Robert Bresson, DIARY OF A COUNTRY PRIEST/JOURNAL D’UN CURÉ DE CAMPAGNE (1951, 113 min)

Directed by Robert Bresson
Written by Robert Bresson, Georges Bernanos (novel)
Cinematography by Leonce-Henri Burel
Edited by Paulette Robert
Music Composed by Jean-Jacques Grunenwald

Claude Laydu... Priest of Ambricourt
Jean Riveyre... Count (Le Comte)
Adrien Borel... Priest of Torcy (Curé de Torcy)
Rachel Bérendt... Countess (La Comtesse)
Nicole Maurey... Miss Louise
Nicole Ladmiral... Chantal
Martine Lemaire... Séraphita Dumontel
Antoine Balpêtré... Dr. Delbende
Jean Danet... Olivier
Gaston Séverin... Canon
Yvette Etiévant... Femme de ménage
Bernard Hubrenne... Priest Dufrety


Unlike most other Bresson films, in which the actors had little or no film experience before the film in question, several members of this task had a great deal of film experience: NICOLE MAUREY (December 20, 1925 in Bois-Colombes, Hauts-de-Seine, Île-de-France, France) was in 4 films before this one and 60 films and tv series after it. ANTOINE BALPETRÉ (May 3, 1898 in Lyon, Rhône, France—March 28, 1963 in Paris, France) appeared in 20 films before this one and 32 after it, some of which were 1960 The Hands of Orlac, 1954 Rouge et noir, 1952


CLAUDE LAYDU (March 10, 1927 in Brussels, Belgium) appeared in 20 films and tv episodes. The last as an actor was a tv movie, 1979 “Le destin de Priscilla Davies.” Some of the other are 1963 Mafia alla sbarra, 1961 Italienisches Capriccio. 1960 Le dialogue des Carmélites, 1954 Attila, 1954 Raspoutine, 1953 Napoleon Road, 1953 Le bon Dieu sans confession, 1953 I Was a Parish Priest, 1952 Nous sommes tous des assassins, 1951 Trip to America, and 1951 Diary of a Country Priest, which was his first role.
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 Reverence 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 Durgnat’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 user 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

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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 champagne/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 (K427). 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 this debt is expressed in _A Man Escaped_. Bresson gives us an almost documentary portrait of a prisoner, 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 form _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 Lamry 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 Carrez.

Importantly the film is not an historical “reconstruction” (Bresson deplores 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
orneration 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 as 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 pictureque 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 Clares 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 pridelful dreamer, foolish to deny 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 despoliation 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.

For the time being, Bresson has abandoned his long-cherished plan to base a film, “Genesis,” on the first chapters of the Old Testament, finding the logistical problems insuperable. In 1987, almost eighty, he was planning a “lighter film” derived from a modern novel about two girls who leave their dreary jobs and head for Monte Carlo and then Italy, gambling and stealing as they go, and knowing their inevitable destiny is prison. The director is also finishing a major book to supplement and amplify his Notes on the Cinematographer.

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.”


Perhaps the most highly regarded French filmmaker after Jean Renoir, Robert Bresson sustained a reputation as an uncompromising artist throughout his career. In 1957 the director Jacques Rivette remarked, “There is only one [French] filmmaker who has not sold out, and that’s Bresson.” At the time Bresson had made only four films, but the claim proved prophetic. Few filmmakers have clung so tenaciously to the same thematic concerns, exerted such obsessive control over every aspect of their work, and adhered to as harsh a vision of the world. Like Carl-Theodor Dreyer, another idiosyncratic filmmaker sometimes drawn to religious subjects and whose career also spanned nearly a half-century, Bresson’s rigorous standards limited his production. In forty years he made only thirteen films. …

Bresson occupied a singular position in international cinema. His pursuit of a “pure” film aesthetic not only placed him outside the mainstream, but led him to renounce even those pleasures afforded by the art cinema of his
The Question of God

The question of Bresson’s personal convictions about God and the Catholic faith in which he was raised is difficult to answer, since without a biography, one can only conjecture from the work and from remarks he made in interviews over the years. The more immediate question concerns the relationship of Bresson’s art to belief in God, and more specifically, to the tenets of Catholic doctrine. Many critics and admirers of Bresson would prefer that such questions just go away. But as the words design, destiny, inevitable course, and prescribed plan—all of which have been used by critics of every stripe, suggest, Bresson’s cinema has always evoked the question of God. …

Consider the moral severity of the films mentioned earlier. Although such a stance has been attributed to his Catholicism, there is no hard evidence that Bresson practiced the faith in his adult life. Nevertheless it would be difficult to deny that both Catholicism and faith left their marks on his thinking and his art, along with a perhaps heretical belief in predestination, as the implacable nature of his narratives strongly supports. Even his late works suggest an inability or unwillingness to relinquish the idea of design inflected by the Christian theory of history. This is something Bresson shared with George Bernanos, Fedor Dostoevsky, and Leo Tolstoy, whose works inspired more than half of his films. Like them he was preoccupied with questions of good and evil. The existence of God, the relationship between body and soul, and that between personal and social morality. For him, as for Bernanos and Dostoevsky, the world is fallen and evil is intrinsic to the human condition, as present in the provinces as it is in the cities, in the old as well as the young, the rich as well as the poor, the powerful as well as the weak. It was this obstinate posture that infuriated Leftist critics in such journals as Positif who declared Bresson out of touch with social and political reality. …

Bresson’s films, thematically and formally, have always been about apparent absences, silences, and the invisible. The only “evidence” of God’s existence in Diary is the intense look on the face of Claude Laydu as he stares into a powerfully charged off screen space…Bresson’s work therefore bears the sign of one raised Catholic as well as the doubts of a deeply engaged modern thinker. Pivoting on the line between the two, his cinema reflects an authentic mind-set of mid-twentieth-century thought. Wondering how committed he was to a religious point of view seems an inescapable aspect of watching his films. …

From Diary on, in fact, we might say that Bresson did not simply discover the means by which he would impose his vision on the world; he became a God-like author of that vision, whose compulsive control over every facet of each film—a stance by definition antithetical to the egoistic personalities of actors—effectively re-created the world in the image and manner in which he believed it was created. From Robert Bresson A Spiritual Style in Film. Joseph Cuneen. Continuum NY 2003

Andrey Tarkovsky, the great Russian director who made Andrey Rublyov, Stalker, and The Sacrifice, rightly insisted that Bresson doesn’t have a genre: He is a genre in himself…Bresson is perhaps the only man in the cinema to have achieved the perfect fusion of the finished work with a project formulated beforehand….His guiding principle was the elimination of what is known as ‘expressiveness,’ in the sense that he wanted to do away with the frontier between the image and actual life, to make life itself graphic and expressive….The principle has something in common with Zen art where, in our perception, precise observation of life passes paradoxically into sublime artistic imagery.

But perhaps Bresson’s instinctive rebellion against the various forms of excess found in most commercial movies is adequately summarized in his wonderful bit of self-advice: “Not to use two violins when one is enough.”

Bresson’s “spiritual style in film” is no guarantee of edifying endings, but his austere, clear-eyed cinematography fosters a deep understanding of the grandeur and pain of our common humanity. …

“All is Grace” Diary of a Country Priest

Bresson’s next project, the adaptation of Bernanos’s great novel Journal d’un cure de campagne (Diary of a Country Priest), was major step in the discovery of his own approach to cinema. Instead of being a studio production, it was shot in a small village in the Pas de Calais, and almost all the roles were filled by untrained actors. Bresson made a strenuous effort to put into practice what he calls cinematography: “a writing with images in movement and with sounds.”

He not only exercised personal control over the movie—like other directors whose work revealed a personal style and who were beginning to be described as auteurs—but
consciously rejected what he criticized as “photographed theater.” Bresson distinguished between two types of film: “those that employ the resources of the theater (actors, direction, etc.) and use the camera in order to reproduce; those that employ the resources of cinematography and use the camera to create.”

Acclaimed by critics a one of the most successful adaptations of a novel for the screen ever made, Diary of a Country Priest is a dazzling achievement, immensely faithful to Bernanos and yet in which Bresson placed his own signature on almost every detail. Diary reached a wide audience in France as well as other countries (including the United States, where it was chosen by the National Board of Review as one of the best foreign films of 1954) although based on a book that seemed impossible to film. Its frame-work appeared completely anti-cinematic: the daily thoughts and recollections of a village priest in northern France during the 1920s. The novel’s minimal plot reflected the processes of the priest’s inner life, and there were many interruptions and digressions for reflection on pastoral concerns, poverty, and spirituality. It was out of such seemingly slight material that Bresson fashioned a movie that earned a special accolade from André Bazin: “Probably for the first time, the cinema gives us a film in which the only genuine incidents, the only perceptible movements, are those of the life of the spirit. It offers us a new dramatic form that is specifically religious—or better still, specifically theological; a phenomenology of salvation and grace.”

This refusal to exploit situations for sheer emotionalism, marks Bresson’s whole work. Although he is concerned with feelings and not abstract ideas, he is unwilling to manipulate his audience. Such an approach complements Bresson’s increasing use of nonprofessional actors who have had little or no experience in front of a camera before working in one of his films. Asked to try out for the part of the country priest, Claude Laydu told the director he was just a beginner in acting school, not realizing this would prejudice Bresson in his favor. During the shooting, Laydu reports, the veteran actors—a small minority in the film—often felt frustrated because they were not allowed to use the techniques of “expressiveness” they had learned on the stage. Submitting himself completely to Bresson’s demands, Laydu says he did not realize he was portraying a saint until he saw the completed film.

Bresson closely follows Bernanos’s structure at the same time that he tightens it. As he said, “I long ago acquired the conviction that in certain works—those in which the writer wanted to put all of himself, and Bernanos’s work is in that category—what shows the author best and in depth, more than his thoughts or intimate experiences, is his particular manner...of reuniting and coordinating them...Hence, for me to adapt means fidelity to the spirit of the work by respecting its construction.”

Bernanos’s novel is composed of glancing insights—short paragraphs of different lengths, marked off from each other, that reflects the phases of the curé’s development without any obvious logical links. Dialogues, examinations of conscience, and personal confidences somehow preserve the unity of the story while reflecting the inner experience of the priest. ...

Dudley Andrews emphasizes that “the non-sectarian success of the film testifies to the consistent and radical interiority attained by Bresson. From first to last (from the image of the diary to that of the cross), we are locked within a particular sensibility, a state of being, a soul.” Although he draws on an explicitly Catholic spirituality, Bresson makes it possible for agnostics to explain away the actions of the curé as the result of heredity and morbidity, and some of the pious may even feel cheated by his refusal to edify.

“In no sense,” Bazin concludes his essay, “is the film ‘comparable’ to the novel or ‘worthy’ of it. It is a new aesthetic creation, the novel so to speak multiplied by the cinema.” Jean Sémoulé points out that at the end of the first chapter of the novel, the curé speaks of the journal as conveying “a sense of inviolable presence which is certainly not God...[but] a friend made in my image.” Although Bresson omits the line, “when the film is projected, the spectator becomes this friendly presence, a real auditor.” Diary of a Country Priest was a brilliant success, but it only strengthened Bresson’s determination to make an even more total break with standard moviemaking in his next film.

From Criterion notes: “Diary of a Country Priest”, by Frédéric Bonnaud

Diary of a Country Priest is a film about imprisonment. As he carries out the duties of his ministry, the priest tries to act as a link between his parish and the local population. But he ends up just another body, a dark blotch on the landscape, a mere spectator who quickly becomes transparent in the eyes of his flock. So Robert Bresson’s film is above all the story of a failure, of a man who is completely incapable of leaving an impression on the world. It is the story of defeat, of a faint trace of spirit left behind and then erased all too quickly. It is a story about someone who tries his best to throw things off balance, and whose best efforts are finally squelched by the weighty order of things. At the beginning of the film, Bresson executes two dissolves—from a page covered with writing in the priest’s diary, to the name plaque at the center of the village, to the young priest mopping his face. The private diary and the sweaty face symbolize two expressions of the same individual anguish, while the plaque is the sedentary object that can neither be removed nor erased. It is the shackles of reality, a worldly obstacle to heavenly exaltation. In the following shot, positioned behind the gates of the manor, has the priest actually seen the adulterous couple kissing? The cutting suggests that he senses their presence only as they walk away behind him. But having himself been seen, he now becomes a dangerous intruder. Henceforth, they will not rest until he is beaten down, until he understands that he is an unwelcome stranger in their territory. In the game of society, the rules are unchanging. The priest of Ambricourt has only his duty and his parish to his name. Nonetheless, he’s an outcast without a history, a tainted product of postwar provincial France, formed from the blackest misery and the reddest wine. In this light, Diary of a Country Priest is the linchpin of Bresson’s oeuvre. It’s the last film in which he comes face to face with contemporary clichés. With its slightly decadent nobility, its “godless” doctor, and its collection of wretched bastard peasants, Diary of a Country Priest isn’t so far removed from the norms of then-contemporary French cinema. It reflects the standardized pitch-black rancidness that the critic-filmmakers of the soon-to-arrive New Wave would rail against. (In fact, the desperation of the Georges Bernanos novel isn’t so far removed from the universe of a Georges Simenon or Henri-Georges Clouzot.) Faced with such worn-out, uninviting material, Bresson responded by creating his very first actor-model, Claude Laydu.
In a way, Laydu is like a visitor from the future, from the cinema of Bresson soon to come, from *A Man Escaped* (1956) or *Pickpocket* (1959). He embodies the will to change as well as the longing for spiritual elevation, both so precious to Bresson. The film’s impact is built around the relationship between this “model,” still at the prototype stage, and the “actors” who make up the rest of cast, all of them branded with the very theatricality Bresson was trying to escape. For the role of the priest of Torcy, Bresson chose Dr. Adrien Borel, a psychiatrist (he initially refused, then changed his mind on the condition that he appear under the pseudonym “André Guibert”. If Borel’s role is unforgettable, it’s largely due to the violent contrast between his “old-fashioned” acting and Laydu’s feverish reticence. Actually, the priest of Ambricourt can be read as a thinly veiled projection of Robert Bresson himself. Bresson’s battleground—in the contemporary political sense of the word—is his own conception of “cinematography,” which must be transcended right here and now, its feet stuck in the sludge of cinema but its head pointed toward the sky of a newfound rigor. Rather than an escape, Bresson wanted nothing less than a radical reform of the cinema’s perception of reality. Even before *A Man Escaped*, he positioned himself as a kind of resistance fighter who was unwilling to heed sensible, measured warnings, just as the priest cannot be satisfied with the commonsensical advice of the priest of Torcy. Rather than avoid the apparent obstacle of a naturalistic representation of the French countryside, Bresson shifts it from the image to the soundtrack. For the first time in French cinema, the less the environment is shown, the more it resonates. Standing in front of his presbytery, the priest watches a wagon go by. But the viewer only hears the sound of horses’ hooves, accompanied by an anonymous whistling. The social reality of the town engulfs the priest and his own universe. As the film goes on, it becomes a constant, murmuring stream, running through his day-to-day existence. Ubiquitous and constant, persistent and unchanging, it doesn’t need to be shown: its evocation through sound is enough. It’s a veritable prison.

Bresson often shows him in an in-between state—between inside and outside, standing before the French windows of the count’s manor or in the courtyards of the local farms. Like many future Bressonian characters, he has no place in the world, and runs the risk of an unlucky encounter. Which arrives in the person of Séraphita, a veritable monster encased in the body of a young girl. Séraphita is scary. Grown up too quickly and bursting with wicked intentions, she seems to have stepped right out of Marcel Carné/Jacques Prévert’s poetic-realist films, and anticipates the twins from Stanley Kubrick’s *The Shining* (1980). She knows too much about too many things, in a manner that’s all too visible. The film stumbles a bit with this character, and yields to symbolism during her nocturnal conversion into a new St. Veronica, a scene that’s far too literal and obvious. Perhaps conscious of this small failure, Bresson would (re)make Séraphita over into *Mouchette* fifteen years later, in order to demonstrate that even this terrifying character could be incorporated into a completely new system of cinematographic representation that owed nothing to its predecessors. In the “portrait of the artist as disturber of the peace” that is *Diary of a Country Priest*, Bresson was still shedding the contingencies of contemporary cinema. But the film left enough of a mark on its viewers to become a milestone in the slow process of the liberation of postwar French cinema. Long after *Cahiers du cinéma* published his famous article “A Certain Tendency in the French Cinema” (No. 31, January 1954), which devotes a lot of attention to screenwriters Jean Aurenche and Pierre Bost’s unproduced adaptation of Bernanos’ novel, only to denounce their alleged inanity and hail Bresson’s genius, François Truffaut would remember *Diary of a Country Priest* and the words of the priest of Ambricourt to Dufréty when he concluded the angry letter in which he severed all personal ties with Jean-Luc Godard: “If I was in your place and I’d broken the oaths of my ordination, I would prefer that it had been for the love of a woman rather than what you call your intellectual evolution.” *Diary of a Country Priest* is truly a rupture in the history of cinema. An earlier version of this essay appeared in the May/June 1999 issue of Film Comment.

COMING UP IN THE FALL 2011 BUFFALO FILM SEMINARS XXIII:

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