

Document Citation

Title	Robert Bresson
Author(s)	
Source	<i>Pacific Film Archive</i>
Date	1998
Type	press kit
Language	English
Pagination	
No. of Pages	8
Subjects	Bresson, Robert (1907-1999), Bromont-Lamothe, Puy-de-Dôme, France
Film Subjects	<p>Le journal d'un curé de campagne (Diary of a country priest), Bresson, Robert, 1951</p> <p>Le procès de Jeanne d'Arc (The trial of Joan of Arc), Bresson, Robert, 1962</p> <p>Les Dames du Bois de Boulogne (The ladies of the Bois de Boulogne), Bresson, Robert, 1945</p> <p>Les anges du péché (Angels of sin), Bresson, Robert, 1943</p> <p>Une femme douce (A gentle creature), Bresson, Robert, 1969</p> <p>Un condamné à mort s'est échappé (A man escaped), Bresson, Robert, 1956</p> <p>De weg naar Bresson (The way to Bresson), Rood, Jurriën, 1984</p> <p>L'argent (Money), Bresson, Robert, 1983</p> <p>Le Diable probablement (The Devil, probably), Bresson, Robert, 1977</p>

Lancelot du lac (Lancelot of the lake), Bresson, Robert, 1974

Pickpocket, Bresson, Robert, 1959

Mouchette, Bresson, Robert, 1967

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

Les affaires publiques, Bresson, Robert, 1934

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

Pacific Film Archive
University of California
Berkeley Art Museum
2625 Durant Avenue
Berkeley, California
Telephone: (510) 642-1412
General admission:
\$6 for one film,
\$7:50 for double bills

Robert Bresson

"It's the internal that commands."

"Bresson is the French cinema as Dostoyevsky is the Russian novel and Mozart is music," Godard said. But the works of Robert Bresson—thirteen exquisite gems in a career that spans five decades—are as rare as they are revered. So it is with great pleasure that we offer this long-awaited retrospective of his films, most of them presented in newly struck prints.

With his first feature—made after he had been a prisoner of war—Robert Bresson was recognized as an original and authentic voice in cinema. Over the years, this authenticity would rework itself in film after rigorous film, gaining him awe and more than a few imitators, but never a true heir. Even now, the power of Bresson's style—austere, yet deeply affecting; controlled, yet replete with compassion, almost unbearably so—remains one of cinema's pure mysteries.

"As far as I could," Bresson commented, "I have eliminated anything which might distract from the interior drama. For me, the cinema is an exploration within. Within the mind, the camera can grasp anything." Preferring to use untrained actors whose natural impassivity he harnesses to his own ends, the epiphany of Bresson's improvised technique is *Pickpocket*, which, in a watershed year in French cinema, 1959, was merely the most contemporary film ever made. Similarly, while Bresson frequently bases his films on literature—on Dostoyevsky, on Bernanos—he distills the original, paradoxically remaining true to both *écriture* and *image*. "The images must exclude the idea of image," he wrote. The part speaks for the whole, and absence often signifies a larger presence.

The Catholic Bresson evinces an unsparing eye toward French society—in the countryside, in the city, in convent or prison—and unsparing compassion for its victims. But while other directors are concerned with sentiment, Bresson's concern is at once more real and more otherworldly: his subject is suffering and redemption. For his many admirers, his films attain the grace his characters seek.

The Bresson Project was organized by James Quandt of Cinematheque Ontario, Toronto, and has been made possible by the exceptional generosity, efforts, and support of many individuals and organizations, particularly Robert and Mylène Bresson; the Bureau du Cinéma, Ministère des Affaires Etrangères, Paris (Pierre Triapkin, Laurent Burin des Roziers, Janine Deunf); and le Service Culturel du Consulat Général de France à Toronto (Fabyène Mansencal) and San Francisco.

We also express our gratitude to: Alliance Française, Toronto; New Yorker Films (José Lopez); La Cinémathèque Française (Dominique Païni, Alain Marchand,

Jacques Aumont); Canal + International (Michel Schmidt, Ron Halpern); Paramount Pictures, Paris; Gallimard (Prune Berge, Julien Laffon); Gian Vittorio Baldi; Lara Fitzgerald; Catherine Yolles; Dorina Furgiuele.

The Robert Bresson series at PFA is proudly sponsored by [AGNES B.

A Major New Publication

Central to the Cinematheque Ontario's Bresson Project is the publication of a major new volume on Bresson, edited by James Quandt. The first collection in English on the director in almost thirty years, it features essays on Bresson's work by no fewer than twenty-three major critics and scholars; interviews with Bresson by Paul Schrader, Jean-Luc Godard, and others; a section dedicated to exploring his influence in statements by two dozen filmmakers ranging from Jean Cocteau to Hal Hartley, Mani Kaul to Aki Kaurismäki; plus a filmography and selected bibliography. The book is sold in our Museum Store and PFA Box Office for \$35.

FRIDAY NOVEMBER 27

Les Anges du péché 7:30

Robert Bresson (France, 1943) **New Print!**

(*Angels of Sin*). Bresson's visual elegance and uncompromising narrative style are already in evidence in his first feature film, lending calm to its passionate religious ambiguities. The script, written by France's distinguished playwright and novelist Jean Giraudoux, follows a sophisticated young woman, Anne-Marie, into the closed world of a convent devoted to the rehabilitation of delinquent girls. At odds with the Mother Superior, she becomes attached to a rebellious girl, Thérèse, whose indifference to her ministrations drives concern into an obsession. Anne-Marie herself becomes "delinquent"; her personal regeneration progresses in parallel fashion to the girl's rehabilitation. The patiently evoked details of convent life present ritual, discipline, and sometimes ruthlessness as the norm, not as eccentricity as in a film such as *Pickpocket*. And if the camera's eye is rarely idle, Bresson said, "The knots which are tied and untied inside the characters give the film its movement, its real movement."

• Written by Jean Giraudoux, R. P. Raymond, Father Leopold Bruckberger, Bresson. Photographed by Philippe Agostini. With Renée Faure, Jany Holt, Louise Sylvie. (80 mins, In French with English subtitles, B&W, 35mm, Courtesy Editions Gallimard, from Cinematheque Ontario)

Les Dames du Bois de Boulogne 9:05

Robert Bresson (France, 1944-45) **New Print!**

(*The Ladies of the Bois de Boulogne*). On the surface, Bresson's most accessible work, *Les Dames du Bois de Boulogne* updates an episode in an eighteenth-century novel by Diderot to a contemporary Paris setting. It concerns a beautiful woman, Hélène (Maria Casarès in her first starring role), who takes revenge on her ex-lover by luring him into marriage with a young prostitute. The first step in her plot is to provide the young woman, Agnès, and her mother with shelter and privacy far away from Agnès's dance-hall clientele. Hélène then arranges the meeting, and the rest follows of its own accord. Only the result is something she had not predicted. It is in contemporizing the story—thus rendering the external character motivation ambiguous—and in Jean Cocteau's dialogue, that Bresson takes his first steps in the abstraction necessary to create this drama of love's triumph. What some have called his "distanced" approach is, rather, a distillation of passions otherwise inexpressible.

• Written by Bresson, based on a part of Diderot's *Jacques le fataliste*. Dialogue written by Jean Cocteau. Photographed by Philippe Agostini. With Maria Casarès, Elena Labourdette, Lucienne Bogaert, Paul Bernard. (90 mins, In French with English subtitles, B&W, 35mm, Courtesy French Ministry of Foreign Affairs)

SATURDAY NOVEMBER 28

The Diary of a Country Priest 7:00

Robert Bresson (France, 1950)

(*Le Journal d'un curé de campagne*). Georges Bernanos's novel concerns a young country priest who, in his simplicity and purity, suffers the scorn of his parishioners. Bresson faithfully adapted the novel to the screen, using Bernanos's original dialogue and diary entries; what he cut from the novel seems only to add to this fidelity. The essence of Bresson's film *écriture*, the narrative is punctuated by images of the priest's journal accompanied by a low-toned, voice-over reading. Episode by episode, in his loneliness and then in illness, like stages of the cross, the priest progresses through pain to grace. Claude Laydu, the Swiss stage actor who plays the priest, fasted for periods in order to achieve the authenticity of his role, which is one of exterior passivity and interior strength. He effects Bresson's most intimate excursion into the soul, and what Gavin Lambert called the director's "exalted pessimism."

• Written by Bresson, from the novel by Georges Bernanos. Photographed by Léonce-Henry Burel. With Claude Laydu, Nicole Maurey, Jean Riveyre, André Guibert. (114 mins, In French with English subtitles, B&W, 35mm, From Interama)

A Man Escaped 9:10

Robert Bresson (France, 1956) **New Print!**

(*Un Condamné à mort s'est échappé*). *A Man Escaped* is pure film existentialism. From a newspaper account by a Resistance leader who escaped from a Nazi prison in Lyon just hours before he was to be executed, Bresson created a film in which the drama is all internal. Minimizing the drama of prison life, paradoxically he maximizes its intensity, concentrating on his character Fontaine's solitude, and on prison relationships in which a tap on the wall, a whisper in the washroom, are bridges to another's soul. For the rest, he emphasizes the material preparation for escape—the spoon Fontaine must steal then shape into a cutting tool, the labor involved in taking apart his door. Set to Mozart's *Mass in C Minor*, this is a genuinely moving encounter with limits, and the need to transcend them. It is a true action film.

• Written by Bresson after the account of André Devigny. Photographed by Léonce-Henry Burel. With François Leterrier, Charles LeClainche, Maurice Beerblock. (97 mins, In French with English subtitles, B&W, 35mm, From New Yorker)

SUNDAY NOVEMBER 29

The Trial of Joan of Arc 5:30

Robert Bresson (France, 1962) **New Print!**

(*Le Procès de Jeanne d'Arc*). Bresson's film follows Joan of Arc's prolonged interrogation through to her death. The dialogue consists entirely of the trial transcript, reduced to its essentials; the visuals are austere, consisting mainly of medium shots of Joan and her judges, intercut with extreme close-ups of objects, hands, feet. Out of this icy surface, Bresson creates an exalting experience, full of the mystery and the drama of this woman's existence. Bresson: "I was content to use the monotony like a unified background against which the nuances would be more clearly seen....Joan's replies...serve not so much to give information about present or past events as to provoke significant reactions on Joan's face, the movements of her soul....I see her with the eyes of a believer. I believe in the marvelous world whose doors she opens and closes....She convinces us of a world at the farthest reach of our faculties. She enters this supernatural world but closes the door behind her."

• Written by Bresson. Photographed by Léonce-Henry Burel. With Florence Carrez, Jean-Claude Fourneau, Roger Honorat, Marc Jacquier. (65 mins, In French with English subtitles, B&W, 35mm, Courtesy French Ministry of Foreign Affairs)

Pickpocket with Les Affaires Publiques 6:50

Les Affaires Publiques

Robert Bresson (France, 1934)

Bresson's legendary first film, long believed lost, proves to be one of cinema's most intriguingly unlikely directorial debuts, a René Claire-like burlesque. The action takes place in an imaginary country, Crogandie, where (carefully orchestrated) chaos rules, and the Chancellor is a clown (the great Beby). And everywhere that Beby isn't, the comic Dalio is, in no fewer than three roles. Bresson: "I was a painter at the time and I wanted to make a film—a slightly crazy film....I did it without knowing anything about how to make a film. But I wasn't mistaken, I did right away what I was going to do afterward: work by instinct."

• Written by Bresson. Photographed by Nicolas Toporkoff. With Dalio, Beby, Andrée Servilanges, Gilles Margaritis. (27 mins, In French with live English translation, B&W, 35mm, Courtesy Cinémathèque Française and M. and Mme. Bresson)

Pickpocket

Robert Bresson (France, 1959) **New Print!**

A young recluse, Michel, drawn inexorably to picking pockets on the Metro and at the horse races, suffers a self-imposed anguish—not guilt, but a kind of performance anxiety, based on his Nietzschean theories of the superior man. Michel's bewilderment as to his motivations is as thorough as ours, which is only one of the fascinating aspects of Bresson's masterpiece, obliquely but famously based on Dostoyevsky's *Crime and Punishment*. Bresson's first film shot in the city—the streets, cafes, and subways of Paris—is a brilliant ballet of fingers, hands, glances, legs, watches, wallets, gazes from strangers indifferent or wary by turns. Everything is observable, isolated. In this way, Bresson ingeniously hones our eye to the director's vision: while we imagine we are seeing through the eyes of the character, we look into his soul. Through the love of Jeanne, the young neighbor of his aged mother, Michel achieves salvation in what may be the most moving, startling, simple gesture in all of cinema.

• Written by Bresson. Photographed by Léonce-Henry Burel. With Martin Lasalle, Marika Green, Pierre Leymarie, Jean Pelegri. (75 mins, In French with English subtitles, B&W, 35mm, Courtesy French Ministry of Foreign Affairs, permission New Yorker)

SATURDAY DECEMBER 5

The Way to Bresson 6:00

Jurriën Rood, Leo de Boer (*The Netherlands*, 1983)

Admission included with first feature, *Au Hasard Balthazar*.

(*De Weg Naar Bresson*). For Bresson neophytes and veterans alike, this documentary is a rare pleasure: an admirably concise, accessible, and intelligent introduction to the cinema of Robert Bresson, with discussions of his style, clips from his films, interviews with admirers and collaborators, plus a rare discussion with the master himself. The film is divided into sections (such as "Camera," "Actors," "Theory") which lucidly examine and illustrate the elements of Bresson's "system."—James Quandt

• (54 mins, English subtitles, Color/B&W, 3/4" video)

Au Hasard Balthazar 7:10

Robert Bresson (France, 1966) **New Print!**

Inspired in part by the donkey anecdote told by Prince Myshkin in Dostoyevsky's *The Idiot*, Bresson cast Balthazar the donkey as the central character. Passed from one owner to the next, Balthazar is both

witness to and victim of their stories, their suffering, their violence. His life, and his death, are as mysterious, if not meaningless, as any of theirs. (If anything, Balthazar's deep eyes, as captured in Bresson's fragmented framing, intimate an understanding lost to the blank-faced peasants. He is the transcendent Bressonian actor.) The other main figure in the film is a young farm girl who befriends Balthazar and suffers some of his fate in the grip of her passion for a leather-jacketed motorcyclist. Bresson was interested not only in the Biblical image of the donkey—his patience, his humility—but in the Greek and Roman concept of the donkey as a symbol of sexuality. Thus *Au Hasard Balthazar* is an extremely sensual film while remaining a work of almost unearthly sensitivity.

- Written by Bresson. Photographed by Ghislain Cloquet. With Anne Wiazemsky, François Lafarge, Walter Green, Philippe Asselin. (90 mins, In French with English subtitles, B&W, 35mm, Courtesy French Ministry of Foreign Affairs, permission Argos)

Mouchette 9:00

Robert Bresson (France, 1966) New Print!

Mouchette is a visual study of a state of mind. Based on a book by Georges Bernanos, author of *The Diary of a Country Priest*, it has affinities with that Bresson film but perhaps even more with *Balthazar* in its depiction of the limits of quiet suffering and humiliation a living being can endure. Here, too, the backdrop of French village life is painted in all its charmlessness. Fourteen-year-old Mouchette has been denied a childhood by an alcoholic father and a dying mother. Despised and rejected, she observes the adult world from a position of extreme isolation; like the donkey Balthazar she has no language in which to express her despair. A measure of defiance is brought out in her complicity with the village poacher, Arsène, but he takes cruel advantage of her affection. This final lesson in the callousness of adults informs Mouchette's first, and last, act of open rebellion, a pure, elegiac enactment of Bresson's transcendent pessimism.

- Written by Bresson, based on the novel *Nouvelle histoire de Mouchette* by Georges Bernanos. Photographed by Ghislain Cloquet. With Nadine Nortier, Jean-Claude Guilbert, Marie Cardinal, Paul Hébert. (80 mins, In French with English subtitles, B&W, 35mm, Courtesy French Ministry of Foreign Affairs, permission Argos)

SUNDAY DECEMBER 6

Les Dames du Bois de Boulogne 5:30

Les Anges du péché 7:15

For program notes, please see November 27.

THURSDAY DECEMBER 10

Mouchette 7:00

Au Hasard Balthazar 8:35

For program notes, please see December 5.

FRIDAY DECEMBER 11

A Man Escaped 7:30

The Diary of a Country Priest 9:25

For program notes, please see November 28.

SATURDAY DECEMBER 12

Une Femme douce 7:00

Robert Bresson (France, 1969) **New Print!**

(*A Gentle Creature*). The suicide of a young wife begins this simple, inscrutable story; afterward, her pawnbroker husband relates the history of their marriage. But his narration necessarily fails to explain the woman whose life we see in flashback, underlining the ultimate privacy of death. The actors deliver their impassioned Dostoyevskian lines with a wonderfully daft (calculated) affectlessness; at moments, the direction reaches a level of sublime absurdity reminiscent of late Buñuel. Yet the dogged peculiarity of Bresson's style and his insistent refusal of psychology seem paradoxically to bolster the story's emotional impact. Mysteriously resonant, too, are the quiet, lucid surfaces that fill the interiors of the director's first color picture—the pawnbroker's dark, burnished table, over which the couple first meet; or Dominique Sanda's pallid face, only slightly more animate in life than in death; and the luminous lid of her coffin, whose closing marks the film's end.—Juliet Clark

• Written by Bresson, from the Dostoyevsky story, "A Gentle Creature." Photographed by Ghislain Cloquet. With Dominique Sanda, Guy Frangin. (87 mins, In French with English subtitles, Color, 35mm, Courtesy M. and Mme. Bresson, permission Paramount)

Four Nights of a Dreamer 8:45

Robert Bresson (France, 1971) **New Print!**

(*Quatre Nuits d'un rêveur*). A Parisian night on the Pont Neuf. A woman bereft attempts suicide. Fate intervenes as a young man, new to town, stops her. An ordinary love story begins. Yet through Bresson, this well-worn tale is rewoven from the Dostoyevsky original into a cinematic meditation on both romanticism and the ultimate subjectivity of love. Intimacy begun in a dramatic moment of life and death continues as Marthe and Jacques pursue dreams, each enmeshed in his or her own romantic reality. Bresson's lean, austere style deeply etches their interlude: they are heard almost removed from context, and only what they see is seen. Bresson's philosophical concerns with transcendence play out in each lover's romantic reveries—Marthe's mind is full of sensual impressions of her longed-for lover while Jacques tape-records his obsessive projections of nearly every woman he sees. The director's trademark sombre atmosphere is lightened by his use of color—and a pop/bossa nova beat.—Sally Syberg

• Written by Bresson, from the Dostoyevsky story "White Nights." Photographed by Pierre L'homme. With Isabel Weingarten, Guillaume des Forêts, Jean-Maurice Monnoyer. (91 mins, In French with English subtitles, Color, 35mm, Courtesy M. and Mme. Bresson and Gian Vittorio Baldi, from Cinematheque Ontario)

SUNDAY DECEMBER 13

Lancelot of the Lake 5:30

Robert Bresson (France, 1974) **New Print!**

(*Lancelot du Lac*). One of Bresson's most beautiful and inventive films updates the King Arthur legend, not by bringing it into modern times but by the timeless modernism of the artist's treatment. The focus is on the adulterous love of Lancelot and Guinevere, viewed in its moment—the end of the Arthurian dream. In the amazing soundtrack, long stretches of the film are without dialogue, and offscreen sound and dialogue—when a person is heard but not seen—is the aural counterpart of a visual scheme in which hands, knees, and legs are seemingly disembodied from their armored owners. Exaggerated noises become ironic comments (e.g., the clash of armor that precedes lovemaking). The powerful effect of Bresson's elliptical soundtrack and images is that of a code of honor broken down, and "poor Lancelot, trying to stand firm in a shrunken world."

• Written by Bresson. Photographed by Pasqualino de Santis. With Luc Simon, Laura Duke-Condominas, Humbert Balsan, Vladimir Antolek-Oresek. (85 mins, In French with English subtitles, Color, 35mm, Courtesy French Ministry of Foreign Affairs, permission New Yorker)

The Devil Probably 7:10

Robert Bresson (France, 1977) New Print!

(*Le Diable probablement*). This has been called Bresson's most cynical film. It certainly offers his most fashionably cynical protagonist, Charles, a young Parisian whose suicidal despair is vaguely linked to, but not entirely explained by, all the ecological, political, and social disasters of the modern world circa 1977. This character makes an interestingly unsympathetic addition to Bresson's gallery of self-sacrifices—his behavior toward his multiple lovers is far from saintly, and his aristocratic beauty can't mitigate an infuriating, passive arrogance. But Charles's life, which ends in the middle of an unexpressed thought (less sublime than he'd expected), takes on in retrospect the odd, compromised dignity of a thwarted spiritual search. It's entirely possible to picture an alternate ending in which this dissatisfied youth becomes a Jesuit. The chic psychiatrist who tries to "cure" Charles's indifference asks, "When it's over, do you see yourself as a martyr?" The reply: "Only an amateur."—Juliet Clark

• Written by Bresson. Photographed by Pasqualino de Santis. With Antoine Monnier, Tina Irissari, Henri de Maublanc, Laetitia Carcano. (93 mins, In French with English subtitles, Color, 35mm, From New Yorker)

THURSDAY DECEMBER 17

Four Nights of a Dreamer 7:00

Une Femme douce 8:45

For program notes, please see December 12.

FRIDAY DECEMBER 18

The Devil Probably 7:30

Lancelot of the Lake 9:20

For program notes, please see December 13.

SATURDAY DECEMBER 19

L'Argent 7:00

Robert Bresson (France, 1982) New Print!

Like Godard and Straub-Huillet, Robert Bresson is better known for his method than for individual films. He is probably the most stringent stylist that narrative cinema has yet produced, the French cinema's brilliant monomaniac. He forces total concentration: scenes are enacted and assembled without differing degrees of emphasis. Whatever inspires people can only be inferred from their laconic utterances and meager gestures. Taken from Tolstoy's "The False Note," *L'Argent* is a serenely composed crime story that tells its ruthless tale without once raising its voice. An ordinary young man is caught up in a spiraling sequence of crimes that culminate in a double hatchet murder. His acts are inexplicable, but they are triggered by false testimony, abandonment, ordinary people on the take—and something totally mysterious in the soul of the protagonist. *L'Argent* has the manner of an official report, the tone of a spiritual autopsy.—Russell Merritt

- Written by Bresson, based on the Tolstoy story “The False Note.” Photographed by Pasqualino de Santis, Emmanuel Machuel. With Christian Patey, Sylvie Van Den Elsen, Michel Brigueat, Caroline Lang. (85 mins, In French with English subtitles, Color, 35mm, Courtesy French Ministry of Foreign Affairs, permission New Yorker)

Pickpocket 8:40

For program notes, please see November 29.

SUNDAY DECEMBER 20

The Trial of Joan of Arc 5:30

For program notes, please see November 29.

L'Argent 6:50

For program notes, please see December 19.