

## Document Citation

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Au hasard Balthazar (Balthazar), Bresson, Robert, 1966

Quatre nuits d'un rêveur (Four nights of a dreamer), Bresson, Robert, 1971



# ROBERT

## A BIRTHDAY

*'Many people are needed in order to make a film, but only one who makes, unmakes, remakes his images and sounds, returning at every second to the initial impression or sensation which brought these to birth and is incomprehensible to the other people.'*

Bresson is a revolutionary; a perfectionist; an *auteur*; a genius. The most extraordinary and original visionary to have graced the medium of film. With 13 uncompromised features, he has created a body of work that should – in a just world – have him revered among a handful of the greatest living artists. So far that is not the case and for every Godard ('Bresson is the French cinema as Dostoevsky is the Russian novel and Mozart is music') there are a thousand cretins capable of booing *L'Argent* at Cannes. But who remembers what actually won the Palme d'Or the year of *L'Argent* or *Lancelot*? Who cares?

So – as yet – it is a minority who would place him with Mozart or Dostoevsky, or even such innovators as Schoenberg, Emily Dickinson or Matisse. But cinematography (Bresson's definition of film) is not yet accorded the status of music, painting or literature. That's not the only problem for Bresson – there's the schizophrenia he induces in critics and spectators.

Bresson's work yields to the spectator. Accept that and life is easier. The films are accessible, emotional and – on the surface – simple. ('What I reject as too simple is the thing that is important and that one must dig into. Stupid mistrust of the simple things.')

Then one must qualify. Regard *Mouchette* as the story of an unloved child who finds salvation in death, or *L'Argent* as the portrait of a victim who becomes a murderer, or *A Man Escaped* as a true POW story. Then wait. These intensely compressed works yield more with every thought, with each viewing. Their initial appeal (visual beauty, strong linear narratives, sensuality, excitement) are just the start. One realises

that he has not only redefined the medium, but within his own terms achieved perfection, and works that are unerringly true. And truth is what Bresson seeks. No torturer has ever revealed more than this director who strips bare all that is superfluous, false.



With consummate (deceptive?) technique he complements sound with image (and vice versa), refining his art. He eschews theatre, deriving inspiration from music and painting, using 'models' (not actors), integrated music (not background), one lens (50 mm) only. These and other complex distillations of his technique create barriers only for those who wish to erect them, as idiotic as those who believe him cynical or pessimistic.

So approach the films with unblinkered eyes and as the 'miracle of objects' (Rohmer on Bresson) as defined by Leonardo: 'Light and dark, colour and substance, form and position, distance and nearness, movement and stillness'. –Brian Baxter.

*Quotes above and in the following notes from Bresson's 'Notes on the Cinematographer' published by Quartet Encounters.*



**Thu 10 Sep  
6.15**

**Les Anges du  
péché/  
Les Affaires  
publiques**

*'Nothing artful, but agile.'* Cinema's most intriguing directorial debut, made after Bresson's release as a POW. In the Béthanie convent, a criminal, Thérèse, resists the stifling attempts by novice Anne-Marie to 'save' her. After murdering her lover, Thérèse returns but communication again fails and Anne-Marie is banished, later discovered dying of exposure. She is unable to say her vows and Thérèse says them for her, in total unity. She is led to prison, free of hate. 1943. Plus the premiere of his comic short (1936).



# BRESSON

## CELEBRATION

**NB: GUARDIAN LECTURE.** *We very much hope that Robert Bresson will attend the season of his films if his schedule allows. An announcement will be made at the NFT in early September.*

Wed 16 Sep 8.30

### Diary of a Country Priest

(Journal d'un curé de campagne)

'An ice-cold commentary can warm, by contrast, tepid dialogues in a film. Phenomenon analogous to that of hot and cold in painting.' A complex treatment of Bernanos's novel with the voice-over counterpointing images, speech and an astonishing use of sound. The young priest of Ambricourt is released from life by cancer, but has long been apart from his parishioners. Expiation ('all is grace') against the image of a grey cross: the first 'famous' image in a Bresson film. 1950.



'Let it be feelings that bring about the events. Not the other way.' This masterly *film maudit*, derived from a section of a Diderot novel, is elegantly mounted and dressed in a timeless 'present'. A wealthy woman revenging herself upon her aristocratic lover arranges his marriage to a hard-up dancer. At their grand reception she whispers, 'You have married a slut'. But mortal love affirms life. The texture and stylised dialogue (Cocteau) propel complex events forward; emotion provoking catastrophe, hate, love. 1945. With Maria Casar  s.

Sat 12 Sep  
6.30

### Les Dames du Bois de Boulogne







**Thu 24 Sep**  
6.30

### A Man Escaped

(Un condamné à mort s'est échappé)

*'Slow films in which everyone is galloping and gesticulating; swift films in which people hardly stir.'* Bresson's first complete masterpiece, where no other contribution finally matters. Ostensibly it is the story of Fontaine's escape. A 'miracle' frees him and his strength is sublimely rewarded as he and Jost pad away in stockinged feet, to a prelude of Mozart and a postlude of natural (train) sounds and the ingenuous comment from the boy, 'If only my mother could see me now'. 1956.



**Mon 21 Sep**  
8.20

### Pickpocket/Trial of Joan of Arc

(Procès de Jeanne d'Arc)

*'The bonds that beings and things are waiting for, in order to live.'* Like Thérèse, the pickpocket escapes from the imprisonment of his interior life and 'fate' by the acceptance of love and actual imprisonment. He 'travels far' to discover Jeanne and the wonderful exultation of their union. Interestingly, this final sequence was copied, in *hommage*, by Paul Schrader for *American Gigolo* and Schrader – one of Bresson's fervent admirers – retains elements of the original film and the Dostoevsky novel which inspired it. 1959. *'Reject historical films whose effect would be "theatre" or "masquerade" . . . arrive at a non-historical truth using historical words.'* The overwhelming effect of *Procès de Jeanne d'Arc*, the most concentrated of films, shatters the senses. No music, no 'theatre' or 'masquerade', only the real words of the trial and a portrait of a pure soul elevated to sainthood. As always, Bresson (see above and the other quotes from his indispensable *Notes*) proves himself his own best and most rigorous critic: trenchant, accurate and discerning. 1961. Total 140 mins.



**Thu 24 Sep**  
8.45

### Au hasard, Balthazar

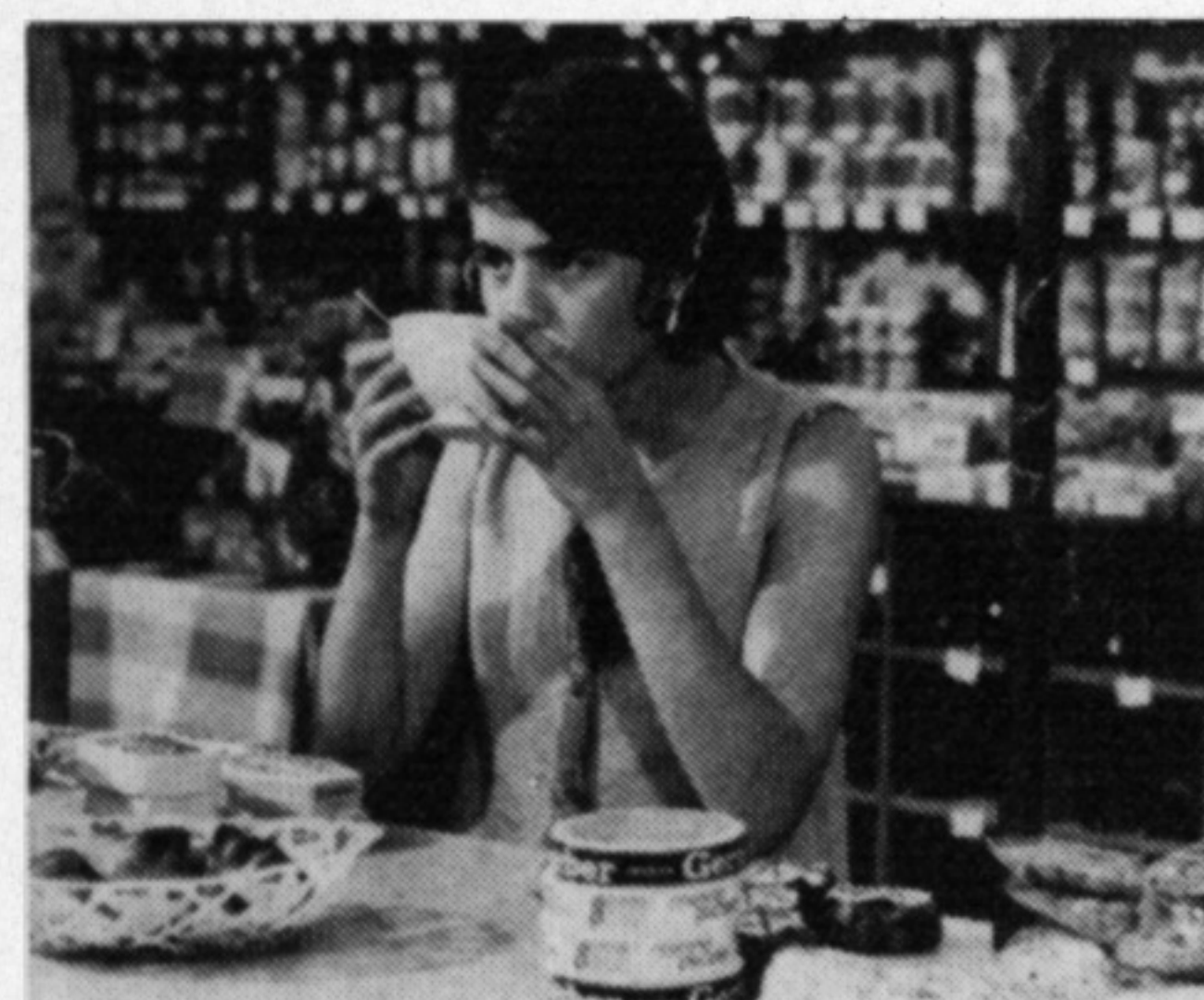
*'Extreme complexity. Your films: attempts, trials.'* An unusual circular movement for Bresson: his 'saint' (the donkey, Balthazar) is seen from birth (on a hillside) to death (among a flock of sheep, on the same hillside – wounded in the side) having endured the various sins of those who love, surround and abuse him. A movement towards 'youth' and the more 'modern' world Bresson was later to explore so vividly. A rare chance to see an exciting masterwork of great complexity and beauty. 1966.



**Fri 25 Sep**  
8.45

### Mouchette

*'Production of emotion determined by a resistance to emotion.'* Mouchette's suicide is intuitive (her wave to a passing worker is not returned), an escape from her poverty of life and the prospect of adulthood. This return to Bernanos is *le maître's* most accessible film, a portrait of a young girl (experiencing brief joy only in the stunning fairground sequence) and the desolate world she inhabits. An 'emotional' film, where no false or sentimental note is struck. 1967.





*Colour gives force to your images. It is a means of rendering the real more true. But if this real is not wholly real, it stresses its unlikeliness (its non-existence).'* Bresson's colour debut derives from Dostoevsky's *The Innocent*. A girl marries to escape poverty and is shackled to a young pawnbroker, whose poverty of spirit crushes her even more. Her suicide fleetingly shown at the beginning is echoed at the end. Her scarf floats in the breeze: a sublime, optimistic release from despair. 1969.

Mon 28 Sep  
6.30

### A Gentle Creature

(Une femme douce)

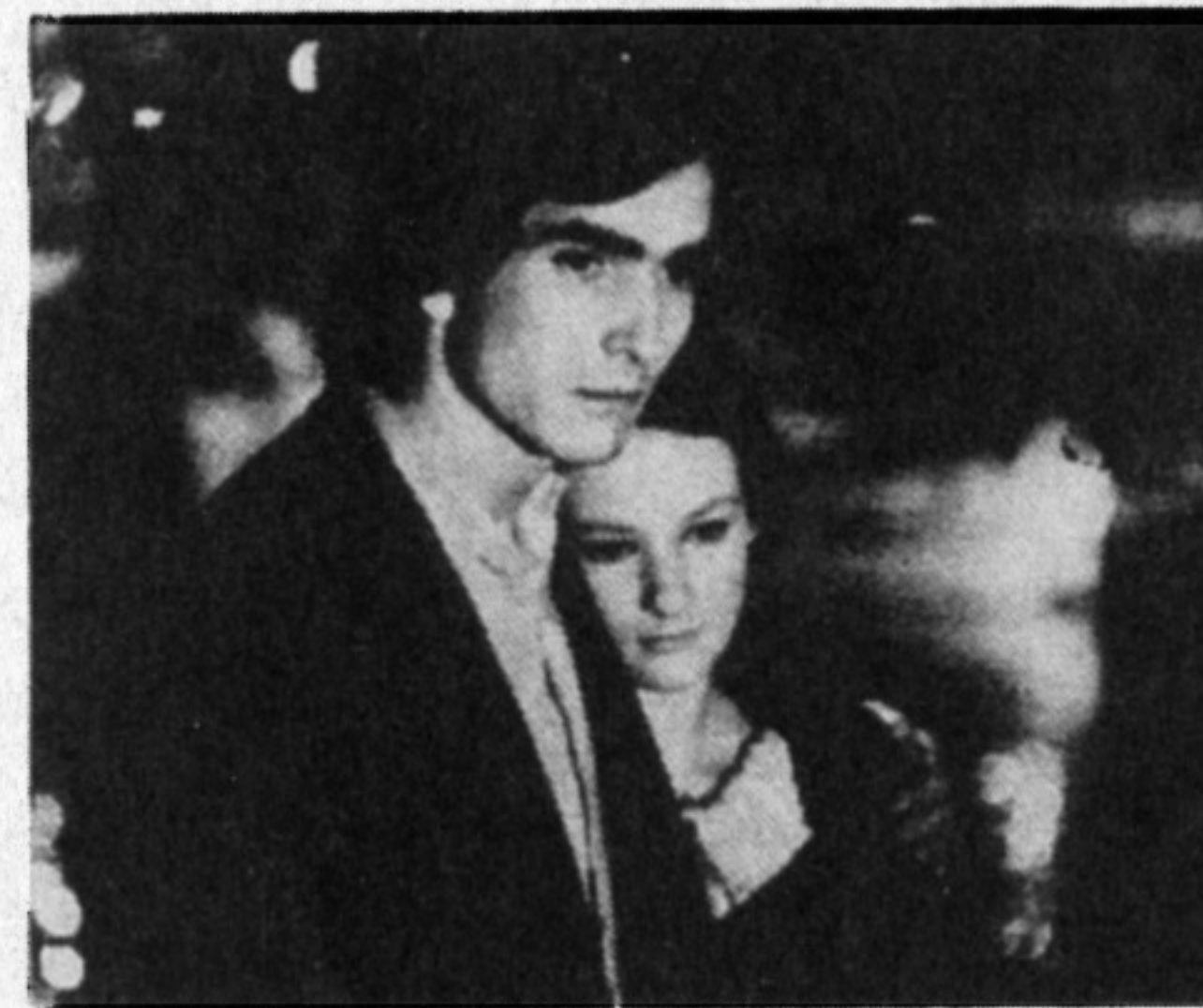


*'Have a painter's eye. The painter creates by looking.'* Bresson transposes Dostoevsky's *White Nights* (rendering the Russian and Italian treatments obsolete) to modern-day Paris, the city forming a magical backdrop to this story of a young girl's love for a man who disappears, and for whom she waits while a young man loves her in turn. The famous *bateau-mouches* sequence is a revelation, but the whole film is replete with beautiful (though *necessary*) images, and a sense of longing. 1971.

Mon 28 Sep  
8.45

### Four Nights of a Dreamer

(Quatre nuits d'un rêveur)



*'Cinematography films: emotional not representational.'* Until *L'Argent* Bresson's greatest achievement. Themes – love, honour, jealousy, friendship, betrayal, loyalty, sacrifice – densely interweave in a *non-representational* story of Lancelot, Guinevere and their King. Misunderstood because of its surface, the film has steadily grown in stature and one sees within this epic (without the idiocy of spectacle) his most mature presentation of a 'saintly' figure. A richly textured work, visually ravishing. 1974.

Sun 4 Oct  
8.30

### Lancelot du Lac



*'Hostility to art is also hostility to the new, to the unforeseen.'* Inspired by a newspaper cutting, this is Bresson's most 'political' work: a vision of a world intent on destroying itself. A quartet, led by the androgynous Charles, view the world despairingly. Charles later pays an addict to shoot him as they walk through a Paris cemetery. Bresson comments: 'It is a film about money, a source of evil whether for unnecessary armaments or the senseless pollution of the environment'. 1977.

Thu 1 Oct  
8.45

### The Devil, Probably

(Le Diable, probablement)



*'The things we bring off by chance, what power they have.'* The brutal title, the fierce ending, designed to 'shock' says Bresson, and the rigorousness of this masterpiece disturbed the French. Bresson's own synopsis explains: 'A small transgression provokes a vertiginous avalanche of Evil until the moment the forces of Good arrive.' This free adaptation of Tolstoy's *The False Note* is where Bresson found the most 'surprises', and it is surely a most complete and perfect work of cinematography. 1982.

Sun 4 Oct  
6.20

### L'Argent

