a 50mm lens providing a constant physical perspective with few traveling shots. (Bresson has used a 50mm lens since his second film.) This rigorousness seemed to demand a change. Bresson had gone as far in the direction of pure cinematography as he could. The linear quality of the prison films could be likened to the path of an arrow. For his next work, one of several Franco-Swedish coproductions undertaken on the initiative of the Swedish Film Institute, he moved to an altogether more complex form.

The result was described by Tom Milne as "perhaps his greatest film to date, certainly his most complex." Bresson had been thinking about the film for years, deriving the initial inspiration from Dostoevsky's *The Idiot*. *Au hasard, Balthazar* (*Balthazar*, 1966) is, says Bresson, "made up of many lines that intersect one another." The picaresque and episodic story links two souls—the girl Marie and the donkey Balthazar. Balthazar passes through a series of encounters, each one representing one of the deadly sins of humanity....Despite the use of a nonhuman protagonist, Bresson achieves his most complex and saintly portrait within a film without sentimentality or a false note.

Mouchette (1966) followed with unprecedented rapidity, thanks to money from French television—the first time that ORTF had collaborated with cinema....Bresson's next film is noteworthy as his first in color—something of which he has always been wary. *Une Femme Douce* (*A Gentle Creature*, 1966) was his first direct (albeit updated) adaptation of Dostoevski....*Quatre Nuits d'un rêveur* (*Four Nights of a Dreamer*, 1971), was adapted from a more famous Dostoevsky story, *White Nights*, already filmed by Ivan Pyriev in Russia and by Visconti in Italy. Bresson moves the novella's setting to Paris....Bresson was attracted to what Carlos Clarens describes as "the idea of love being stronger than the love story itself.." The result is an altogether more secular work than any which had preceded it....Even Bresson's admirers worried about his preoccupation with young love and his use of "popular" music in the film, although no one could be other than ravished by the breathtaking scene of the *bateau-mouche* floating down the Seine (filmed near his Paris home) and the gentle, somber use of color throughout. By some standards a "minor" film, it was yet of a stature to receive the British Film Institute award as "the most original film" of its year.

In 1974 Bresson returned to grander things and—after twenty years planning—achieved his dream of filming "The Grail" or, as it came to be called *Lancelot du Lac* (*Lancelot*). This was his most elaborate and costly work and, although he could not film it in separate English and French versions as he had hoped, it was otherwise made without compromise.

The film opens in a dark forest with a close-up of two swords wielded in combat. There are glimpses of other scattered conflicts and of groups of riderless horses galloping through. Titles describe how the Knights of the Round Table had failed in their quest for the Holy Grail. Lancelot and the other survivors return, and he begs Queen Guinevere to release him from their adulterous bond so he may be reconciled with God. Mordred lurks, fomenting dissension. There is a tournament and the victorious Lancelot is wounded and goes into hiding. He abducts Guinevere, who is under suspicion, but in the end restores her to King Arthur. Mordred stirs up rebellion and Lancelot fights on the King's side. Arthur and all his knights, encumbered by their

obsolete armor and idealism, fall before Mordred's disciplined bowmen—a great junk heap of chivalry. Lancelot died last, whispering the name of Guinevere.

Some critics saw a moral triumph in Lancelot's renunciation of Guinevere; others, like Jane Sloan, thought Guinevere "the only one who is grounded, willing to take life for what it is," and Lancelot a prideful dreamer, foolish to dent her love. Most agreed that the film was deeply fatalistic and pessimistic, with none of the certainty of grace that inspired the earlier films, and "darker than any Bresson film to date, both morally and literally" (Tom Milne).

There are numerous deliberate anachronisms because Bresson maintains that "you must put the past into the present if you want to be believable." For Jane Sloan, *Lancelot de Lac* "is a film about the end of things and the illusory heights of idealism....The reliance on individual series of repeated images as set-pieces also presents the clearest instance of the approximation of musical form in Bresson's work. The riderless horses galloping through the dark woods are a particularly haunting melody in this respect, but there are many other instances: the opening and closing of visors that punctuate a conversation between the knights; Gawain's repeated utterance of 'Lancelot' during the tournament; and the several series of multicolored horse trappings. The elegance and coldness of this aesthetic search for the 'purely abstract' has its parallel in the search for the Grail, the impossible search for the spiritual in the living world."

"Think about the surface of the work," Bresson says (with Leonardo da Vinci). "Above all think about the surface." Various critics have fastened on various different aspects of the surface in *Lancelot*. Jonathan Rosenbaum found his "manner of infusing naturalistic detail with formal significance...particularly masterful in the marvellous use he makes of armour....It functions as an additional layer of non-expressiveness, increasing neutrality and uniformity in separate images and cloaking identities in many crucial scenes....The concentration on hands and feet that is a constant in Bresson's work becomes all the more affecting here when it is set against the shiny metal in other shots. Or consider the overall effect of contrast achieved between the suits of armour and the image of Guinevere standing in her bath, which makes flesh seem at once more rarified and vulnerable, more soft and graceful, more palpable and precious. The on- and off-screen rattle of the armour throughout the film reinforces this impression."

Bresson's use of animals in this film (as elsewhere) was also much discussed. Tom Milne wrote that "the mysterious, poetic precision of the film springs from...images invested with Bresson's belief that animals are more sensitive, more perceptive perhaps, than humans"—images like those of "the birds flying graceful and free above the knights, the horses toiling through the mud and dying with their riders."

From the haunted medieval forests of *Lancelot du Lac*, Bresson returned to modern Paris for a story arguably even darker, *Le Diable, probablement* (*The Devil, Probably*, 1977), photographed like its predecessor by Pasqualino de Santis, was based on a newspaper story. It centers on four disaffected young intellectuals—two men and two women—completely disillusioned with the world created by their elders. The quartet pad through Paris, witnesses to a world that is insanely materialistic, inhuman, and exploitative of its natural resources. This is a work far more overtly political than anything that preceded it; Bresson called it "a film about money, a source of

great evil in the world whether for unnecessary armaments or the senseless pollution of the environment." These evils are shown in brilliantly orchestrated newsreel and other footage of despoilation and waste.

The film's title is a reply to a question asked by one of the characters "Who is responsible for this mockery of mankind?" If the possibility of grace seemed remote in *Lancelot du Lac*, it is almost inconceivable here. Jan Dawson called this "Bresson's most daring and uncompromising film to date," partly because "Charles appears to us, if not to his girlfriends, as the most antipathetic of Bresson's protagonists to date.

L'Argent (*Money*, 1982; first drafted in 1977) is loosely based on Tolstoy's story "The False Note." Jean Sémolué points out the "brutality" of this title—the first time Bresson had used an object for this purpose—and the film shows a bleak, appalled rigor of content and means, proving an uncomfortable experience for many of those at the Cannes premiere and later.

Bresson himself describes *L'Argent* as the film "with which I am most satisfied—or at least it is the one where I found the most surprises when it was complete—things I had not expected." For him, the making of a film comprises "three births and two deaths"; the birth of an idea is followed by its "death" in the agony of writing; it comes alive again in the period of preparation and improvisation, only to die again during the actual filming; and then there is rebirth in a new form during the editing, where the "surprises" come. At Cannes in 1983 it shared the "Grand Prize for Creation" with Andrei Tarkovsky's *Nostalghia*....

In his long career, Bresson has made just thirteen feature films and earned the right to two clichés. He is a genius of the cinema, and he remains unique. Since his 1943 debut, he has steadily refined and perfected a form of expression that places him apart from and above the world of commercial movie-making. He has preferred to remain inactive rather than compromise and has chosen never to work in the theatre or on television (a medium he dislikes). He is the cinema's true *auteur* in that his films are completely and immediately recognizable and he has controlled every aspect of their creation. He has built a pyramidal, densely interwoven body of work with great purity and austerity of expression, in which, as Jonathan Rosenbaum has written, "nothing is permitted to detract from the overall narrative complex, and everything present is used." Bresson has often been called the Jansen of the cinema, because of his moral rigor and his concern with predestination; but his films often seem to embody a passionate struggle between that bleak creed and a Pascalian gamble on the possibility of redemption.

Too singular to lead a "school" of filmmakers, Bresson has nevertheless influenced many directors and has been intensely admired by Jacques Becker, Louis Malle, Paul Schrader, François Truffaut, and Jean-Luc Godard, among others. He remains resolutely attracted to the idea of youth, "its suppleness and potential," and has become increasingly hardened in his dislike of the commercial cinema, maintaining that he has not seen a film through to the end for twenty-five years. Yet nothing could be further from the truth than the suggestion of a hermetic, cynical, or bitter man. Late in 1986, in a conversation with this writer he said simply: "I love life."

from The Criterion DVD of *Au Hazard Balthazar*, 2005: "Un metteur en ordre" ["One who imposes order"] a tv program from *Pour le plaisir* [*For Pleasure*] 5/11/66 devoted to the film *Au hazard Balthazar*, organized by Roger Stéphane, including

directors Robert Bresson, Jean-Luc Godard, Louis Malle, François Reichenbach, novelist Marguerite Duras, and members of the cast and crew of the film.

Bresson: The title comes from my desire to give the donkey a biblical name. So I named him after one of the three Wise Men. The title itself is the motto of the nobles of Baux who claimed to be heirs of the Magus Balthazar. Their motto was “Au hazard Balthazar” [The chance or fortune or perils of Balthazar] I like the rhyme in the title and I like the way it fits the subject exactly. *Au hazard Balthazar* is about our anxieties and desires when faced with a living creature who’s completely humble, completely holy, and happens to be a donkey: Balthazar. It’s pride, greed, the need to inflict suffering, lust in the measure found in each of the various owners at whose hands he suffers and finally dies. This character resembles the Tramp in Chaplin’s early films, but it’s an animal, a donkey, an animal that evokes eroticism yet at the same time evokes spirituality or Christian mysticism because the donkey is of such importance in the Old and New Testaments as well as all our ancient Roman churches. Balthazar is also about two lines that converge, lines that sometimes parallel and sometimes cross. The first line: in a donkey’s life we see the same stages as in a man’s: a childhood of tender caresses, adult years spent in work, for both man and donkey. A little later, a time of talent and genius, and finally the stage of mysticism that precedes death. The other line is the donkey at the mercy of his different owners, who represent the various vices that bring about Balthazar’s suffering and death.

Another concern I had while making this film was that the central character who wasn’t always present but was always the main story line, glimpsed only from time to time, and yet still the subject was the donkey. It had to be clear that the donkey was the main story, the main character. To achieve this, all the events that didn’t happen in his presence or that he only glimpsed, move away from him. It’s hard to say where the other characters came from. They just came to me. I saw them. Then they were drawn in like portraits. I can’t explain them the way a novelist could.

Malle: Essentially a film about pride. What absolutely drives all the characters is pride.

Bresson: This pride if you really look at the people around you, isn’t it essentially a good and useful thing? If we weren’t proud of ourselves, what would become of us? This humanity that you find so bleak I don’t see that it’s any less lovable than a humanity that’s less dark.

Anne Wiazemsky [who plays Marie]: Marie is a little girl who never grows up. She’s lost from the start due to total passivity.

Bresson: I don’t think that either one loves the other. It’s love that finds its niche but it’s sensual love. The scene is about sensuality. I won’t say ‘eroticism’ because the term’s been overused to the point of becoming meaningless. To me, the scene is more about sensuality than love. It’s spring, the birds are singing. It’s only by chance—responsible for so much in our lives—that this young man is at her side and causes something to stir in her. Sensual love is born at that moment. Maybe she believes this love is specifically for Gérard, but it could easily be for someone else.

Stéphane: Was that scene written in detail in the script, or was

it improvised in filming?

Bresson: No, it was on paper, but there’s a world of difference between writing it and filming it. For me the most important part of a film is its rhythm. Everything is expressed by the rhythm. Without rhythm, there’s nothing. There’s nothing without form either, but there’s nothing without rhythm. To me, it’s about taking two characters, and their attitudes, and finding their connection. But everything you say happens didn’t happen during filming but during editing. It’s the editing that creates these things. That brings them forth. The camera simply records. It’s precise and, fortunately, unbiased. The camera is extremely precise. The drama is created in the cutting room. When images are juxtaposed and sound is added, that’s where “love blossoms.”

Stéphane: There is something quite troubling, dark and ambiguous about Marie’s relationship with Balthazar.

Bresson: It’s love without a clearly defined object. Adolescents can be very in love with something very vague, very undefined. Love must have an object. The object of her love isn’t the donkey. The donkey’s just an intermediary. That’s what I think.

...The difficulty is that all art is both abstract and suggestive at the same time. You can’t show everything. If you do, it’s no longer art. Art lies in suggestion. The great difficulty for filmmakers is precisely not to show things. Ideally, nothing should be shown, but that’s impossible. So things must be shown from one sole angle that evokes all other angles without showing them. We must let the viewer gradually imagine, hope to imagine, and keep them in a constant state of anticipation. This goes back to what I said earlier about showing the cause after the effect. We must let the mystery remain. Life is mysterious and we should see that on-screen. The effects of things must always be shown before their cause as in real life. We’re unaware of the causes of most of the events we witness. We see the effects and only later discover the cause.

Marie hides in that man’s house because it’s her final refuge. She’s become clever and skillful and cunning enough to titillate him so he’ll let her sleep in the hay. As for the rest, she goes further because she’s now fairly experienced. All the same, afterwards, she treats him with utter contempt.

Stéphane: What happens between them that night?

Bresson: Certain extremely contradictory currents. In which the girl’s fundamental honesty ultimately prevails.

Stéphane: What roles do words have in films like yours?

Bresson: I think words should say everything an image can’t. Before living characters speak, we should examine everything they could express, with their eyes above all, with body language, certain kinds of interaction, certain ways of behaving. Words should only be used when we need to delve deeper into the heart of things. In short, ideas must be expressed in film using appropriate images and sounds, and dialogue should only be used as a last resort. I don’t like talking about technique. I don’t feel I have one. It’s more an obsession I have with flattening out images. I have good reason to. I believe—rather I’m certain—that without transformation, there is no art. And without transforming the image, there is no cinema, if the image

remains isolated on-screen, just as it was filmed, if it doesn't change when juxtaposed with other images. To achieve that images bearing the mark of the dramatic arts can't be transformed because they're marked by that seal. Like a table made of wood that's already been carved once. The table will be shaped by those carvings. You must use the image free from all art, especially the dramatic arts, as they can be transformed through contact with other images and sound. The great difficulty in cinema—I say "cinema" ['cinema writing' literally] to distinguish it from "movies." By movies I mean conventional ones, which to me are just filmed plays. The director has the actors perform a play, and he films it. To me the cinema is something entirely different. It's an independent art born of the juxtaposition of image with image, image with sound, and sound with sound. This is true creation, not reproduction. When you film actors performing a play the camera reproduces the scene, it doesn't create it. I wonder if I'm making myself clear. In the theater, we ask actors to perform a piece, actors from stage or film or both. We film them acting out this story. To me it's not the same thing. It's about image and sound. Images are transformed when juxtaposed with others. But the images must have certain quality that might be called neutrality. They mustn't have—and it's very difficult to avoid—too much dramatic meaning from their juxtaposition with other images. That's what is extremely difficult to know, how this image should be shot, and from what angle, to allow it to interact with other images.

Ghislain Cloquet [director of photography]: As technicians we had the chance to see that his method—which consists of using just one lens for an entire film, and what's more, one with a long focal length, a 50mm lens which is very restrictive and imposes very precise limits. This ground rule, like all rules that last, produced absolutely unexpected and marvelous results. It's similar to the surprise he says can occur with actors. When you've worn them out, something magical happens. What's striking about the use of this 50mm lens is that he actually doesn't plan his staging. If he did, the camera with the 50mm lens would do its best to capture his framing. Instead, he stages the scene by looking through the 50mm lens and that gives him the answer because it's his only option. Out of this comes an editing style, a style of storytelling, that's very homogeneous and very fluid. For example, the cameraman—I wasn't the cameraman on this film, one of my crew was—but his work became extraordinarily constant and extremely consistent.

Bresson: To the degree that theater is an external and decorative art—which is not at all an insult in my mind—to that same degree, the aim, the goal of cinema—I specifically say cinema referring to the art of cinema, if it exists—is about interiorization, intimacy, isolation. In other words, the innermost depths.

To me, cinema is the art of having each thing in its place, in this it resembles all other arts. Like the anecdote about Johann Sebastian Bach playing for a student, The student gushes with admiration but Bach says, "There's nothing to admire. You just have to hit the note at the right time and the organ does the rest."

...What cinema is not is thinking out a gesture, thinking out words. We don't think of what we're going to say. The words come even as we think, and perhaps even make us think. In this regard theater is unrealistic and unnatural.

What I attempt with my films is to touch what's real. Perhaps I'm obsessed with reality.

Stéphane: You don't call yourself a director?

Bresson: Not at all, not even a cinephile

Stéphane: What is Robert Bresson's profession?

Bresson: Someone once said I'm one "who imposes order." I prefer that to "director" as on a stage because I don't see a stage anywhere.

We can't imitate life. We have to find a way to reproduce it without imitating it. If we imitate life, it's not real. It's fake. I think using a mechanism like this can lead to something lifelike and even real.

...What interests me is not what they [his actors or models as he calls them] show but what they conceal.

Stéphane: And you manage to film what they conceal?

Bresson: Thanks to that extravagant device, the marvelous machine called a camera. As a matter of fact what surprises me is that such an incredible device, capable of recording what our eyes cannot, or more precisely what our mind does not is only used to show us tricks and falsehood. That's what surprises me.

In cinema, the raw material isn't the actor, it's the person. Acting is simply projection.

Stéphane: Is it true that you don't let the actors see a script?

Bresson: They have a script. What they don't know is how they're doing on screen. Unlike what's commonly done in movies, on my films they aren't shown the previous day's rushes. I never show them what they've done so they won't watch themselves on-screen as if in a mirror and try to correct themselves, as all actors do. They think my nose is too far to the right. Next time I'll face left, that'll be better.

To me, the substance of cinema isn't gestures and words, it's the effect produced by these gestures and words. So it's completely independent of me and even them. It occurs completely without their knowledge. It's what these gestures and words emit, what we read into their attitudes and faces. As Montaigne said we're revealed in our gestures.

Malle: It's cinema that has burnt all bridges with the theater. It's a cinema of inner life, the expression of thought.

Bresson: But I think it's a good rule though I think rules are made to be broken to always show the effect before the cause. The cause must be passionately desired so that the images, your film grabs the audience's interest.

And I always try categorically to eliminate whatever's not essential.

I think—perhaps I'm wrong—that the arts are on the decline. They're dying, perhaps from too much freedom, perhaps due to their incredibly wide distribution like everything today. I think movies, radio, and television are killing the arts. But I do also believe that oddly enough, that it's precisely through cinema, radio, and television that these arts will be reborn, perhaps in a completely different form. The word 'art' may no longer even mean what it does now. But it seems to me there's hope. I believe in cinema as a completely new art that we really don't even yet quite grasp. I believe in the muse of cinema.

Degas said “The muses don’t speak to each other. They dance together.” Actually I believe cinema is or will soon be a completely independent art and is not as has been imagined a synthesis of other arts. It’s an art completely apart and independent.

It’s very possible that movies, as opposed to cinema, will continue to exist. There’s no reason that movies as entertainment shouldn’t continue. But I firmly believe in cinema as a serious art, not as entertainment but on the contrary as a way of taking a deeper look at things, a kind of aid to mankind in delving deeper and discovering ourselves.

also from the Criterion DVD 2005, *Au Hasard Balthazar* by James Quandt

Godard’s famous claim that *Au hasard Balthazar* is “the world in an hour and a half” suggests how dense, how immense Bresson’s brief, elliptical tale about the life and death of a donkey is. The film’s steady accumulation of incident, characters, mystery, and social detail, its implicative use of sound, offscreen space, and editing, have the miraculous effect of turning the director’s vaunted austerity into endless plenitude, which is perhaps the central paradox of Bresson’s cinema. ...

Bresson’s twin masterpieces of the mid-sixties, *Au hasard Balthazar* and *Mouchette*—his last films in black and white—are rural dramas in which the eponymous innocents, a donkey and a girl, suffer a series of assaults and mortifications and then die. With their exquisite renderings of pain and abasement, the films are compendiums of cruelty, whose endings have commonly been interpreted as moments of transfiguration, indicating absolution for a humanity that has been emphatically shown to be not merely fallen but vile. Both “protagonists” expire in nature, one on a hillside, the other in a pond, their deaths accompanied by music of great sublimity: a fragment of Shubert’s Piano Sonata no.20 and a passage from Monteverdi’s *Vespers*, respectively. (That these contravene Bresson’s own edict against the use of music as “accompaniment, support, or reinforcement: is significant; he later regretted the rather sentimental employment of the Shubert in *Balthazar*, and the film without it would be significantly bleaker in effect.) The representation of both deaths is ambiguous. The sacred music in *Mouchette* (Monteverdi’s “Magnificat,” with its intimations of the Annunciation), *Mouchette*’s three attempts to “fall” before succeeding, and the held image of the bubbles on the water that has received her body imply to many a divine, even ecstatic deliverance (and a perhaps heretical consecration of suicide). Similarly, *Balthazar*’s death, accompanied by the secular, albeit exalted, Shubert, as he is surrounded by sheep, suggests to several critics a glorious return to the eternal, a revelation of the divine.

A common reading of *Balthazar*, relying on an orthodox sense of Bresson’s Catholicism, on the Palm Sunday imagery of Jesus riding into Jerusalem on “the foal of a donkey,” and on the film’s references to Dostoevsky—especially *The Idiot*—ascribes to the animal a Christlike status. In this schema, *Balthazar*, after enjoying a brief, paradisaical childhood, apparent in the image of his nuzzling his mother’s milk that opens the film and his playful baptism by three children, lives a calvary. Passed from cruel master to cruel master, *Balthazar* traverses the stations of the cross, beaten, whipped, slapped, burned, mocked, and, in the concluding crucifixion, shot and abandoned to bleed to death, the

hillside on which he perishes a modern-day Golgotha. That he dies literally burdened (with contraband) suggests, in this reading, a sacrifice for humanity. This meaning is intensified by *Balthazar*’s sole, stigmata-like wound and by the sheep that flow around him, a tide of white that surrounds his dark, prostrate form. With their tolling bells, they evoke the Agnus Dei [Lamb of God] and thereby the liturgy, “Qui tollis peccata mundi, miserere nobis [who takes away the sins of the world, have mercy on us].” *Balthazar* has died for the sins of those who have transgressed against him—the alcoholic Arnold, the vicious Gérard, the mean, miserly merchant—and of the few who have not, particularly the martyred Marie, whose fate parallels his.

This interpretation is tempting in its simplicity. That *Balthazar* passes through the hands of seven masters suggests to some a numerical trace of the seven words from the cross, the seven sacraments of the church formed by Christ’s Passion, or the seven deadly sins. The mock baptism performed by the children and the auditory equation of church bells with *Balthazar*’s bell indicate the animal’s divinity; Marie’s name suggests the mother of God, and the garland of flowers she makes for *Balthazar* is reminiscent of Christ’s crown of thorns; the strange bestiary in the circus implies the ark; the smugglers’ gold and perfume are the equivalent of the offerings of the magi; Gérard’s band of *blousons noirs* [black jackets] represent Christ’s tormentors (or, as Gilles Jacob has suggested, the thieves of Ecclesiastes); the wine that Arnold drinks and the bread that Gérard delivers both suggest transubstantiation; Arnold is in many ways a Judas figure; and so on.

But Bresson’s art never proceeded by strict or simple analogy—he is no C.S. Lewis, no Christian allegorist—and he always resisted such a reductive reading of *Balthazar*. While the name “*Balthazar*” alludes to that of the third magus and thereby to the birth of Christ, for instance, one wonders if Bresson, who began as a painter and was inspired by Chardin, among other artists, also had in mind the art historical references conjured by the name: *Balthazar* appears in several *Adoration of the Magi* paintings, by Dürer, Mantegna, Leonardo, et. Al., often portrayed as the African or Ethiopian king, following medieval custom. And just as the pale, sculpted face of Marie’s father reminds one of a Bellini doge, her garland of flowers, which returns as an ornamental spray on *Balthazar*’s harness in the circus sequence, certainly also suggests the feathered or jeweled turban of the third magus that was a common index of his “exotic” origins in these paintings.

A transcendental reading of the film also ignores the pessimism of Bresson’s vision—what he preferred to characterize as lucidity—which was to intensify in his subsequent films. Indeed, one is reminded more than once of Henri-Georges Clouzot’s acidulous *Le Corbeau* in Bresson’s insistence on the iniquity and malice of French provincial life, in particular with the anonymous letters sent to condemn Marie’s father. Resolutely turning away from the spiritual or metaphysical subjects of his previous films—the belief that “all is grace” in *Diary of a Country Priest* or that the hand of God guides humanity to its predestined fate in *A Man Escaped*—Bresson here begins the trajectory to the materialist world of his last film, *L’Argent* (in which Yvon Targe’s cellmate, echoing Marx, calls money “le dieu visible” [the visible god]). In *Balthazar*, little is numinous. We are placed in a hard corporeal world of rucked, muddy fields and of things and objects, some of them signifiers of a modernity Bresson finds wanting: cars, carts, coins, benches, guns, tools, booze, jukeboxes, telegraph poles,

deathbeds, transistor radios, and—especially—official documents (police summonses, audits, wills, orders of sale) and instruments of control and incarceration (harnesses, bridles, chains, muzzles). The latter manifest the film's theme of liberty and freedom, of Balthazar's and Marie's parallel captivities. She, too, passes from master to master (her father, Gérard, into whose subjugation she willingly enters; and Jacques; the childhood sweetheart who sustains an ideal image rather than any real sense of her), but there is no release from her suffering. She simply disappears near the end of the film, one infers into a universe of servitude.

The elliptical, sometimes clipped rhythm of Bresson's editing, the physicality of his sound world (the skidding cars, Balthazar's braying, the clanking chains with which Gérard is repeatedly associated), and his fragmentation of bodies through truncated framing—the focus on torsos, legs, and hands, in particular—amplify this sense of materiality. Money and its equivalents (bread, land, contraband) are insistently shown, alluded to, and invoked, especially in the grain dealer's speech about loving money and hating death. This avaricious miller is played by writer Pierre Klossowski, expert on de Sade and older brother of the painter Balthus, and he briefly takes the film into Buñuel territory as he surveys the shivering Marie, who swats his hand away from her neck and hungrily spoons compote from a jar. He offers her a wad of francs for sex, fulfilling the command of the young man who danced with her at Arnold's party: "If you want her, pay!" In this monetary setting, Balthazar's circuitous journey to death suggests less a traversal of the stations of the cross than an exchange of value, like the passing of the false note in *L'Argent*. His transit from hand to hand does not unleash "an avalanche of evil" as the trading does in the latter film, but just as determinedly reveals a world of moral and physical barbarity.

Using a rhetoric of reversal, in which a prayer or promise or characteristic is bluntly contradicted, sometimes within just one edit (a cut or dissolve), Bresson repeatedly depicts religion, or at least the church, as false, ineffectual. The casual criminal acts of Gérard, which Gilles Jacob says "introduce a satanic element" in the early sequences—slicking a highway with oil so that cars spin out of control and crash—are immediately followed by a sequence in which Gérard sings angelically at church, inciting Marie's enthralment with his beatific evil. Arnold cries to Christ, the Virgin, and all the saints that he will never drink again but within a quick edit is once more slugging back the booze. And as Marie's father lies dying from grief at the end, a priest tells him, "There must be forgiveness for all. You'll be forgiven because you have suffered." The ailing man turns his body away from the priest and the latter reads from the Bible: "He may punish, yet he will have compassion. For he does not willingly afflict the children of men." Even as we wonder what compassion we have witnessed in the film, aside from Marie's tender ministrations toward Balthazar—the dubious kindness of the baker's wife toward Gérard, perhaps?—Bresson all but ridicules the priests' teachings. Outside, the dying man's wife prays: "Lord, don't take him from me too. Wait. You know how sad and miserable my life will be." The priest's hand beckons through the window. She goes in. Her husband is dead.

The mourning wife tells Gérard, who wants to borrow the donkey for a smuggling operation, that Balthazar is "a saint," much, one assumes, as Bresson's gaunt, alcoholic country priest had become a saint, through his ceaseless suffering. In his

famous essay on *Diary of a Country Priest*, André Bazin notes "the analogies with Christ that abound toward the end of the film." A transcendental reading of *Balthazar* relies on a similar proliferation of signs: the donkey's death, serene and glorious, sanctified by the Shubert andantino; the sheep and their pealing bells; his physical burden and spurting wound; and the silence that engulfs him before the screen fades to black. But Bresson's lucidity sees the death differently, as the prolonged expiry of an old, abused animal, too wounded to bray, too exhausted to do anything but collapse to the earth, his value depleted.

from Robert Bresson. Keith Reader. U Manchester Press, 2000: "The last black-and-white films: Au hasard Balthazar and Mouchette"

The Franco-Swedish co-production *Au hasard Balthazar* (herein after *Balthazar*), released in 1966, is the most complex and baffling, but also for many critics (of whom I am one) the most thoroughly 'Bressonian', of its maker's works. ...*Balthazar* differs from the films that went before it in a number of ways. It foregoes linear narrative in favor of a criss-crossing amalgam of characters and their trajectories, whose course and motivation are often quite difficult to understand at a first viewing. ...

Its most striking innovation is of course the use of a donkey as the 'central character'. Outside the cartoon, lead roles for animals have by and large been confined to action dramas for children, of the *Lassie* or *Rin-Tin-Tin* variety. More than thirty years after *Balthazar*, I know of no film that has made such profound or audacious use of an animal protagonist. This is not, of course, to everybody's taste—not to mine the first time I saw the film....Bresson himself adopts an unabashedly anthropomorphic attitude towards the donkey, speaking of how 'l'âne a dans la vie les mêmes étapes que l'homme [the donkey goes through the same stages of life as man], culminating in 'la période mystique qui précède la mort' [the mystic period before death]. Balthazar's name—derived apparently from a medieval motto of the Counts of Les Baux in Provence, but also evoking the Three Wise Men—works to endow him with a perhaps unexpected nobility. The religious overtones of the beast that carried Christ are made explicit in one of the film's final images, when Balthazar is shown laden with a shrine in a procession. Other intertexts often cited include Watteau's painting *Gilles*, which features a donkey observing calmly in the background, and Dostoevsky's *The Idiot*, in Chapter Five of which Myshkin relates how the braying of a donkey in the market-place at Bâle caused his depression to disappear. We may also be reminded by the scenes in which Balthazar is mistreated that Nietzsche's final breakdown was precipitated by the savage beating of a carthorse in a Turin street; he threw his arms around the animal's neck and burst into tears, never again to utter a word.

The donkey as scapegoat, as observer, as literal or metaphorical bearer of the divine—these connotations figure prominently in European culture and give the presence of Balthazar much of its force. They also help to avoid any suspicion of sentimentality, at least once Balthazar is fully grown.

from Robert Bresson A Spiritual Style in Film. Joseph Cunneen. Continuum NY 2003

"The supernatural in film is only the real rendered more precise. Real things seen close up." —Bresson

The Donkey as Witness *Au hasard Balthasar*

The central character of Bresson's next movie, *Au hasard Balthasar*, is a donkey. Shot in the foothills of the Pyrenees, it is filled with memories of the director's own childhood. Bresson called *Balthasar* "the freest film I have made, the one into which I have put the most of myself." He had been thinking of it since 1950. "If with this film I succeed in touching the public, it is especially, as happens in literature, thanks to that autobiographical element....The beginning of the film bathes in my childhood—the countryside, the fields, the trees, and the animals—these are my vacations as a child and an adolescent."...

As Jean-Luc Godard recognized, "This movie is really the world in an hour and a half, the whole world from childhood to death." Perhaps the most powerful and beautiful of Bresson's films, it does not offer the exultant sense of liberation found in the endings of *A Man Escaped* and *Pickpocket* and yet, mixed with its pain, it carries an ineffable sense of consolation. Bresson, of course, is counting on our recognition of the donkey as an image of humility, and perhaps the animal's association with the ordinary people among whom Jesus chose to live. Remembering a scene from Dostoevsky's *The Idiot*, Bresson was impressed with Prince Myshkin's account of how the cry of a donkey helped restore his lucidity: "

I completely recovered from my depression, I remember, one evening at Basel, on reaching Switzerland, and the thing that roused me was the braying of a donkey in the market-place. I was quite extraordinarily struck with the donkey, and for some reason very pleased with it, and at once everything in my head seemed to clear up."

The director to think of "an idiot taught by an animal, to have someone who passes for an idiot but is of a rare intelligence see life through an animal....

Everyone is familiar with the donkey's time-honored place both at the Christmas crib and in Christ's triumphal entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. Bresson even exclaimed in hyperbole, "The donkey is the entire Bible, Old Testament and New Testament," and recalled seeing donkeys on the tympanum of countless little romanesque churches in France. Art historian Thomas Mathews reminds is that the image of Christ riding a donkey implies a radical reversal both of the meaning of power and the human attitude toward animals. In the fourth century the ass was sometimes venerated; there were even ass-headed crucifixes....

Bresson pointed out that the title of his movie is the motto of the ancient counts of Baux, the presumptive heirs of the Magi king Balthasar; "hasard," of course, carries all the ambiguous significance which the director customarily gave to "chance" and "destiny." He spoke directly of his intentions in this film:

Au hasard Balthasar is our agitation, our passions, in the face of a living creature that is completely humble, completely holy, but happens to be a donkey.

Depending on whose hands he falls into by chance, he suffers from pride, avarice, the need to inflict suffering, or sensuality, and finally dies. He is a little bit like the Charlot character in the earliest films of Chaplin, but he is nevertheless an animal, a donkey, who brings with him eroticism and at the same time a kind of spirituality or Christian mysticism.

... *Au hasard Balthasar* is a daring achievement, a complex design that embraces a greater variety of characters than Bresson used in earlier films. Left with questions about the motivations of characters, many spectators, Keith Reader suggests, "will probably find themselves oscillating ...between filling in the film's gaps and leaving its sense(s) to speak through them, so that *Balthasar*'s challenge—the donkey's and the film's—to our way of viewing becomes an integral part of its meaning." Lloyd Baugh rightly emphasizes the central role of the donkey, "both because of what happens to him, his story from birth to death...and also because of his quiet but intense presence, his witnessing, his participation in the experiences of the other characters." I believe he is straining for a theological reading of the film, however, when he adds: "In the double experience of Balthasar, as sympathetic participant in the evil visited on others and as victim of the same evil...he becomes a Christ-figure." Despite the high praise of the film, J. Hoberman avoids such terminology: "The donkey who is the eponymous protagonist of the heartbreakingly sublime and ridiculous *Au hasard Balthasar*—the director's supreme masterpiece and one of the greatest movies ever made—is the ultimate example of a Bressonian subject....

In terms of trying to give an "explanation" for everything that takes place, *Balthasar* may be Bresson's most difficult film, but for those who allow themselves to be carried along by its rhythm, it may also be the most powerful: everything holds together. A second viewing will show that its sudden shifts are subtly connected, even the apparent digression when Balthasar and Arnold's other donkey are providing transportation for an artist and his companion. The scene satirizes the artistic pretentiousness of the tourists, but the men's discussion of criminal responsibility for actions committed under the influence of drink reminds us of the probability of Arnold's connection with the murder.

Bresson deliberately leaves a certain opacity in the characters and situation: we don't know what happens to Marie at the end, or why Gérard hates Arnold, or where Arnold came from, yet we are carried along by the feelings that attach to their interactions. As Jean Collet writes, "The discontinuity of the story masks its profound unity, which exists not at the level of story, or psychology, but in revealing the mystic bonds between all beings—the secret solidarity of innocence and cruelty, good and evil, purity and vice. The whole movement of the film is that of a sensitive balance that never finishes wavering. Balthasar is the yardstick of innocence helping to light up the virtues and vices around him."

Here, as elsewhere in Bresson, the difficulty is due to his determination to offer a stripped-down version of reality, to omit psychological explanations, to present the cause *after* the effect. Such a method follows from his conviction that all art is both abstract and suggestive:

Everything should not be shown, or there is no art; art lies in suggestion....

Things should be presented, therefore, under a single angle, which would evoke all the others. Little by little the spectator should suspect, or hope to suspect, and should always be kept in a kind of expectation which comes from the cause being shown after the effect.

Mystery should be preserved; since we live in mystery; mystery should be on the screen.

Bresson's choice of a donkey as the center of the movie

seems a perfect realization of his use of models. Amusingly, in keeping with his shunning of professionals, Bresson chose an untrained donkey instead of a trained “performer”; this resulted in several exasperating delays during which he had to wait for the donkey to follow his directions. Jean Collet is perceptive in suggesting that Bresson’s conception of cinema acting leads sooner or later to the exploration of animal mystery: “In rejecting everything that belongs to dramatic art, Bresson exhausts his models by multiplying the number of takes in the same shot. What is he looking for in this? Automatism, a diction and a behavior that is no longer reflected on. It is exciting to discover this automatism, these reflexes, in the animal. The innocence Bresson is looking for in the non-professional actor already exists in the innocence of the animal. What we can decipher in them is only an overflow of soul, or nothing. But this nothing obliges us to scrutinize with increased attention the smallest physical trace of interior life. By no longer acting, the people whom Bresson films make us aware of the smallest nuance of voice, of a glance that reveals itself, a hand that shows panic, not knowing that it is observed. Or of nothing, of the opacity of all existence. The boldness and honesty of Bresson’s approach is that he never used montage to violate the mystery of the animal. On the contrary, he wanted us to experience it to the point of agony.”

...The bright colors, the wide, panoramic shots of the meadow, the sheep’s bell continuing to call out even after *Balthasar* dies, and a final return of the Shubert sonata create what the *New York Times* reviewer Roger Greenspun called “surely one of the most affecting passages in the history of film.”

...Andrew Sarris’s comment may be especially telling since he is sometimes critical of aspects of Bresson’s technique: “All in all, no film I have ever seen has come as close to convulsing my entire being as has *Au hasard Balthasar*....it

stands by itself as one of the loftiest pinnacles of artistically realized emotional experience.”

...The recollections of Anne Wiazemsky, the Marie of *Au hasard Balthasar*, are especially revealing. She was seventeen when she met Bresson after losing her biological father; Bresson, she says, was her artistic father. Her grandfather was François Mauriac, who had to give his assent to her appearance in the movie, since she was a minor. The film was shot in the country, and it was apparently a happy time for her; she found it reassuring to work with someone who knew what she had to do. “Bresson created a climate of empathy that undoubtedly helped me to understand what he wanted without asking him....Never, in any other cinema, has youth been so present, grasped so subtly at the moment when it is still youth but is beginning to tip over into something else.”

Against Bresson’s wishes, Ms. Wiazemsky embarked on an acting career after *Balthasar*, making films with directors like Godard and Pasolini. In 1999, while attending a retrospective of Bresson’s work in Tokyo, she was asked to offer a few anecdotes on her experience with the director. First came the presentation of *Au hasard Balthasar*; “When I came on stage, I saw in front of me four hundred Japanese in tears. It was very moving, and it was obviously impossible to present little anecdotes in the midst of that emotion. Then I spoke of the urgency of making Bresson’s work better known. Every time people want to present any of my films it is always *Au hasard Balthasar* that I most hope they will use, because it is the one I like best of all that I have made, and I consider it artistically far above the others. I am someone who is usually uncertain about everything, but I am sure that the work of Bresson will not cease to grow. For the moment, it seems as if it has been seen and loved by individuals, but the public is going to come, and Bresson’s films will always speak to it.

Coming up in the Buffalo Film Seminars XII, Spring 2006

Mar 28 Richard Brooks **In Cold Blood** 1967

Apr 4 Ousmane Sembene **Xala** 1974

Apr 11 Wim Wenders **Wings of Desire** 1987

Apr 18 Andre Konchalovsky **Runaway Train** 1985

Apr 25 Karel Reisz **The French Lieutenant's Woman** 1981

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...for the series schedule, annotations, links and updates: <http://buffalofilmseminars.com>

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...for cast and crew info on any film: <http://imdb.com/search.html>

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