

FRENCH FILM DIRECTORS

Robert Bresson



KEITH READER

Robert Bresson

MANCHESTER
1824

Manchester University Press

FRENCH FILM DIRECTORS

DIANA HOLMES and ROBERT INGRAM *series editors*

DUDLEY ANDREW *series consultant*

Luc Besson SUSAN HAYWARD

Claude Chabrol GUY AUSTIN

Diane Kurys CARRIE TARR

George Méliès ELIZABETH EZRA

Coline Serreau BRIGITTE ROLLET

François Truffaut DIANA HOLMES AND ROBERT INGRAM

Agnès Varda ALISON SMITH

forthcoming titles

Jean-Jacques Beineix PHIL POWRIE

Bertrand Blier SUE HARRIS

Jean Cocteau JAMES WILLIAMS

Marguerite Duras RENATE GUNTHER

Jean-Luc Godard STEVE CANNON AND ELIANE MEYER

Jean Renoir MARTIN O'SHAUGHNESSY

Bertrand Tavernier LYNN A. HIGGINS

André Téclimé BILL MARSHALL

Jean Vigo MICHAEL TEMPLE

FRENCH FILM DIRECTORS

Robert Bresson

KEITH READER

Manchester University Press
MANCHESTER AND NEW YORK

Copyright © Keith Reader 2000

The right of Keith Reader to be identified as the author of this work has been asserted by him/her in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

Published by Manchester University Press
Altrincham Street, Manchester M1 7JA, UK
www.manchesteruniversitypress.co.uk

British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
A catalog record for this book is available from the Library of Congress

ISBN 0 7190 5366 8 paperback

First published 2000

The publisher has no responsibility for the persistence or accuracy of URLs for any external or third-party internet websites referred to in this book, and does not guarantee that any content on such websites is, or will remain, accurate or appropriate.

Contents

LIST OF PLATES	page vi
SERIES EDITORS' FOREWORD	vii
PREFACE	ix
Introduction	1
1 'Bresson before Bresson': <i>Affairs publiques</i>, <i>Les Anges du péché</i> and <i>Les Dames du Bois de Boulogne</i>	12
2 <i>Journal d'une curé de campagne</i>	30
3 The 'prison cycle': <i>Un condamné à mort s'est échappé</i>, <i>Pickpocket</i> and <i>Le Procès de Jeanne d'Arc</i>	43
4 The last black-and-white films: <i>Au hasard Balthazar</i> and <i>Mouchette</i>	76
5 Bresson and Dostoevsky: <i>Une femme douce</i> and <i>Quatre nuits d'un rêveur</i>	98
6 Sixth time lucky: <i>Lancelot du lac</i>	116
7 The director as writer: <i>Notes sur le cinématographe</i>	126
8 Civilisation and its discontents: <i>Le Diable probablement</i> and <i>L'Argent</i>	132
FILMOGRAPHY	154
SELECT BIBLIOGRAPHY	160
INDEX	162

List of plates

1	<i>Affaires publiques</i> (1934)	page 71
2	<i>Les Dames du Bois de Boulogne</i> (1945)	71
3	<i>Journal d'un curé de campagne</i> (1951)	72
4	<i>Un condamné à mort s'est échappé</i> (1956)	72
5	<i>Le Procès de Jeanne d'Arc</i> (1962)	73
6	<i>Mouchette</i> (1967)	73
7	<i>Au hasard Balthazar</i> (1966)	74
8	<i>Une femme douce</i> (1969)	75
9	<i>Lancelot du lac</i> (1974)	75

Plates 1–8 courtesy of the Collection Robert et Mylène Bresson. Plate 9 courtesy of SYGMA.

Series editors' foreword

To an anglophone audience, the combination of the words 'French' and 'cinema' evokes a particular kind of film: elegant and wordy, sexy but serious – an image as dependent on national stereotypes as is that of the crudely commercial Hollywood blockbuster, which is not to say that either image is without foundation. Over the past two decades, this generalised sense of a significant relationship between French identity and film has been explored in scholarly books and articles, and has entered the curriculum at university level and, in Britain, at A-level. The study of film as an art-form and (to a lesser extent) as industry, has become a popular and widespread element of French Studies, and French cinema has acquired an important place within Film Studies. Meanwhile, the growth in multi-screen and 'art-house' cinemas, together with the development of the video industry, has led to the greater availability of foreign-language films to an English-speaking audience. Responding to these developments, this series is designed for students and teachers seeking information and accessible but rigorous critical study of French cinema, and for the enthusiastic filmgoer who wants to know more.

The adoption of a director-based approach raises questions about *auteurism*. A series that categorises films not according to period or to genre (for example), but to the person who directed them, runs the risk of espousing a romantic view of film as the product of solitary inspiration. On this model, the critic's role might seem to be that of discovering continuities, revealing a necessary coherent set of themes and motifs which correspond to the particular genius of the individual. This is not our aim: the *auteur* perspective on film, itself most clearly articulated in France in the early 1950s, will be interrogated in certain volumes of the series, and, throughout, the director will be treated as one highly significant element in a complex process of film production and reception which includes socio-economic and political determinants, the work of a large and highly skilled team of artists and technicians, the mechanisms of production and distribution, and the complex and multiply determined responses of spectators.

The work of some of the directors in the series is already known outside France, that of others is less so – the aim is both to provide informative and original English-language studies of established figures, and to extend the range of French directors known to anglophone students of cinema. We intend the series to contribute to the promotion of the informal and formal study of French films, and to the pleasure of those who watch them.

DIANA HOLMES
ROBERT INGRAM

Preface

I began teaching French cinema in a British university – then called a polytechnic – in 1975, during the pre-video era when 16-millimetre prints were screened to groups of students. The course, shared with a colleague, adopted, like this series, an auteur-based approach, and Bresson was one of six directors studied. I knew his work very little at the outset and did not care much for most of what I did know, so that the bulk of the teaching of his films fell to my colleague, fortunately an ardent enthusiast. *Mouchette* (1967), and even to an extent *Journal d'un curé de campagne* (1951), intrigued me by their tight visual organisation and depiction of the miseries of life in the depths of provincial France, but as that most oxymoronic of entities an ex-Catholic, I was unsurprisingly as resistant to the redemptive ending of *Pickpocket* (1959) as to the odyssey of meekness in *Au hasard Balthazar* (1966), which struck me as little more than *Black Beauty* with a strong dose of opium of the people thrown in.

That all changed in the spring of 1982, when study-leave arrangements meant that I taught the whole of the French cinema course, including Bresson. The family and personal circumstances that catalysed my change are less important than the dramatic manner of its occurrence. As the cross filled the silent screen at the end of *Journal d'un curé de campagne* (hereinafter *Journal*), I left the room in tears, and even more extraordinarily the same thing occurred – the same tears happened to me – at the end of *Pickpocket*, a film whose laconic style I had hitherto dismissed as meretricious.

Paul Schrader has identified a key Bressonian moment as that of the 'decisive action', which 'forces the viewer into the confrontation with the Wholly Other he would normally avoid' (Schrader 1972: 81). That confrontation enacts on the other side of the screen the decisive action carried out – often in spite of themselves – by the films' central characters, so that my experience on reviewing Bresson's films had all but made of me one of their protagonists, bringing about a performative identification that had less to do with *who* those protagonists were (I had stolen only infrequently and never been a priest) than with *where*. Within a week of the screenings that had so moved me, I had drafted an outline for a research proposal and submitted it to the British Academy for funding. I spent a

month of that summer in the film libraries of Paris, saturating myself in Bressoniana, and the resulting article (Reader, 1986) became the first one on film to be published by the journal *French Studies*.

I mention this not (only) out of boastfulness or in order to substantiate my bona fides as a Bresson scholar, but because the extraordinary speed with which I moved from scepticism, verging on hostility, to passionate professional and personal commitment remains unprecedented in my experience. Extraordinary too was the coincidence that in his major book on Bresson, published in the same year as my article, Philippe Arnaud deploys the selfsame quotation from the Judaeo-Christian mystic Simone Weil that I had used – ‘La grâce comble, mais elle ne peut entrer que là où il y a un vide pour la recevoir, et c’est elle qui fait ce vide’ (Weil 1988: 18; Arnaud 1986: 20; Reader 1986: 441). Less extraordinary than it may at first seem, perhaps – Weil’s sparse, aphoristic writing is easily read as a pre-text for Bresson’s own *Notes sur le cinématographe*, and the importance of grace in the Bressonian universe is recognised by virtually all commentators on him – but an indication nonetheless of how my view of that universe interacted with others’. My fascination with Bresson’s work is largely a fascination with the variety of critical discourses, ranging from the adulatory to the scornful, it has generated, and in the pages that follow I shall try to give due space to these as well as to the films themselves.

My thanks go to: the New Professors’ Fund of the University of Newcastle upon Tyne for funding a period of sustained research in Paris; the Maison Suger in Paris for providing accommodation during that period; the staff of the Bibliothèque du Film, the Bibliothèque de l’Arsenal and the Bibliothèque François Mitterrand in Paris, and of the British Film Institute Library in London, for their kind and informed help; the Cinémathèque de Paris for making it possible for me to view three Bresson films (*Affaires publiques* (1934), *Une femme douce* (1969) and *Quatre nuits d’un rêveur* (1972)) otherwise unavailable; the Institut National de l’Audiovisuel (INA) for arranging a screening of the television programme on Bresson *Pour le plaisir*, Liz Andersen, Mylène Bresson, Rachel Edwards, Jill Forbes, Jean-Pierre Jeancolas, Chris Johnson, Eleonore Kofman, Catherine O’Brien, Phil Powrie, Ken Richardson, Naomi Segal, Trista Selous, Ginette Vincendeau and Anne Wiazemsky for their help, support and advice.

References

- Arnaud, Philippe (1986), *Robert Bresson*, Paris, Cahiers du Cinéma.
 Reader, Keith (1998), “‘D’où cela vient-il?’: notes on three films by Robert Bresson”, in James Quandt (ed.), *Robert Bresson*, Cinematheque Ontario, Toronto.
 Schrader, Paul (1972), *Transcendental Style in Film: Ozu, Bresson, Dreyer*, Los Angeles/London, University of California Press.
 Weil, Simone (1988), *La Pesanteur et la grâce*, Paris, Plon.
1. Grace fills up, but it can enter only where there is an empty space to receive it, and it makes this empty space itself.

Introduction

‘Bresson est “à part” dans ce métier terrible’¹ according to Jean Cocteau (Cocteau 1997: 35). Cocteau’s chosen epithet runs like a leitmotif through fifty years’ and more evaluation and description of Bresson’s work. Whether hagiographic, contemptuous or somewhere in between, those writers and critics, from Marguerite Duras to Patti Smith, who have dealt with Bresson have been almost unanimous in their assertion of his uniqueness – sometimes, it might be thought, acting as a pretext for avoiding or curtailing further analysis of his work. Immense though his influence on other directors has been – Jean Eustache, Rainer Werner Fassbinder, Philippe Garrel, Jean-Luc Godard, Aki Kaurismäki among Europeans; in transatlantic cinema, Atom Egoyan, Hal Hartley, Monte Hellman, Martin Scorsese² – Bresson himself passes for the archetypally uninfluenced film-maker, a myth reinforced by his insistence that he never goes to the cinema (‘Hier encore, quelqu’un me disait (c’est un reproche qu’on me fait parfois, sans le vouloir, mais c’en est un): “Pourquoi n’allez-vous jamais voir les films?” Car c’est absolument vrai: je ne vais pas les voir.’ (Ndlr: Bresson va voir tous les films)’³ (Godard and Delahaye 1966: 32, 71).

1 ‘Bresson is “apart” in this terrible trade.’

2 A useful overview of Bresson’s influence on three major film-makers – Jean Eustache, Philippe Garrel and Monte Hellman – is to be found in Brenez (1996a). Quandt (1998) includes seventy variously provocative and hagiographic observations by ‘Filmmakers on Bresson’ (523–91).

3 ‘Only yesterday somebody was saying to me (it’s an unintentional criticism

This individualism articulates itself through an instantly recognisable visual style – pared-down, laconic, elliptical – and a non- (or sometimes hyper-) realist use of sound and voice. ‘Lorsqu’un son peut remplacer une image, supprimer l’image ou la neutraliser’⁴ (Bresson [1975] 1988: 62). Jonathan Rosenbaum, indeed, has identified ‘sound presence’, along with ‘the framed image’, as the two major reasons why he believes that Bresson’s work does not successfully translate to video (Rosenbaum 1998: 17). The intense focus on key sounds, such as the raking of the leaves in the scene between the priest and the countess in *Journal* or the racecourse ticket-machines in *Pickpocket*, is complemented by a vocal delivery which often makes it sound as if the characters were quoting their lines rather than speaking them. Even the term ‘characters’, in that sentence, is open to doubt; a *Cinéma* 63 symposium on Bresson yielded the following exchange:

(Michel Mesnil) ... Il n’y a pas un seul personnage féminin sympathique chez Bresson.

(Robert Benayoun) Il n’y a pas de personnages sympathiques chez Bresson.

(Pierre Billard) Y a-t-il des personnages chez Bresson?

(*Cinéma* 63: 27)⁵

The absence – increasingly marked in the later works – of the kind of psychological detail and motivation that characterises a no less spiritually intense film-maker such as Bergman makes it genuinely tempting to proffer ‘No’ as an answer to that final question. Bresson’s characters tend to come without the baggage of information, direct or indirect, we might expect from other directors; we know nothing of the priest’s parents in *Journal* or of Michel’s previous life or occupation in *Pickpocket*, the couple in *Une femme douce* are never given names, the provincial region in which the action of *Au hasard Balthazar* (hereinafter *Balthazar*) is set is

sometimes made of me, but a criticism all the same): “Why don’t you ever go to see films?” That’s absolutely correct – I never go to see them’ (Editorial footnote: Bresson always goes to see films).

4 ‘When a sound can replace an image, get rid of the image or neutralise it.’

5 ‘There is not a single sympathetic female character in Bresson. There are no sympathetic characters in Bresson. Are there any characters in Bresson?’

never specified in the film (other than obliquely through a car number-plate). This absence of detail – hence, of ‘character’ in the sense in which a Balzac or a Renoir would have understood it – is commented upon by virtually every writer on Bresson, whether hostile as when John Coleman describes *Balthazar* as ‘almost comical in its withholding of information’ (Coleman 1969: 86) or more soberly analytical as in P. Adams Sitney’s view that Bresson ‘thoroughly empties out the projection of intention, conflict, and other signs of interiority’. For Sitney, he ‘invests the act of seeing – and therefore the shot-countershot structure – with the full burden of fictional psychology’ (Sitney 1998b: 150). This displacement of ‘content’ onto ‘form’ helps to explain the interest in Bresson’s work shown by such formally conscious writers on and in film as Jean-Pierre Oudart, Jean-Marie Straub and Danièle Huillet or Susan Sontag. That interest does not so much elide or marginalise the specifically Catholic aspects of the films as subsume them within the formal dimension. For Peter Schofer, ‘two avatars, rhetoric and Jansenism, are condensed in the films of Bresson’ (Schofer 1974: 59), and it is that condensation that provides the key to understanding how writers out of sympathy with a Catholic perspective, such as those mentioned above, have approached his work. According to René Prédal, the commonest Bressonian rhetorical figures are litotes, ellipsis and metonymy (Prédal 1992: 30), the first of these associated above all with sexual love (Bresson’s work is saturated with sexual tension yet contains nothing that resembles a ‘sex scene’, with the possible exception of *Quatre nuits d’un rêveur*). Ellipsis, in the form of unanswered questions (*Pickpocket*) or gaps in the narrative (*Balthazar*), works against conventional psychology and its overtones of filmed theatre, while metonymy – the shawl in the opening sequence of *Une femme douce*, the armour in *Lancelot du lac* (1974) – appears more marked in the colour films, whose tendency towards greater expansiveness it works to contain.

Bresson’s refusal, from *Journal* onwards, of professional actors (Anne Wiazemsky and Dominique Sanda went on to successful acting careers, but never appeared for Bresson again) is of a piece with his rejection of psychology and character. He goes so far as to

refuse the very word ‘acteur’, preferring to speak of ‘modèles’, a term whose overtones of automatism and malleability are significant:

Modèle. Questionné (par les gestes que tu lui fais faire, les mots que tu lui fais dire). Réponse (quand ce ne serait qu’un refus de répondre) que souvent tu ne perçois pas mais que la caméra enregistre. Soumise *ensuite* à ton étude.⁶

The notorious frequency with which Bresson obliges his *modèles*⁷ to repeat their lines and gestures (up to fifty times), and his insistence that they eschew any apparent emotional investment in or colouring of what they say, become understandable in this context. Only afterwards, on screen during editing, away from the gaze of the *modèles* who have no access to the process, does it become plain which version is the ‘right’ one, the one that has achieved in its relationship with other words and images what Roland Barthes calls the *punctum* to which ultimately the whole film will owe its force. It is in this sense that we should understand René Briot’s view that ‘pour Bresson, [l’image] n’a qu’une valeur d’échange’⁸ (Briot 1957: 23).

Bresson’s use of *modèles*, so far as I know unique in the cinema, suggests three approaches to his work to which I shall return in this study. It smacks, first, of a sadism unappealingly distilled in his remark to Paul Guth during the shooting of *Les Dames du bois de Boulogne* (1945) (hereinafter *Les Dames*) that ‘[i]l faut apprivoiser son sujet comme un homme apprivoise sa femme’⁹ (Guth 1989: 106); his frequent squabbles with Maria Casarès during *Les Dames*, Claude Laydu’s pulling a medallion from a real fire in the shooting of *Journal*, Marie Cardinal’s description of the filming of *Mouchette* (Cardinal 1967) all provide anecdotal evidence for this, though Anne

6 ‘Model. Questioned (by the gestures you make him carry out, the words you make him say). A response (even if only a refusal to respond) that you often do not perceive but that is recorded by your camera. Only then is it submitted to your scrutiny.’

7 I use the French term throughout to emphasise the particularity of Bresson’s terminology.

8 ‘For Bresson, [the image] has only exchange value.’

9 ‘You have to tame your subject-matter as a man tames his woman.’

Wiazemsky is insistent that he was a delight to work for. Jean-Pierre Oudart goes so far as to theorise the ‘rapport sadien entre le séducteur et sa victime’ as the ‘inscription refoulée des rapports établis au cours du tournage du film entre le metteur en scène et ses acteurs (ses actrices)’¹⁰ (Oudart 1972: 88). Sternberg and Hitchcock are precedents that may occur to us here, but the iconographising thrust of the one and the bullying, overgrown-schoolboy playfulness of the other are a long way from what Bresson seeks to achieve. Almost like the surrealists with their interest in automatic writing, he uses repetition and reiteration to strip away layers of self-defence masquerading as self-projection – the quality he so abhors in conventional screen acting – and accede to an unconscious truth in which his *modèles* ‘rapports avec les personnes et les objets autour d’eux seront *justes*, parce qu’ils ne seront pas *pensés*’¹¹ (Bresson [1976] 1988: 34-5). We are here close to the second of the approaches I have mentioned – a view of the unconscious associated with Freud and more particularly with Lacan, that Lacan who ‘denigrates “humanistic” philosophy and psychology that treat man as an actor who wills his action and instead sees man as a submitting object of processes that transcend him’ (Turkle 1979: 49-50). Bresson’s relation to his *modèles* appears in many respects like that of the analyst to his or her analysands (‘l’important n’est pas ce qu’ils me montrent mais ce qu’ils cachent, et surtout *ce qu’ils ne savent pas qui est en eux*’¹² – Bresson [1976] 1988: 17), and recent Bresson scholarship (the work of Philippe Arnaud and Jean-Pierre Oudart in particular) has drawn largely on Lacanian concepts and methods.

Lacanian discourse has a complex and multiply determined relationship with Catholicism, and – third and last, but emphatically not least, in my short list of common approaches – Bresson has the reputation of being the cinema’s greatest Catholic director

10 ‘The Sadean relationship between the seducer and his victim [is] the repressed inscription of the relationships set up during shooting between the director and his actors and actresses.’

11 ‘[Their] relationships with the people and objects around them will be *true*, because they will not be *thought through*.’

12 ‘The important thing is not what they show me, but what they hide from me, and above all *what they do not know is in them*.’

(doubtless leaving Dreyer and Bergman to fight it out for the Protestant crown). For Louis Malle writing on *Pickpocket*, '[p]endant le temps de la projection, l'artiste est Dieu'¹³ (*Éloge* 1997: 36) – we may think, bearing in mind the celebrated Lacanian *boutade* 'je père-sévère',¹⁴ God the Father (*primus inter pares* if ever there were) at that. Catholic artists – François Mauriac and, even more, Graham Greene are the best-known examples – have a wealth of experience in recasting sinners as saints, so that the exceptionally high incidence of suicides in Bresson (four in thirteen features)¹⁵ situates him within a well-established heretical tradition. The theological term most often used to refer to Bresson, however, is Jansenist, after the Dutch theologian whose belief in predestination set him at odds with orthodox Catholicism. Jansenism, influential in France through the work of Racine and Pascal, has as its founding premise the radical hiddenness of God, at once present within yet absent from the world we perceive and thus able to be recognised only by those destined from all eternity to do so. Susan Sontag (Sontag 1969) was probably the first critic to suggest the analogies between the often violently heterodox Christian thought of Pascal and Simone Weil on the one hand and Bresson's on the other. Weil's observation on the void created by the action of grace¹⁶ quite literally mirrors Pascal, himself quoting God, when he writes "tu ne me chercherais pas, si tu ne m'avais trouvé"¹⁷ (Pascal [1670] 1976: 200).

Pascal's wager on the existence of God has what contemporary linguistics might call a performative effect, for it is only thanks to the wager that God's existence becomes certain and available to the believer. This means that the wager rests less on a craven calculation of self-interest than on the fact that God, if he exists, is

13 'For the time it takes to screen the film, the artist is God.'

14 Literally, 'I persevere,' but also 'I am a/the severe father.' A *boutade* is a witty remark.

15 To wit: Doctor Delbende in *Journal*, Mouchette and the *femme douce* in the films of those names, and Charles in *Le Diable probablement*. (I have thus not counted marginal cases such as the country priest's self-neglect or Joan of Arc's recantation).

16 Quoted above, footnote 1, p. x.

17 "You would not be seeking me if you had not already found me."

qua infinite being necessarily hidden from and only partially, 'through a glass darkly', perceptible to the finite run of mortals.¹⁸ God figures surprisingly little in Bresson's *œuvre*, and less and less as it unfolds, all but dispossessed by Satan by the time we reach *Le Diable probablement* (1977). His presence is most obtrusive as the tyrannical father-figure in whose name the death-dealing proceedings of *Le Procès de Jeanne d'Arc* (1962) (hereinafter *Procès*) take place; his absence – which turns out to have been a real presence all along – most laceratingly felt in *Journal* ('Dieu s'est retiré de moi, je suis sûr',¹⁹ the priest says at one point); his presence-in-absence most movingly experienced perhaps in *Un condamné à mort s'est échappé* (1956) (hereinafter *Condamné*), described by Bresson himself in conversation as the film of grace *par excellence*, whose subtitle *Le Vent souffle où il veut* ('The wind bloweth where it listeth') distills the spirit of Jansenism.

If two of Bresson's first three feature films – *Les Anges du péché* and *Journal* – take the religious life as their setting, that life, like the God that is its ostensible inspiration, subsequently dwindles to near-invisibility. Few Catholic artists, however, have found the institutional life of 'their' Church a congenial or inspirational topic, and its declining importance in Bresson's later work is not of itself particularly surprising. That his work becomes more pessimistic in the course of his career is scarcely open to doubt, but the deepening disenchantment it shows with developments in contemporary society, from the *blousons noirs* in *Balthazar* to the environmental ravages depicted in *Le Diable probablement*, may not of itself be enough to justify its blanket labelling as 'pessimistic'.

My approach will be a chronological one – partly because in an auteur-based series that is the line of least resistance, but also because the patterns of evolution I have just described seem to me to lend themselves to it particularly well. I shall devote somewhat more space to *Balthazar* than to any of the other films, partly because I believe it to be Bresson's most important work and partly

¹⁸ Lucien Goldmann's *Le Dieu caché* (Goldmann, 1967) gives a masterly exposition of the importance for Pascal and Racine of God's essential hiddenness.

¹⁹ 'God has gone away from me, I am sure.'