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LES DAMES DU BOIS DE BOULOGNE - France, 1945.

Production	- - - - -	Les Films Raoul Ploquin.
Direction	- - - - -	Robert Bresson.
Scenario and adapt.	- - - - -	Bresson, after a part of Diderot's <u>Jacques le Fataliste.</u>
Dialogue	- - - - -	Jean Cocteau.
Photography	- - - - -	Philippe Agostini.
Music	- - - - -	Jean-Jacques Grünenwald.
Design	- - - - -	Max Douy.
Editing	- - - - -	Jean Feyte - Cleris.
Cast	Maria Casarès (Hélène); Elina Labourdette (Agnès); Lucienne Bogaert (Madame D.); Paul Bernard (Jean); Jean Marchat (Jacques).	
Distribution	- - - - -	Consortium du Film.

A "purifying", a "refining", a "striving towards a pristine Racinian atmosphere", "jansenist", "the cinema's conscience": such are the various terms used to describe Robert Bresson, his attitude and his work, and certainly, by his own avowal, he is striving to draw the cinema from what he sees as a "rut". The cinema has its own language, its own means, he repeatedly says, but since it has existed it has been on a wrong track - the search to express itself by theatrical means. "I believe in the very special language of the cinema and I believe that as soon as you try to express yourself by mimicry, by gesture, by vocal effects, it can no longer be cinema, it becomes photographed theatre." (Clair, of course, had made the same complaint thirty years earlier). The cinema, he continues, is concerned not with images themselves, but with the relationships between them. So we return to Clair's concept of movement: only in Bresson's case it is a question of interior motion rather than exterior movement, it is a question not of an image containing a movement, but of a series of images whose meaning lies in their rythm, that is, in their juxtaposition. As soon as this happens the film takes on its own life: the basic plot itself, the protagonists, all serve as a jumping board to a significance which surpasses them. Diderot's lightly ironical tale of the vengeance of a society woman on her faithless lover is transformed into a tragedy. Every action of Hélène to imprison Jean and Agnes further in her trap becomes more and more of a torture for her: no longer do we follow the pursuit of a whim; instead we watch a will impose itself on others, as it were, despite itself, knowing that success will be agonising, but that no attempt would be weakness.

André Bazin has commented on how the characters are abstracted, not by the theatrical means of placing them in bare surroundings (whose sole intent would be to achieve this abstraction), but by the "counterpoint of two realities": he refers to "the reality of the rain, of the rushing noise of the waterfall, of the sound of earth slipping from a broken vase, the trotting of a horse on the cobbles" which is not only opposed to the simplification of the decor, to the conventionality of the costumes and to the literary and anachronistic tone of the dialogues" (which last Cocteau relates was demanded of him by Bresson), but which realities are there for "their indifference and complete irrelevance". It is this that tends to cause the characters to move in a world isolated from reality where their interior motion becomes important. The use of sounds, as already described, the use of the juxtaposition of black and white, as in the nightclub scene where Agnès is bathed in light and dressed in a black costume while Hélène can be seen surrounded in cigarette smoke standing out against a black background, or in the church where white and black dresses are opposed, effects both visual and auditory intensify the internal struggle of the characters.

The feeling of being in a kind of prison, communicated in all his films, perhaps translates a feeling present in Bresson himself, a feeling from which he would escape, but towards something unknown: "I would like, he has said, to make

it apparent that the paths we take do not always lead towards a known end." A film should be "a search for the unknown"; "the character must be a man, not an actor", is a dictum that follows logically: the camera should explore the personality before it knows what it will find. This is one reason why Maria Casarès was so perfect a lead - just as in Cocteau's Orphée later on, as Death, the role is above all a triumph of "presence", which is also the reason why Bresson was displeased with the weaker playing of Paul Bernard as Jean.

With Bresson, perhaps more than anyone, the film is a translation of a personal sentiment - it is a striving towards something, and the plot itself is no more than an excuse: "More and more, in my films, I try to suppress the plot." One cannot help wondering whether, should he ever succeed, he would be forced to say with Agnès: "I prefer our own destiny to one which is imposed upon us ... The sad thing is that I can no longer do anything. I had a profession.....!"

Filmography:

- 1934 - Les Affaires Publiques (co-dir. Pierre Charbonnier).
- C'était un musicien (dir. Fred Zelnick and Maurice Gleize. Dial. Bresson).
- 1936 - Les Jumeaux de Brighton (dir. Claude Heymann. Scenario: Bresson).
- 1939 - assistant to Clair for Air Fur (unfinished).
- 1943 - Les Anges du Péché.
- 1945 - Les Dames du Bois de Boulogne.
- 1950 - Le Journal d'un Curé de Campagne.
- 1956 - Un Condamné à mort s'est échappé or Le Vent souffle où il veut.
- 1959 - Pickpocket.
- 1962 - Le Procès de Jeanne d'Arc.

Sources: Cahiers du Cinéma, nos. 3, 75, 76, 77, (the last three contain the dialogue of DBB).

René Briot, Robert Bresson. (Paris: Cerf, 1957)

Pierre Lherminier, L'Art du Cinéma. (Paris: Seghers, 1960)

Georges Sadoul, Le Cinéma Français. (Paris: Flammarion, 1962)

"People of Talent - I: Maria Casarès," in Sight and Sound, Vol. 24, no. 4 (Spring 1955), p. 201.

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