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Bresson Since Pickpocket

One of the cinema's greatest stylists, French director Robert Bresson has released twelve austere features over a thirty-five-year period — each one distinguished by an elliptical narrative and a formal rhythm that, in the words of Susan Sontag, "induces in the spectator a spiritual balance that is itself the subject of the film." Concentrating on Bresson's universe as it has emerged since *Pickpocket* — in which the intense moral struggles of the Bressonian individual are acted out, more often than not, against the visual traces of the modern world — this retrospective offers Toronto audiences their first opportunity for a chronological viewing of Bresson's late masterpieces. Included in the series are two films — Hitchcock's *The Wrong Man* and Dreyer's *The Passion of Joan of Arc* — which are frequently discussed in the context of the Bresson films with which they are shown.

Admission to the films is \$2.00 (including Gallery entrance). The exceptions are *Pickpocket* and *Le Procès de Jeanne d'Arc* which are free on admission to the Gallery. See back page for ticket details.

Sunday, January 7

2:00 pm *Pickpocket*

(1959, b&w, 75 min; French, *no* subtitles) dir. Robert Bresson; music: Jean-Baptiste Lully; w. Martin Lassalle, Marika Green

Michel is an arrogant unbeliever who turns to thievery. His progression is from intransigence to imprisonment, from a denial of values to an acceptance of responsibility. Like previous Bresson heroes, he finds that his responsibility is his humanity . . .

Daryl Chin, Museum of Modern Art programme note

For Bresson the true cinema is *écriture*, not *spectacle*, so style is the index of truth and a rigorous realism the only possible style. Thus, in *Pickpocket*, the same emphasis on still, contained faces and moving skilled hands, practising and working; the stark and spare beauty of functionally composed and newsreel-textured photography; the punctuations and interactions of commentary and classical music

Daniel Millar, *The Films of Robert Bresson*

3:45 pm *The Wrong Man*

(1956, b&w, 115 min) dir. Alfred Hitchcock w. Henry Fonda, Vera Miles, Anthony Quayle

A jazz musician, falsely accused of a series of thefts, is plunged into a state of anonymity that leads to liberation for himself and madness for his wife. "As this adventure is lived Hitchcock presents it, like Bresson, without embellishment. The suspense no longer even stems from the fact that what one knew would happen does happen, but on the contrary from the fact that what one was afraid of happening does not finally happen

"Five or six marvellous close-ups illuminate the film with brilliant flashes worthy of Murnau, not to mention Dreyer. The beauty of each of these close-ups, with their searching attention to the passage of time comes from the sense that necessity is intruding on triviality, essence on existence Once again Alfred Hitchcock proves that the cinema today is better fitted than either philosophy or the novel to convey the basic data of consciousness."

Jean-Luc Godard

Sunday, January 14,

2:00 pm *Le Procès de Jeanne d'Arc*

(1961, b&w, 65 min; French, *no* subtitles) dir. Robert Bresson w. Florence Delay

Bresson's Joan is the least saintly of all the Joans Spirituality, with Bresson, is not saintliness. His film is made on an object — the text — and on faces immobilized once and for all in only one appearance, that

of innocence or of guilt; a film made on four other material appearances — feet (bare in sandals or shod), wood, stone, iron.

Antonin Artaud, whose face was that of an exalted monk in the *Passion of Joan of Arc*, wrote, "Human skin, things, the drama of reality, that is what cinema plays with first. It exalts matter, makes it appear to us in its deep spirituality, in its relation with the spirit from which it is sprung." With Bresson, no exaltation, neither of the face nor of matter . . . One would seek there in vain an image of mystical love like that of Joan receiving the host in Dreyer. ▼

René Gilson



3:30 pm *La Passion de Jeanne d'Arc*

(1928, b&w, 85 min, silent; English intertitles) dir. Carl Dreyer w. Marie Falconetti, Antonin Artaud, Eugène Silvain

La Passion de Jeanne d'Arc seems like an historical document from an era in which the cinema doesn't exist.

Jean Cocteau

While shooting was still in progress Dreyer stated, "I am searching for nothing but life. It is the objective drama of the spirit that is important not the objective drama of the images." . . . Moussinac has noted that "Dreyer made maximum use of close-ups and all the expressive possibilities of camera angles. His refusal to use make-up gives the faces a strange and terrible force allowing them to express internal feelings and thoughts with a singular power.

Georges Sadoul, *Dictionary of Cinema*

Sunday, January 21

2:00 pm *Au Hasard, Balthazar*

(1965, b&w, 95 min) dir. Robert Bresson; music: Franz Schubert; w. Anne Wiazemsky, François Lafarge

Balthazar (which I had been thinking about for ten or twelve years) started from two ideas, from two schemata, if you will. First schema: the donkey has in his life the same stages as does a man, that is to say, a childhood, caresses; maturity, work; talent, genius in the middle of life; and the analytical period that precedes death. Second schema, which crosses the first or which starts from it: the passage of this donkey (*Balthazar*) through different human groups representing the vices of humanity, from which he suffers and from which he dies.

Given that the life of a donkey is a very even life, very serene, it was necessary to find a character who would be parallel to the donkey and who would give the film its dramatic rise. It was just then that I thought of a girl. Of the lost girl. Or rather — of the girl who loses herself Marie is the character parallel to the donkey and who ends by suffering like him.

Robert Bresson

Sunday, January 28

2:00 pm Mouchette

(1967, b&w, 90 min) dir. Robert Bresson; based on the novel by Georges Bernanos; w. Nadine Nortier, Jean-Claude Guilbert

An oppressed child, living in poverty in a hostile provincial community, tentatively, almost accidentally, commits suicide. Innocence sacrificed to the corruption of the world is a central Bressonian theme but "the real importance of *Mouchette* is that it confirms a new departure in Bresson's work which began with *Balthazar*. Always a solitary, the Bresson hero has hitherto lived apart, in a world almost of his creation, isolated not only by circumstance but by his own nature. With Marie and Mouchette, Bresson describes a different kind of solitude: one which exists *within* the world rather than apart from it; one which is resisted rather than courted."

Tom Milne, *Sight & Sound*

Sunday, February 3

2:00 & 4:00 pm Une Femme douce/A Gentle Creature

(1969, colour, 87 min) dir. Robert Bresson
w. Dominique Sanda, Guy Frangin

Based on Dostoyevsky's 1876 story of a young wife who jumps from a window holding an icon in her hand, Bresson's "gentle creature (like Mouchette) is no saint . . . but this makes the tragedy more ordinary and so more affecting. The matter-of-factness by which Bresson establishes the unexceptional nature of this marriage — as in his filming of the night after the wedding, when the husband has first sight of the girl's capacity for joy, which he later crushes — prepares us for the more psychic representations of the conflict between them: such as the dramatic moment when she thinks he is asleep and holds a pistol to his head."

Eric Rhode, *Sight & Sound*

. . . a film about diagonals. Diagonal angles, diagonal glances. About two diagonal lives. About eyes that never really meet. A film without a single frontal shot. A film about three-quarter spaces. About the sound of closing doors . . . About flowers picked and never taken home . . . About death in our midst.

Jonas Mekas, *Movie Journal*

Sunday, February 11

2:00 & 4:00 pm Quatres Nuits d'un rêveur/Four Nights of a Dreamer

(1970, colour, 91 min) dir. Robert Bresson w. Isabel Weingarten, Guillaume des Forêts

Four Nights of a Dreamer is very much a movie about the human condition of being in love. The story, adapted from Dostoyevsky's *White Nights* concerns a solitary man, a romantic dreamer, who one night befriends a distraught young girl and for the next three nights meets her to tell about himself and listen to her tale of what may be unrequited love. On the last night the girl encounters her lost lover and goes off with him — leaving the dreamer, who has fallen hopelessly in love, with only a memory. ▼



Bresson has moved the story from St. Petersburg of the 1840s to Paris of the 1970s . . . The intense covert eroticism of earlier Bresson is now overt and even lyrically sustained. Time and again it is shockingly beautiful, and I can think of nothing in recent films so ravishing as his strange romantic vision of the city, the river and the softly lit *bateaux mouches* floating silently in the night.

Roger Greenspun, *New York Times*



Sunday, February 18 ▲

2:00 & 4:00 pm Lancelot du Lac/Lancelot of the Lake

(1974, colour, 82 min)

dir. Robert Bresson w. Luc Simon, Laura Duke Condominas

Bresson's often-announced and long-awaited "medieval tapestry" traces the end of the feudal dream, of courtly love and the beginning of modern times. "Most modern of all perhaps are the characters of Guinevere and Lancelot: the absence of any psychology, elliptical exposition of their feelings, and the degree to which Bresson isolates them from their environments and defines them in relation to each other, all serve to give them unmistakable contemporary reverberations. And the anonymous scenes of war and indifferent slaughter that enclose their story register with an effect which is even more timely . . . Faceless phantoms battle and perish beneath heavy armour. The gush of blood from the decapitated knight and the last word of Lancelot are the only concrete signs that we are witnessing men and not machines, death and not an abstraction of death . . . It seems useful to speak here of Bresson's art as one of immanence, not one of transcendence, and one where the inside is always revealed by remaining on the outside.

Jonathan Rosenbaum, *Sight & Sound*

Sunday, February 25

2:00 & 4:00 pm Le Diable, probablement/The Devil Probably

(1977, colour, 95 min) dir. Robert Bresson w. Antoine Monnier, Tina Irissari, Henri de Maublanc, Laetitia Carcano

Two beautiful girls and two handsome boys give life to *The Devil Probably*. I am emphasizing their beauty because it is in part the subject of the film: wasted beauty, wasted youth . . .

François Truffaut

No other director I can think of has come as close as Bresson to molding his players into what are, in effect, variations on a continuing personality, much the way a painter might. This film, Bresson's first to be based entirely on his own screenplay, is about a young man who, realizing he cannot support the world as he finds it, nor hope to change it through revolution or religion, nor even to adapt to it through psychoanalysis, chooses suicide. Bresson reports this in newspaper headlines in the opening sequence, then proceeds backwards as he coolly presents us with the picture of an age that, like his hero Charles, is systematically destroying itself.

Vincent Canby, *New York Times*