

L'Argent

Kent Jones



BFI Modern Classics

Rob White

Series Editor

Advancing into its second century, the cinema is now a mature art form with an established list of classics. But contemporary cinema is so subject to every shift in fashion regarding aesthetics, morals and ideas that judgments on the true worth of recent films are liable to be risky and controversial; yet they are essential if we want to know where the cinema is going and what it can achieve.

As part of the British Film Institute's commitment to the promotion and evaluation of contemporary cinema, and in conjunction with the influential BFI Film Classics series, BFI Modern Classics is a series of books devoted to individual films of recent years. Distinguished film critics, scholars and novelists explore the production and reception of their chosen films in the context of an argument about the film's importance. Insightful, considered, often impassioned, these elegant, beautifully illustrated books will set the agenda for debates about what matters in modern cinema.

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This book is dedicated to Frank Moore.

On Bresson

How do you deal with a film-maker as profoundly individualistic and idiosyncratic as Robert Bresson? Every aspect of Bresson's cinema – visualization of space, storytelling practice, sound, performance style – is so much the product of his unique temperament and vision that his work has prompted extreme reactions from every quarter. For many average cinemagoers, his films feel disturbingly unemotional. In a parallel with popular reactions to atonal music and abstract painting, the lack of emotional variance in Bresson's (non-) actors is felt as sharply as the lack of melody in Webern or the lack of representation in Mondrian: in each case, the charge is excessive intellectual and formal precision at the expense of emotional involvement, hence anti-populism and élitism. On the other hand, for those cinemagoers who do connect with his work, Bresson is all but infallible. And for those who take it upon themselves to explain this towering artist, he remains a bit of a puzzle.

First, there is the approach of unbounded awe, in which Bresson's films are deemed to be so inhumanly pure that they stand far outside the rest of cinema, inhabiting a rarefied atmosphere uniquely their own. This line of thinking is perhaps best represented by the Bresson entry in David Thomson's *Biographical Dictionary of Film*, in which he writes:

It might be said that to watch Bresson is to risk conversion away from the cinema. His meaning is so clearly inspirational, and his treatment so remorselessly interior, that he seems to shame the extrinsic glamour and extravagance of movies. For that reason alone, he is not an easy director to digest. To go beyond admiration might be too near surrender.¹

The flip side is represented by Pauline Kael in her various writings on Bresson throughout the years. According to Kael, Bresson began his career doing great work but, beginning with *Pickpocket* (1959), slid steadily into the mire of formal and thematic severity. In other words, his films may be great on some level, but they are far too punishing to actually enjoy; therefore, they deserve banishment from the populist kingdom of the



Robert Bresson shooting *Trial of Joan of Arc*