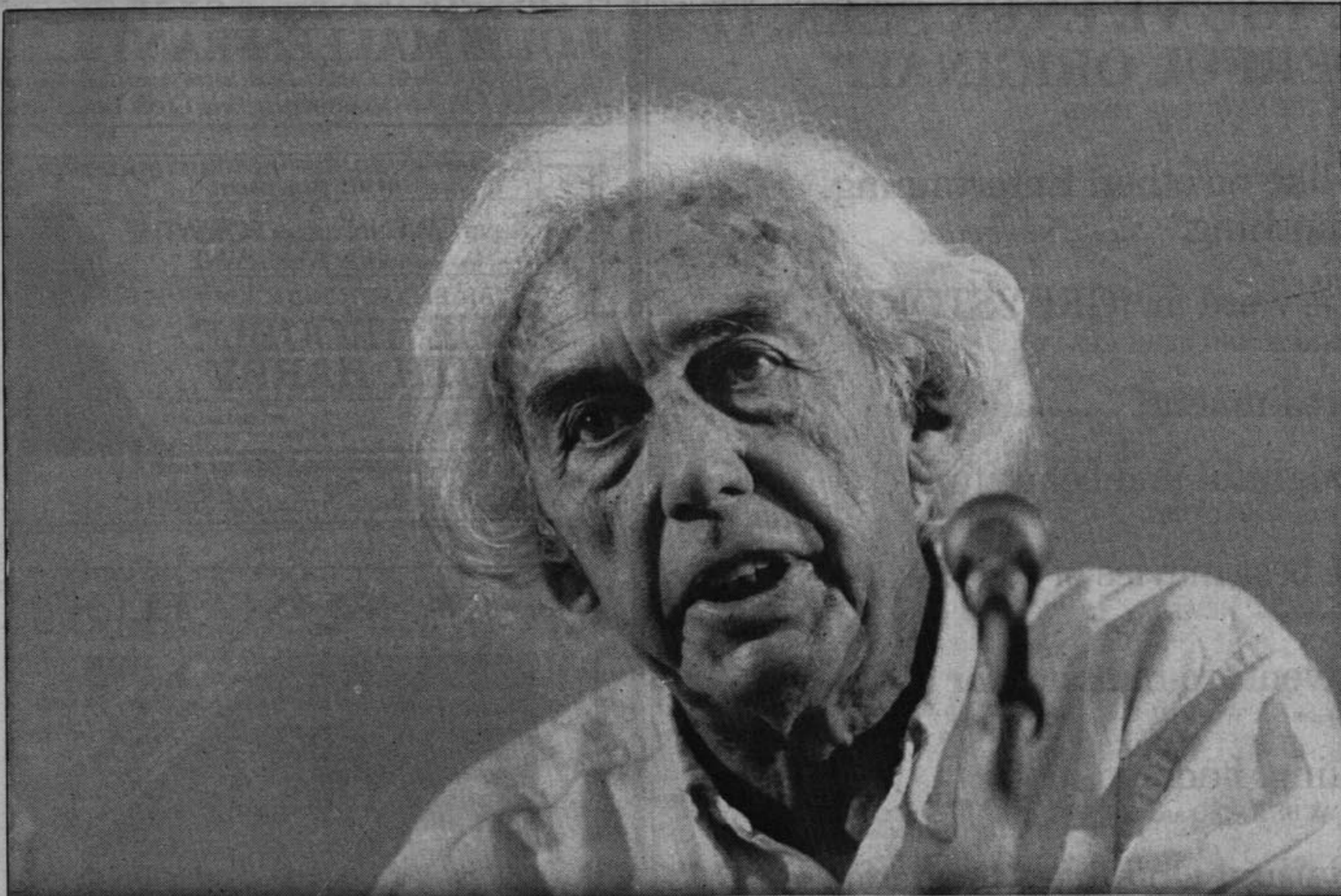


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FILMS IN FOCUS



Robert Bresson: 100-proof morality

Thoughts on Bresson and Hitchcock

By Andrew Sarris

L'ARGENT. Directed and written by Robert Bresson. Released by Cinecom International Films.

THE TROUBLE WITH HARRY. Directed and produced by Alfred Hitchcock. Screenplay by John Michael Hayes, from a novel by Jack Trevor Story. Originally released by Paramount, currently released by Universal.

When Robert Bresson, then nearly 80, slowly ascended the steps to the stage of the Palais du Festival to accept an award at the 1983 Cannes Film Festival for *L'Argent*, the predominantly French audience booed him roundly. I am told that the same indignity had befallen him some years before on the occasion of a Festival crumb for *Lancelot*. Hence, Bresson can hardly be regarded as a peculiarly French taste like the post-'50s Jerry Lewis. He is not, for that matter, a widely shared American taste either, but I doubt that an American audience would ever boo him in the flesh. Not only do we tend to be more intimidated by the physical presence of an artist than are our French cousins, but we also tend to be vaguely, numbly respectful of allegedly religious art. Most Americans confuse piety with religiosity, and, like their amiable president, take religion seriously only as a children's genre.

The French attitude toward Bresson is complicated by an encrusted anticlericalism in league with the many modish offshoots of neo-Marxism and neo-Freudianism. This is not to say that Bresson is without critical champions in France, but rather that he offends the humanistic instincts of most moviegoers, French and American. He seems to be too much in control of the characters, the narrative, and the *mise-en-scène*. Nothing and nobody can breathe within the iron grip of his rigid frames.

And of course there are the malicious rumors of senility on the set, of a certain degree of dottiness in the director, the dark side of genius, as it were. I can't evaluate these rumors, and it can be as awkward for this American to defend Bresson against the French as, on other occasions, it has been to defend Dreyer against the Danes and Bergman against the Swedes.

L'Argent, as a case in point, is not an

easy film to enjoy. God, is it hard! It simply never takes off on its own into the airy realms of the untrammelled unconscious. Bresson simply won't let it do so. By now he probably doesn't even have to tell his actors to avoid all vulgar histrionic display. Bressonian blankness has become an acting style all its own, and even nonprofessionals can master it. Consequently, *L'Argent*, like most Bresson works, plays more like a reading of the film than the film itself. And, really, when you think about it, what could be more "French" than the idea of the sacredness

one can often mistake the temple of cinema for a fun house. There is very little fun in Bresson, but an almost incredible beauty and intensity.

For the record, Bresson has adapted *L'Argent* from a story by Tolstoy, and is concerned here as he was in *The Devil Probably* with the problem of evil as the energizing force of social intercourse. A petty crime—passing counterfeit money—sets into motion a chain of events culminating in a mass murder. Everyone has his reasons, of course, but they are all bad and selfish reasons. A hysterical con-

With Hitchcock, one can mistake the temple of cinema for a fun house. There is very little fun in Bresson, but an almost incredible beauty and intensity.

of the text. Certainly, I wouldn't want the rest of the cinema to be infected by the feverish "purity" of Bressonianism, and yet Bresson achieves overpowering effects with his method. I am reminded of the moment in *Lancelot* when the deadpan hero tells an equally deadpan Guinevere that without her love he will lose all faith in God and the world. The very absence of histrionic inflection so completely isolates the Idea that it bursts into flames in my brain as an expression of the cosmic sweep of medieval passion. It is for such an epiphany that I go along with Bresson as he carries his cinematic cross across the screen to some unknown Golgotha of his imagination. *L'Argent* itself has many such epiphanies. It is getting to them that is the problem. And is it worth getting to them? I suppose that is the big question with Bresson. To the average, general, casual moviegoer, I would say no. One must take the cinema very seriously and the soul very seriously to take even the first step with Bresson. With Hitchcock

vict addresses Money itself as if it were a new god, and one does not have to follow the hilarious adventures of Ed Meese to realize that Mammon is alive and well and thriving far beyond Orange County. On the surface *L'Argent* would thus seem to be fashionably antibourgeois entertainment, and thus ideal fare for the straw men and women of the art-house liberal-left. The problem is that Bresson cuts all the way to the bone in charting the course of moral disillusion and disintegration. There are no halfway houses between heaven and hell in Bresson. There are no easy cures, and no sentimental consolations. Bresson's morality is 100-proof. Drink it at your own peril.