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NOTES ON ROBERT BRESSON

Gavin Lambert

"Difficult," probably, is the word for Bresson's films; difficult because the experience they communicate is not only a personal but a fairly private one. Such a degree of privacy is rare in the cinema, and rarer still its uncompromising, classical austerity of expression. Cocteau in *Orphée* was unveiling a personal as much as a Grecian myth, but it so happens that many symbols of his private world—its apparatus of melodrama, after all, is familiar to the cinema—are known to our public one and so easily recognisable. To find a parallel with Bresson one has to go back to Dreyer—a parallel that has perhaps been over-stressed (since Bresson denied having seen *Jeanne d'Arc* until a year after he made *Journal d'un Curé de Campagne*) but which, all the same, exists.

Like Dreyer, Bresson has been able to make very few films—so far, three in ten years—and obliged to abandon several projects; like Dreyer, he insists on dominating his actors—as a sculptor models his clay, a French journalist remarked; and, like Dreyer, his films have an extraordinary inner concentration, a dedicated quality, stripped of all external concessions, implacably penetrating, and examining the human face, the dramas that may be expressed in it, not so much under a microscope as an X-ray machine.

It is hardly surprising that Bresson has found it difficult to work within the commercial framework of cinema, though the scope of his projects demands its resources; neither his point of view, nor his temperament, nor his methods, are likely to command large audiences. His first two films, *Les Anges du Péché* (1943) and *Les Dames du Bois de Boulogne* (1945), were not financially successful, and that he has achieved a kind of orthodox recognition with *Journal d'un Curé de Campagne* (1950) is due not to any change in approach, any compromise—on the contrary, it is perhaps the most unyieldingly disciplined of all his films—but to the book being a popular modern classic. Most people, in France at least, one suspects, came to see the film of the book, and by no means all of them liked it. Certainly when I first saw it in Paris nearly three years ago, after having to queue for half an hour in the middle of the afternoon (it was then in its third month), the audience was perplexed and restless; a full house at the beginning was depleted by at least a third at the end.

II

Hitchcock once remarked that the art of commercial film-making was to know just how far you could go; and Bresson, for a popular audience, starts where Hitchcock leaves off. He has had less a career in films than a crusade, and though it seems unlikely that in popular terms he will ever achieve more than the ambiguous

Studies in faces. Top : Jany Holt as Thérèse in "Les Anges du Péché" : centre, Maria Casares as Helene in "Les Dames du Bois de Boulogne" : below, Claude Laydu as the young priest of "Journal d'un Curé de Campagne".

The Bresson image: "Les Anges du Péché."

success of *Journal d'un Curé,* he has with three films established himself as the most original film-maker of his generation.

Born about forty years ago, he was first a painter; became interested in the cinema, was encouraged by René Clair, then joined the French army at the outbreak of the 1939 war, and was in a German prison camp for a year and a half. At the end of 1941 he met Father Raymond Bruckenberger, who suggested to him the idea of a film about the Sisters of Bethany. They worked out a story in collaboration with Jean Giraudoux, who wrote the dialogues, and for nearly two years tried to interest producers in it. Finally, Gaumont bought the script but "postponed" production, and it was due to the enterprise of Roland Tual, who acquired the rights from Gaumont, that *Les Anges du Péché* was not only made but made exactly as Bresson intended it.

Bresson has since remarked that he does not believe "technique," in the accepted sense of the word, exists; he prefers "*L'écriture.*" "*An author writes on the screen, expresses himself by means of photographed shots of variable length, and from variable angles. On an author worthy of the name, a choice is imposed, dictated by his calculations or his instinct, never by chance. For him, and for him alone, once he has worked out his découpage, each shot he takes can have only one definite angle, one certain length of time.*" *Les Anges du Péché* certainly gives this impression, and its mastery is none the less remarkable, especially for a first film. The story, set in a convent of the Dominican order founded by Father Lataste, whose chief work is the admission of women criminals as novices on their release from prison, centres on the relationship between an over-eager young sister and an apparently irredeemable girl whose soul she is determined to save; and, though it has a few of the kind of conventional elements that Bresson was later to reject entirely, already they cannot be accepted on a conventional dramatic level. This is precisely the level that interests Bresson least, and why, no doubt, the film was not popular. For the not always successful plot contrivances are quite obliterated by the film's main purpose, the delineation of a spiritual conflict, exactly analysed, between two young women, against a richly described background of convent life—its ritual, its dedication, its formidable self-discipline and, at times, ruthlessness.

Sister Anne-Marie (Renée Faure), who has given up a well-to-do middle-class home and a fond, self-indulgent mother to enter the order, has led a life almost devoid of personal experience; certainly evil is a conception, not a reality, for her. She does not understand it, she is frightened of it, but when she encounters it in Thérèse (Jany Holt)—a violent and embittered girl, unjustly sentenced, who kills the man who betrayed her, and takes refuge in the convent as a novice—she cannot let it alone. She wants, explicitly, to "reform" Thérèse—but as much, one feels, for the sake of eradicating wickedness as of Thérèse; desperately over-anxious about it, she is sensitive to Thérèse's indifference and provocations, and as the drama intensifies Anne-Marie's struggle becomes a struggle with herself. She is drawn to Thérèse because Thérèse has experienced all that side of life utterly closed to her: crime, violence, sex, poverty. She is horrified by it, but she must defeat it. Then, at the end, after Thérèse's rebuffs have driven her to a nervous obsession, to defiance, rage and spiritual pride, after she has been obliged to leave the order but wanders round the convent all the next night during a thunderstorm, after she has been brought back dying, Thérèse and Anne-Marie almost change sides; too weak to read her reception into the order herself, Anne-Marie has Thérèse read it for her, and Thérèse, "converted' by Anne-Marie's sacrifice and faith, gives herself up to the police. She will return after serving her sentence and, no doubt, be equally zealous, though wiser, in "reforming" others.

A girl leaving prison to shoot her associate in crime: a distracted ex-novice wandering round the convent during a storm at night; a final renunciatory walk to the police waiting with handcuffs. . . . These elements do not sound particularly uncompromising, yet Bresson's treatment of them provides a key to the film, and to his style. In each case a highly charged moment is related with a kind of impassive interior force, without any external emphasis. The girl shooting her lover is brilliantly, unexpectedly handled in one shot; Thérèse rings the bell at the apartment door, the shadow of the opening door crosses her figure as she stands against the corridor wall opposite, a voice off-screen is heard saying "*Bonjour*," she replies "*Bonjour*," then is pointing the revolver and fires it three times. Anne-Marie's collapse has an equally stringent economy. She is on her knees in the cemetery garden at night, her face intent and desperate, she apostrophises and pleads with God, half praying, half justifying herself, lightning flashes across the screen, raindrops fall on her face, she gives a little cry, continues her monologue, then suddenly falls forward. That is all. This concentration on the human face, revelation of situation through it, is Bresson's particular unrivalled gift, and he has developed it with each film.

Les Anges du Péché is in other ways less spare than its successors because of its almost exotic settings. The convent rooms and corridors, all white-walled, the black and white habits of the sisters luminously patterned against them, inspire a series of exquisite formal groupings, finely executed by Agostini's camera; the sisters' smooth insinuating movements, the rituals—their sudden abasements, prone to the floor, the frightening scene of the *correction fraternelle* when Anne-Marie knocks at the doors of the sisters' rooms in turn and asks to be told of her faults—and the beautifully insistent repetitions of black against white, create a draughtsmanship with something oriental in its precision and remoteness. This is a society no less strange for being taken so completely for granted. There are some fine character portraits—Sylvie's *Mère Prieure*, patient, resigned, solitary, Marie-Hélène Dasté's angular and dominating Mère Saint-Jean, Sylvia Monfort's reformed novice, eagerly grateful and pathetically weak; and, at the centre of the film, Renée Faure subtly develops her interpretation of Anne-Marie, elated with the first stages of her renunciation, increasingly driven in on her own inexperience as she discovers the harsher disciplines of her vocation and the obsession of Thérèse.

The fine assurance of Bresson's handling cannot mask certain flaws in the scenario—most notably, the briefly interpolated passages of the police inquiry into the murder, where the plot skeleton shows too thinly through—and in Jany Holt's Thérèse, which begins well, but cannot rise to the crucial demands of the character. In its overriding unity, though, and strongly personal temperament, *Les Anges du Péché* is unmistakably the work of a unique self-critical artist. This style, this *écriture*, is perhaps immediately remarkable for its fastidiousness—but a fastidiousness in the rejection of all impure, all facile elements, not in elegance or refinement for its own sake. Although the background gives it a pictorial richness that can be admired for itself—groupings, compositions, can look striking out of context, which is not to be the case with Bresson's next two films—the emotional force lies completely within the images of faces. Bresson is to dominate, to mould his actors more arbitrarily in his succeeding work, but already the handling of Renée Faure, of Sylvie (who have never equalled these performances in the cinema), and above all of Jany Holt, whose playing is generally much cruder, shows his distaste for any conventionally theatrical flavour in playing; a face has to speak, to dissimulate, to lay bare its character all the time. No mannerisms, no decoration, no flattery—metaphorically, at least, he cuts their hair, leaves their features

The Bresson image: "Les Anges du Péche."

naked, as Dreyer did with Falconetti. After *Les Dames du Bois de Boulogne* he is to use only little-known players; anyone with a suspicion of "star" quality will bring something false and irrelevant.

With the movement and the rhythm of the film dictated by its inner development, many of the cinema's devices—above all, editing as a dynamic property—are jettisoned. On the surface the pace of Bresson's films looks inflexible, and yet any external variations would distract from the rigours of the "exploration within." Every film, he has remarked, requires its "uniform"—and, above all, no fancy dress. This uniform becomes, as it were, a garment for the soul: the alternating blacks and whites of *Les Anges du Péché,* the almost abstractly formal costumes of *Les Dames du Bois de Boulogne,* the severe black robes against grey wintry landscapes and anonymous interiors in *Journal d'un Curé de Campagne. "Nous poussons l'amour du style jusqu' à la manie. . . ."*

In the construction of a sound-track, the same classicism: the dialogue in each of these films has a lucid, precise, condensed quality, and in each case is created by a writer of high and meticulous literary skill, Giraudoux, Cocteau, Bernanos. There are no concessions to naturalism, which again would distract. The same composer, Jean-Jacques Grünenwald, has written the score for each film in a spare, strict, unsensuous style (except for the Anne-Marie "theme" in *Les Anges* which seems to me too conventional), and natural sound is used in an arbitrary, succinct manner: usually as a reminder of a world outside the world of the film, momentarily impinging upon it—the ominous, fatal whirr of the electrically-operated prison gates closing when Thérèse attempts her escape, street sounds that intermittently pierce the walls of Hélène's apartment in *Les Dames du Bois de Boulogne,* the muted rattle of the old man's lawnmower while the priest is talking to the Countess in *Journal d'un Curé de Campagne.*

III

The character of Anne-Marie expounds Bresson's favourite protagonist, the dedicated, haunted, isolated self-questioning hero or heroine, to whom all human communication seems to become increasingly painful, and whose eye is fixed on a horizon that others cannot see. In his next film, *Les Dames,* this dedication is profane. An attempt at a *tour de force,* it is a film quite without precedent, but in retrospect it appears the least complete of Bresson's films. Based on an episode in Diderot's novel *Jacques le Fataliste* (1773) the story, with dialogue by Cocteau, is set in contemporary Paris (though the backgrounds are so pared down that all we see of Paris is, briefly, part of the Bois de Boulogne). *Les Dames* are a mother and her daughter (Lucienne Bogaërt and Elina Labourdette) used by a rich society woman (Maria Casarès) in a scheme of revenge against the lover (Paul Bernard) who has grown tired of her. Agnès, the daughter, has fallen into night club "entertaining"; Hélène rescues her, sets her and her socially aspiring mother in a flat in the Square de Port-Royal, and then introduces Agnès to Jean, the lover she now detests. Deceiving both sides, so that Jean never learns about Agnès's past and Agnès believes she will lose him if she confesses it, Hélène manœuvres them into marriage. All too obvious former associates of Agnès (invited by Hélène) mingle with other guests at an expensive wedding, and Hélène is able triumphantly to tell Jean: *"Vous avez epousé une grue. Elle etait 'danseuse,' mon cher. . . ."*

Bresson contrives to tell this extraordinary story entirely through the characters as they reveal themselves in a series of encounters mainly pre-arranged by Hélène; everything exists within a powerful, mesmeric vacuum; what the characters do outside their particular situation is never indicated—their social positions emerge elliptically, their friends or acquaintances are never shown except collectively, anonymously at the night club and the wedding—and the action takes place almost entirely within two apartments.

In a scene reminiscent in style of Anne-Marie's hysteria in the storm at night, Hélène is shown awakening in bed the morning after she has extracted Jean's confession that he no longer cares for her; her maid comes in, she instructs her to tell anyone who telephones that she is out, and then she says, looking at the camera, *"Je me vengerai!"* And that, again, is all.

From this moment the narrative is dictated by Hélène's obsession. Nothing occurs that does not spring directly from it—she apparently has no qualms, no distractions, no other commitments, and certainly no relaxations; and to heighten the effect of, as it were, a formal distillation of life, a quintessence of a particular essence, the characters are costumed with determined unreality. Hélène, with her enormous eyes and long, dark hair, wears a long, black velvet evening gown most of the time, even dines in a leopard skin toque. Agnès has only two costumes, her night club outfit and a simple, plain dress over which she wears a shabby belted coat. Invited to dinner by Hélène, Mme. D. arrives heavily veiled, and removes neither hat nor veiling throughout the meal.

All this creates the impressions of ritual figures engrossed in a ritual drama, a kind of human equation, in which nothing is presented on an ordinary, naturalistic level; nothing, that is, until the end, when in the final scene between Jean and Agnès they succeed in emerging intact from Hélène's duplicities and find they can still love and trust each other. Here direct emotion breaks, or is intended to break, through, and that it doesn't is due partly to Paul Bernard's performance—an intelligent but frigid actor, badly miscast (the part was intended for Alain Cuny), he is stiff and uneasy throughout—and partly because the transition to a scene of direct emotional intensity needed a flexibility that Bresson was not prepared to give it. Although at last his two characters are, for the first time in any scene in the film, managing an affirmation, an episode of tenderness, the handling remains unremittingly distant and formal.

Thus, at the end, one is left with an equation brilliantly, intricately stated and incompletely solved. In the sheer concentration on character, the elimination of all extraneous detail, the film fascinatingly continues and intensifies the method of *Les Anges du Péché*; if it slightly overplays the formality—in Casarès' costuming and coiffure, which is a little too bizarre, the authority, the burning obsession of her performance overrides this obstacle. In fact, she is too strong for the others. They are supposed finally to break the vacuum, the last image is their image, but it leaves us still in the bleak, fierce, haunted world of Hélène.

IV

For *Journal d'un Curé de Campagne,* Bresson's starting-

point was an author surprising after Giraudoux and Cocteau; but what he made of Bernanos' central character, the lonely, uncertain, pre-destined young country priest of Ambricourt, "*prisonnier de la sainte agonie,*" shows the choice to have a firm inner logic. The protagonist, once again relentlessly isolated, striving, weighed down with an obsessive suffering, offered perhaps the greatest challenge; for his creation involved also a portrait of a kind of saint, a mystic, a person with an inner life of great richness, privacy and pain, most elusive for the camera to realise. Also, it offered another opportunity for an experiment in construction, in *écriture*; the diary form—again, one would have thought, demanding an almost impossible extension of the camera's dramatic resources, relying as it does on a monologue, interior and exterior, by a character mainly passive. Bresson, however, seems to have been certain of his style from the first. "Within the mind," he remarked to a French interviewer, Jean Douchet, while shooting the film, "the camera can grasp anything. . . ." The photography, he informed him, would be plain, unsophisticated—"no effects," of course; he intended to preserve the structure, the proportions, much of the dialogue of the original; and the backgrounds—the film was shot entirely on location, interior and exterior—would be "very little seen, but their presence will be known, and that is enough. . . ."

Only after seeing the film does one understand exactly what Bresson meant, and how difficult it would have been to be more explicit. "Within the mind" is an imponderable, resisting analysis or exposition; it is there; the "method" that communicates it—the elimination of everything external, descriptive, decorative—can be appreciated, but the method does not explain the inspiration, the interior strength. Technically—not in the sense that Bresson has despised the word, but, as he has said, in the sense that "*la construction a la valeur d'une idée*"—the result is a masterpiece; and, because the technique is indeed worth the idea, the film itself deserves that title.

Bresson has retained all Bernanos' central scenes; the intrigues at the Count's château, the "conversion" of the Countess, the consoling dialogues with the Curé de Torcy, the mischievous and adoring child Séraphita, the young priest's discovery of his illness, his journey to Lille, the visit to the squalid lodgings of his friend Louis, a defrocked priest, and the death. . . . What he has added is, mainly, his own temperament. For the film has a quality of exaltation, of inner revelation about it, not in fact present in Bernanos; the novel's tone is more detached and, at the same time, closer to physical realities. It is profoundly grim. Bresson gives the film a texture more complex, more poetic; everything seen is, so to speak, conveyed through the eyes of a visionary, the exterior world filtered down, real and visible and yet at one remove; the images are two-toned—Burel's photography, arrived at, apparently, after interminable testing, has a hypnotic softness and delicacy, a gentle wintry quality that suffuses the whole film, and against these grey landscapes and interiors the human faces are caught in close-ups of a rigid clarity and power. One has the feeling that Bresson was more personally engaged with his central character and his predicament, for his portraiture of the young priest's agonies, secret doubts and contemplations, reflected in the anxious lineaments of Claude Laydu's face, produces an intimate and profound concretion of experience. The method goes beyond the analytical, and the camera is admitted to the confines of a soul. The images it captures there take on the aspect of a visual meditation,

"Journal d'un Curé de Campagne." Claude Laydu, André Guibert.

This soul, this hero, is one of the most remarkable that the cinema has yet given us; for once a character is not externally memorable; the fact of Laydu is haunting not for itself but for what it expresses. Lonely, uncertain, and yet exalted; young, and yet fixed and set; it has a mysterious fervour and dedication that grows more urgent, and more self-contained, as the hostility of a primitive little village asserts itself; it is doomed, and yet will not be forgotten; for it carries its mystery away with it, and it is a mystery which even those of us who do not share, or want to share, would like to understand. *Journal d'un Curé de Campagne* is not, as someone has remarked, a film about religion, but about faith. Though it has (like *Les Anges du Péché* and, in its profane way, *Les Dames du Bois de Boulogne*) the physical and spiritual masochism to be found in so much modern Catholic art, though some of its agonies go beyond ascetism, it also possesses a genuine nobility. That Bresson's inspiration is a Christian and a Catholic one, and that it is the only one seriously at work in the cinema today, is evident; more remarkably, it stems from a pure, elevated and classical tradition. It is free from the repelled fascination with back-stairs squalor so disconcertingly revealed in the puerile and furtive concoctions of *The Living Room*, as from the gnawing, self-immolating "guilt" of Mauriac's families depressingly populating the Bordeaux district. It is joined, in fact, to the tradition of exalted pessimism which, unsparing though it is, derives from affirmation, from intrinsic faith; from love. It is a kind of love the cinema very seldom portrays, bound up as it is with a stringent self-renunciation, a mortified denial of the world and the flesh (and perhaps *Les Dames du Bois de Boulogne* even springs partly from a rejection of a "human" love); it is not the kind of love for many of us; but, hermetically sealed off though it may be, its voice and its particular ecstasy are unmistakable.

> "La douleur a cessé tout à coup. Elle était d'ailleurs si regulière, si constante que la fatigue aidant je sommeillais presque. Lorsqu'elle a cédé je me suis levé d'un bond, les tempes battantes, le cerveau terriblement lucide, avec l'impression—la certitude—de m'être entendu appeler. . . ."
>
> (BERNANDOS, *Journal d'un Curé de Compagne.*)