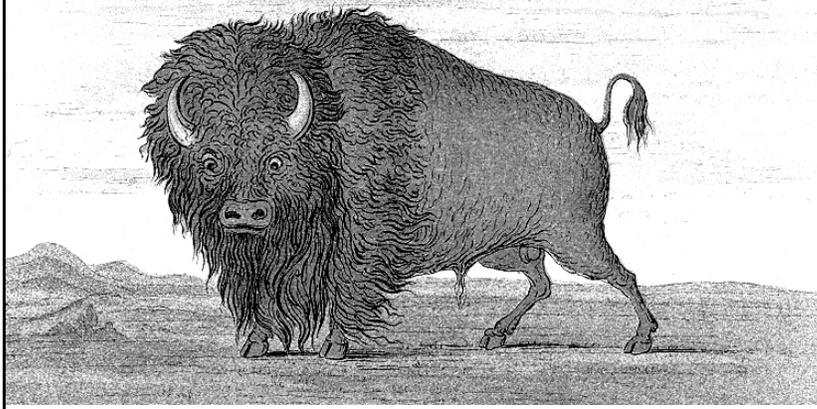


# The Buffalo Film Seminars



Conversations about great films  
with Diane Christian & Bruce Jackson

**ROBERT BRESSON** (25 September 1901, Bromont-Lamothe, Puy-de-Dôme, Auvergne, France—18 December 1999, Paris, natural causes) directed 13 films and wrote 17 screenplays. The other films he directed were *L'Argent/Money* (1983), *Le Diable probablement/The Devil Probably* (1977), *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), *Un condamné à mort s'est échappé ou Le vent souffle où il veut/A Man Escaped or: The Wind Bloweth Where It Listeth* (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).

**PASQUALINO DE SANTIS** (24 April 1927, Fondi, Latium, Italy—23 June 1996, Ukraine) shot 53 films, among them *La Tregua/The Truce* (1997), *Les Couleurs du diable/The Colors of the Devil* (1997), *Cronaca di una morte annunciata/Chronicle of a Death Foretold* (1987), *Misunderstood* (1984), *Cristo si è fermato a Eboli/Christ Stopped at Eboli* (1979), *Le Diable probablement* (1977), *Una Giornata particolare/A Special Day* (1977), *L'Innocente/The Innocent* (1976), *Lucky Luciano* (1974), *The Assassination of Trotsky* (1972), *Morte a Venezia/Death in Venice* (1971), *La Caduta degli dei/The Damned* (1969), *Romeo and Juliet* (1967; Academy Award, Best Cinematography) and *Il Momento della verità/The Moment of Truth* (1965). He was camera operator for *8½* (1963), *L'Eclisse* (1962), and *La Notte* (1961).

**LUC SIMON** and **VLADIMIR ANTOLEK-ORESEK** each appeared in just one film—this one. **LAURA DUKE CONDOMINAS** appeared in 4 other films: *La Nuit porte jarretelles* (1985), *Credo* (1983), *Un rêve plus long que la nuit* (1976), and *Non si scrive sui muri a Milano* (1975). **HUMBERT BALSAN** (21 August 1954, Arcachon, Gironde, France—10 February 2005, Paris, suicide) acted in 26 films, among them *Le Divorce* (2003), *The Proprietor* (1996), *Jefferson in Paris* (1995), *Aspern/The Aspern Papers* (1985), *Un amour de Swann/Swann in Love* (1984), *Chanel Solitaire* (1981), *Quartet* (1981), and *Les Conquistadores* (1976); he also produced 52 films. **PATRICK BERNHARD** acted in 2 other films: *Les Aventuriers* (1967) and *Fünf vor 12 in Caracas/Countdown to Doomsday* (1966).

**CHRÉTIEN DE TROYES** (France, 1135-1183). From Grey Walker's review of *Everyman Library's Arthurian Romances 1991*: "These stories and their embellishments come from the fervid imagination of Chretien de Troyes, one of the fathers of Arthurian legend.... Arthur never cut such a splendid figure on the literary scene before de Troyes wrote his Romances in the twelfth century, and it is arguably due to de Troyes that Camelot is a household name to this day. This Everyman's Library edition of de Troyes' work contains the romances *Erec and Enide*, *Cliges*, *Lancelot*, *Yvain*, and the incomplete *Percival*.... Chretien de Troyes wrote for distinguished patrons, most notably Eleanor of Aquitaine's daughter, Marie, Countess of Champagne, and Philip of Alsace, Count of Flanders. The romances are set in ancient Britain, and ample evidence suggests that de Troyes drew heavily on old Celtic sources such as the *Mabinogion*. However, de Troyes was careful to tailor their details to his medieval French audience. As Graeme Fife points out in his book *Arthur the King*, in these stories Arthur and his court speak elegant court French, dress in the height of twelfth century French fashion, and possess thoroughly medieval values."

## Lancelot du Lac

film de  
ROBERT BRESSON



APRIL 12, 2005 (X:12)

LANCELOT DU LAC/LANCELOT OF THE LAKE  
(1974) 85 min

Luc Simon...Lancelot du Lac  
Laura Duke Condominas...La Reine (The Queen)  
Humbert Balsan...Gauvain  
Vladimir Antolek-Oresek...Le Roi (The King)  
Patrick Bernhard...Mordred  
Arthur De Montalembert...Lionel  
Charles Balsan  
Christian Schlumberger  
Joseph-Patrick Le Quidre  
Jean-Paul Leperlier  
Marie-Louise Buffet  
Marie-Gabrielle Cartron  
Antoine Rabaud  
Jean-Marie Becar  
Guy de Bernis  
Philippe Chleq

Directed by Robert Bresson  
Script by Robert Bresson, based on the story by Chretien de Troyes  
Produced by Alfredo Bini, Jean-Pierre Rassam, François Rochas, Jean Yanne  
Original Music by Philippe Sarde  
Cinematography by Pasqualino De Santis  
Costume Design by Grès

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 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 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* (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 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 less 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 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 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 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 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*.

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.”

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

*Lancelot of the Lake* was a project Bresson had long dreamed of; he first hoped to work on it even before *A Man Escaped*. It is a purely speculative question as to how different the movie would have been if he had made it in the mid-1950s; the only thing that can be said for sure is that it would have been in black and white. Successive delays in acquiring financial support for his proposal to deal with the Arthurian legend at least meant that Bresson had the opportunity to become experienced in working with color. He was probably glad to interrupt the adaptation of the work of others and develop his own scenario without worrying about questions of “fidelity.” Bresson was undoubtedly familiar with Chrétien de Troyes’s *Lancelot, ou le chevalier de la charrette* and *Le roman de Perceval ou le conte de Graal*, as well as *La Mort du Roi Artur*, composed around 1230 by an unknown author. He could also assume a general knowledge of the Grail legend, the idea of the Round Table, and the love between Lancelot and Guinevere. As Jeff Rider suggests, however, Arthurian legend plays a different role in France than in England or the United States. “A French audience today associates the Arthurian legend with artistic greatness rather than with the thwarted imperial destiny of a pseudo-historical king.”

King Arthur and his knights have, of course, been part of the western European imagination since the thirteenth century. They were figures of a misty past from the beginning, since the real Arthur is supposed to have lived at the end of the fifth or the beginning of the sixth century. As with *The Trial of Joan of Arc*, although he wished to suggest the spirit of an earlier age, Bresson was not aiming at historical accuracy. Nor had he ever intended to draw on the spectacular or fairy-tale elements of his material; “I am going to try to transpose this fairy-tale aspect into the domain of feelings—that is, to show how feelings modify the very air we breathe.” The result reinforces the comments of Michel Estève:

Stripped of the dross of false realism, the Middle Ages presented to us [in *Lancelot*] is in accord with our time, and a dialectic of the temporal (the time of legend) and the a-temporal (our own age, and the one to come), or past and present, gives to the testimony of the author a character that is both universal and exemplary. On the level of customs or costumes (the fighting dress of the knights, the duels, the preparation and unfolding of the tournament, even the way of mounting a horse), the spiritual and psychological climate (fear of God, union of mystical and carnal love, obsession with the woman, courtly love) of the age, *Lancelot* revives the chivalry of the thirteenth century, but in many ways the mentalities presented and the quest pursued are also our own.

Understandably, the Arthurian material has extra appeal for those who

lament the crassness and limitations of modernity; Chrétien de Troyes's version even tries to enhance the attractiveness of feudalism. Whatever appeal these stories may have held for Bresson as a boy, the most striking thing about *Lancelot* is that it presents the age of knighthood without its patina of glamour, at the very moment it is coming to an end. In *Positif*, a journal often resistant to Bresson's approach to film, Barthélemy Amengual recognized the special suitability of the material for the director:

The painter recognizes in medieval illumination. . .the very form of his art. Doesn't illumination, like Bresson, excel in signifying, in arousing more by less? Through the elimination, conciseness, and elliptical violence customary with him, Bresson revives in its physical status a culture and an obscure world that is manipulated by mystery and the invisible....Bresson insists on floating this marvelous quest, with its lyrical combats and adventurous challenges, into exercises, ritual, interior debate, and exalted gestures, almost formalities. But here this formalism is inspired, since it blends with the fundamental formalism of chivalry....A game of chess and a tournament—indeed, the entire film, is conceived as an ordered and moral game, a bullfight, a judgment of God.

One could easily maintain that the age of chivalry has ended even before the beginning of the film: the very first shots of *Lancelot* offer a succession of destructive images. The knights are killing each other. Heads are cut off, bodies hang from trees; sacred objects are swept off an altar, and blood seems to gush everywhere. It is not simply a matter of the knights having met with some disaster; they have abandoned their vocation, which involved the search for the Grail. The Grail was the magic cup, preserved in an obscure castle in Brittany, in which Joseph of Arimathea had preserved the blood of Christ. Hence it was linked with the mystery of both the incarnation and the redemption. A text at the very beginning of the film, before the credits, summarizes the essentials of this legend:

After a series of adventures which draw on the marvelous and in which Lancelot of the Lake was the hero, the knights of King Arthur, known as "the knights of the Round Table," set out in pursuit of the Grail....Merlin the enchanter, before dying, vowed the knights to this holy adventure....Two years have passed. The knights return to the castle of King Arthur and Queen Guinevere, decimated and without having found the Grail.

This prologue is spelled out in letters of blood red, unfolding on the image of a chalice, and accompanied by the music of fife and drum. The action to follow will show the collapse of the knightly ideal; we are left to speculate as to the reasons for its failure.

Although *Lancelot* displays the total collapse of a proudly proclaimed ideal—and indeed of a whole civilization—it is not simply a cry of despair. Its sheer physical beauty hardly needs demonstration. Emmanuel Machuel, who was the film's assistant photographer—and also worked on *Balthazar*, *Mouchette*, *A Gentle Woman*, and *L'Argent*—said that he would give it first place for photography among all of Bresson's films. The colors are so dark that it may take a while to realize that the film is in color; the browns and blacks are found in every shade, making the queen's long blue robe all the more striking. Machuel observes that while Bresson had always been concerned to avoid lighting effects, working in color made this effort easier. "*Lancelot* shows especially well this total absence of effects due to color; there is no backlighting and faces are lit with exemplary sobriety. Lamps and projects were employed with great delicacy. It was necessary to eliminate everything that was artificial."

Rider describes the lighting as "simultaneously naturalistic and significant. It is generally low-key (dim and subdued) and diffused. The only high-key scenes in the film (scenes with bright even lighting) are those in the tournament sequence, and this contrast makes these rounds of civil violence in the sun the visual opposite of the dark forest

in which the knights meet their fated end." As Bresson always insisted. It is a matter of seeing images in relation to each other; a shot-by-shot analysis would be needed to show what he and his director of photography, Pasquale De Sanctis, accomplished.

The film's visual subtleties are always in the service of its tragic theme, announced from the beginning, in which the demands of love-passion, an insistence on loyalty, and a search for the impossible combine to make death inevitable. Of course, many commentators rightly point to the sudden and unexplained appearance of the archers as confirming the inadequacy of the older warrior ideal, but *Lancelot* is doomed long before that. Although the film can be used to support the conventional characterization of Bresson as austere, this should not be understood to mean that *Lancelot of the Lake* is simply bleak and cynical. The love of Guinevere and Lancelot is genuine and profound. Lancelot, who feels responsible for the failure of the knights' quest, at first resists the queen's reminders of his earlier vow to her and calls on God's help to give him the strength to leave her.

Connecting the story of Lancelot and Guinevere with that of Tristan and Isolde, Estève emphasizes that its pattern is in conformity with the reality of courtly love studied in Denis de Rougemont's *Love in the Western World*: "The fundamental rule of courtly love is opposed to having such a love become reality—i.e. to end up in full possession of the lady....he and Guinevere act like Tristan and Isolde, as if they had understood that everything that is opposed to love consecrates it in their heart and exalts it in that instant of absolute obedience which is death.

*Lancelot* may be Bresson's most complete demonstration of the deliberate elimination of excess and ornamentation that governed his approach to film. Julien Gracq praises his refusal to load his work with second-rate medieval antiquities, simultaneously preserving just what a Hollywood spectacular would have eliminated:

What survives of this massacre, strangely, or what surges from it new and never before seen, is what the novels about the Round Table themselves never show. Blood. Wounds. Fatigue. Mud. The brutality of the clash. And floating about the Round Table an air of rugged and ruined nobility that remains verdant despite the imminent ruin....One of the extraordinary things about the film—and a good part of its impact on the spectator—is there, in what we don't dare to call—since the two words protest being placed side by side—its Arthurian realism: the materialization, without any connivance with magic, almost poor in its lack of ornamentation, of a story that has never had a model or real locality, which since its birth has never had any other climate than that of myth, not any dwelling place but the wings of imagination.

As usual, the soundtrack merits extended study; Jeff Rider's comments support Gracq's paradoxical claim:

Many of the sound effects have an unnatural quality, yet Bresson uses them in ways that pretend to evoke a naturalistic ambience. This technique gives the illusion of a natural setting: the audience hears horses whinny and gallop, hears the knights armor clanking as they walk, hears an earthenware vessel being emptied. Some of these sounds are anchored visually; others are not. The sounds have been so elaborately constructed and enriched, however, that they take on a life and significance of their own when the audience hears them, bold and alone, on the soundtrack. The whinnies that one hears, offscreen, for example, are not intended to make us believe in the presence of off-screen horses. They are hyper-real intrusions that create a sense of anxiety and hidden meaning, both because one cannot attach them to anything in the film and because their peculiar quality undermines their credibility. The clanking cacophony of armor similarly serves to enhance this impression.

As for the dialogues between Lancelot and Guinevere, which constitute

the heart of the film, they are worthy of high tragedy. The vocabulary is as simple as that of Racine; the carefully balanced lines recall the thrust and riposte of Sophoclean *stichomythia*. Pronounced in a near monotone by Bresson's models, these exchanges—at least for those who can follow the French—communicate with far greater power than the histrionic love scenes found in most plays and movies.

All this supports René Prédal's emphasis on *Lancelot* as a poem. He emphasizes its plastic and sonorous leitmotifs, such as blood, gestures, lances, the changing reflections from armor (whether in darkness, candles, or daylight), the groaning of horses (their eyes, hindquarters, and nostrils). In order to find a modern equivalent to the richness of the original texts Bresson dissociates the meaning from the aesthetic, the soundtrack from the image, "verses" and "rimes no longer being (as in Eric Rohmer's *Perceval*) in the text but in the resonant and visual material of cinematographic language, appearing, for example, in the dazzling image of blood sweating from the interstices of the iron armor: the inspired visualization of the human death of an order.

Estève points out the paradoxical position of *Lancelot* in comparison with Bresson's other films containing explicitly religious subject matter:

*Lancelot* is the one in which the presence of God is least felt. The fundamental project of the hero, the prayers and oaths of Lancelot and Arthur, the conversations of the knights, and the evocation of Mass, Lancelot's offer of reconciliation to Mordred...all suggest a Christian vision of the world. But to evoke the celebrated search for the Grail, Bresson opens the story with shots of duels and the sacking of a church altar which show more iconoclastic violence than mystical aspiration. Invoked, prayed to, supplicated, God never responds.

But this is by no means to say that the film leaves us in a mood of total pessimism. Bresson ignores the pious endings of *La Mort du Roi Artur*, in which Guinevere becomes a nun after Arthur is killed, and Lancelot a priest after the death of the queen. Instead, he gives us Gawain's last words of affection for Lancelot and the royal couple and emphasizes that Lancelot has carried out the vow that the queen had reminded him of in the grange, "For you, I prefer death to life." As Jean Sémolué concludes, "The voyage to the end of disaster does not lead the hero to deny what he holds as most dear." We should recall that when the knights are looking in vain for Lancelot, they say, "Some force is manipulating us," a line that prefigures the theme of Bresson's next movie, *The Devil Probably*. But although there is little sense of liberation and God does not work a miracle to prevent the victory of the archers over an older civilization, it is worth recalling Bresson's cautionary response to parallel concerns voiced after *Au hasard Balthazar*: "If I succeed through the means of cinematography, in representing a human being...someone who is not a marionette, who wriggles, if there is a human presence, there is a divine presence."

A brochure for a future Bresson retrospective in North America should not be afraid to concede that his work is demanding and that it contradicts the assumptions with which most of us were indoctrinated when we started going to the movies. It's not just that we went mostly for escape, to indulge in romantic illusion, to laugh at the farcical antics of comedians, or to be horrified by hair-raising images. Movies were a way of forgetting classroom or family discipline, identifying with Hollywood glamour, sharing the anarchy of the Marx Brothers, ogling Claudette Colbert in a Roman bathtub. Or watching Fred Astaire dance. Of course, there is no need to feel guilty about enjoying such entertainments, but cinematography is a radically different way to think about film that can provide more liberating and enduring pleasures. David Thompson is right in saying that "to watch Bresson is to risk conversion away from the cinema. His meaning is so clearly inspirational, and his treatment so remorselessly interior, that he seems

to shame the intrinsic glamour and extravagance of movies. For that reason alone, he is not an easy director to digest. To go beyond admiration might be too near surrender.

The truth is that Bresson's movies do not fit the established genres, and are constructed in a way that is quite different from most of those we have seen. It isn't that Bresson doesn't tell stories, but he doesn't build them with the usual dramatic blocks, creating an inevitable climax that grows out of a clearly established climax.

As P. Adams Sitney explains, "One speaks of 'narration' in discussing the films of Robert Bresson rather than 'plot.' He replaces the conventional outline of events with a sense of the process by which events are arranged on the screen....Essentially, narrative becomes interesting in these works from which it almost disappears. It turns into a formal element when it diminishes as the focus of interest in a work."

The main barrier keeping the general public from Bresson's work, and which also made it difficult to find producers to finance them, was the absence of actors. We are so accustomed to watching actors' "interpretations" that we have ended up accepting them as the normal way of presenting human action on the screen. For Bresson, the idea of employing a camera to photograph what is not reality but only role-playing is a fundamental contradiction. John Keegan reminds us:

People in real life are not "actors." Still, real people will play roles and act. But even then they do not talk in the way actors who are performing tend to do. Interpretation is not a premeditated part of our speaking. We simply speak—without always being consciously aware of the depth of what we are saying. Bresson's method of filmmaking is an attempt to give expression to the "spiritual resources" beyond (within) the human effort.

With *Lancelot of the Lake* he was finally able to carry out a project he had dreamed of for years; although the suppression of background information often leaves us unsure of time and place, it may nevertheless be his most beautiful film. Choosing to begin with a pitiless description of the collapse of the Arthurian ethos, Bresson gives powerful expression to the hiddenness of God, and the cry for human liberation becomes all the stronger. It is the end of an age, but the idealism of Gawain and fidelity of Lancelot, though severely tested, both survive.

After Bresson's insightful successes with such heroines as Joan, Mouchette, and the gentle woman, it was hardly a surprise that Bresson's Guinevere, Laura Duke Condominas, would be so young. All the knights, even Gawain look up at her window, but she is more than a *femme fatale*; after insisting that Lancelot remain true to his vows to her, she criticizes him and his brother knights for misunderstanding the meaning of their search for the Grail: "God," she insists, "is not a trophy to be carried home."

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.

### David L. Simpson on "Chivalry and Courtly Love"

#### The Troubadours

Chivalric or Courtly Love (known in medieval France as "fine love" or *fin amour*) originated with the so-called troubadours of the late eleventh century. Promoting a suave new form of paganism which they called *Gai Saber* (literally, "the happy wisdom" or "gay science"), these colorful figures from the Provence region of southern France effectively challenged and sought to redefine traditional Christian ideals of love, marriage, manhood, virtue, and femininity. Under the sponsorship of powerful nobles like Eleanor of Aquitaine and Marie de Champagne, their influence gradually spread throughout France and eventually into England and Germany. By the middle of the 13th century, the troubadour philosophy had become practically institutionalized throughout the courts of Europe, and "fine love" had become the basis for a glamorous and exciting new style of life.

**What is Courtly Love?** Properly applied, the phrase *l'amour courtois* identified an extravagantly artificial and stylized relationship--a forbidden affair that was characterized by five main attributes. In essence, the relationship was

\* **Aristocratic.** As its name implies, courtly love was practiced by noble lords and ladies; its proper milieu was the royal palace or court.

\* **Ritualistic.** Couples engaged in a courtly relationship conventionally exchanged gifts and tokens of their affair. The lady was wooed according to elaborate conventions of etiquette (cf. "courtship" and "courtesy") and was the constant recipient of songs, poems, bouquets, sweet favors, and ceremonial gestures. For all these gentle and

painstaking attentions on the part of her lover, she need only return a short hint of approval, a mere shadow of affection. After all, she was the exalted *domina*—the commanding "mistress" of the affair; he was but her *servus*—a lowly but faithful servant.

\* **Secret.** Courtly lovers were pledged to strict secrecy. The foundation for their affair—indeed the source of its special aura and electricity—was that the rest of the world (except for a few confidantes or go-betweens) was excluded. In effect, the lovers composed a universe unto themselves—a special world with its own places (e.g., the secret rendezvous), rules, codes, and commandments.

\* **Adulterous.** "Fine love"—almost by definition--was extramarital. Indeed one of its principle attractions was that it offered an escape from the dull routines and boring confinements of noble marriage (which was typically little more than a political or economic alliance for the purpose of producing royal offspring). The troubadours themselves scoffed at marriage, regarding it as a glorified religious swindle. In its place they exalted their own ideal of a disciplined and decorous carnal relationship whose ultimate objective was not crude physical satisfaction, but a sublime and sensual intimacy.

\* **Literary.** Before it established itself as a popular real-life activity, courtly love first gained attention as a subject and theme in imaginative literature. Ardent knights, that is to say, and their passionately adored ladies were already popular figures in song and fable before they began spawning a host of real-life imitators in the palace halls and boudoirs of medieval Europe. (Note: Even the word "romance"—from Old French *romanz*—began life as the name for a narrative poem about chivalric heroes. Only later was the term applied to the distinctive love relationship commonly featured in such poems.)

### Robert Creeley - Bresson's Movies

A movie of Robert  
Bresson's showed a yacht,  
at evening on the Seine,  
all its lights on, watched

by two young, seemingly  
poor people, on a bridge adjacent,  
the classic boy and girl  
of the story, any one

one cares to tell. So  
year pass, of course, but  
I identified with the young,  
embittered Frenchman,

knew his almost complacent  
anguish and the distance  
he felt from his girl.  
Yet another film

of Bresson's has  
the aging Lancelot with his  
awkward armor standing  
in a woods, of small trees,

dazed, bleeding, both he  
and his horse are,  
trying to get back to  
the castle, itself of

no great size. It  
moved me, that  
life was after all  
like that. You are

in love. You stand  
in the woods, with  
a horse, bleeding.  
The story is true.

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