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Robert Bresson's

# LANCELOT DU LAC

## That hollow ring

I must admit straight away that I am not a great fan of Robert Bresson. His severe stylization, his rigid Jansenism, his austere objectivity distress me. His characters rarely, if ever, laugh, and I don't trust directors whose vision is so humorless. There are films by Bresson that I admire greatly, such as **Diary of a Country Priest** and **Un Condamné à mort s'est échappé**: films set in prisons — both spiritual and physical — where he seems most at home. Two of his most recent films, **Une Femme douce** and **Four Nights of a Dreamer** (both, incidentally, based on short stories by Dostoevsky, updated and set in modern Paris) were excruciatingly precious and unconscionably dreary. Is this blasphemy? Perhaps, but Bresson's rarified style is incongruous in contemporary dress. Dominique Sanda in **Femme douce** was no more dead as a corpse than in life, and the hippies by the Seine who inhabited **Dreamer** lived lives like 78 rpm records played at 33 & 1/3. The content and form of both of these films were too disparate. So that the impact of one cancelled out the intensity of the other. Whereas, in **Un Condamné**, objects were endowed with a special life of their own, in **Femme douce** and **Dreamer**, people were drained of their existence and became objects.

Now that I've said all this, I can gladly report that Robert Bresson's latest film, **Lancelot du Lac**, is an unqualified masterpiece. It is a film he had to make: a film that *only* he could make. Here, in the sparse, medieval world of Camelot where everything from battle to bath to bed takes on the air of a formal ritual, Bresson is in his element. His cinematic style and the content of the story are in perfect harmony so that everything flows together smoothly in a dramatic and terrifying pageant. The themes with which he loves to work — self-denial, impossible honor and impending doom — are lucidly presented in a way that is at once compelling, incomprehensible, accessible, strange. Bresson's is not the Camelot of Joshua Logan's dream, peopled by Vanessa Redgrave and Richard Harris singing about the rain not falling until after sunset and wondering what merriment the king might be pursuing. This Camelot is made up of prayer, repression, carnage and sorrow. Here, chivalry is a thin veneer over a primitive barbarism, and the famed code of knightly conduct is an excuse for self-righteous bloodbaths and blessed suicide.

**Lancelot du Lac** begins with the Knights of the Round Table returning from an unsuccessful quest for the Holy Grail — their ranks decimated, their morale gone — and ends with the death of everyone in a pile of broken armor: a massive junk yard of history. Collectively they have failed in their sacred mission; individually — as exemplified by the noble Lancelot — they have failed in their personal vows of purity. There is nothing left to do but wait to be punished, and they wait for their inevitable death.

In the telling, Bresson jumps about a great deal, leaving much unexplained and omitting large segments of the narrative. But that is his intention and strangely enough, it works. This is a fragmented world in which communication is as rare as affection. Bresson wants us to see only fragments, for that is all there is. The knights not only wear their armor: they *are* their armor. Entire scenes are shot where nothing more than anonymous sollerets and cuisses are seen and nothing is heard but the clanking of metal against stone. A complete tournament is played out and we see nothing more than part of a bagpipe and the stomachs of charging horses. There is nothing more to see. An armored foot is as revealing or as concealing as an armored

By picking such a well-known tale as the legend of Camelot, Bresson has freed himself totally from the narrative: a liberation he has long sought. With **Lancelot**, he is free to make comments on the action as he wishes — sometimes long statements, sometimes brief notes in the margins — and he revels in this newfound freedom. He even makes jokes. Yet behind all this, one senses a self-satirization, as if in exposing the emotional void in Camelot's rigid codes, Bresson is himself aware of the absurdity of dogmatism as a basis for morality. Perhaps not. Whatever the case, in **Lancelot du Lac**, the master of austere ritual takes ritual itself to its furthest limits and finds it — like armor in which a body has decomposed — hollow.

*Fred Barron*