



Control and Redemption

The Austere Cinema of

**ROBERT  
BRESSON**

*Mouchette*



**by Peter Goddard**

The Bresson Project is one of the most comprehensive retrospectives undertaken by Cinematheque Ontario. Robert Bresson, now in his early 90s, is described by many critics as the world's greatest living filmmaker. Starting with what he considers to be his first film, *Les Anges du péché* in 1943, Bresson made 13 feature-length films in 40 years. (An earlier comedy, *Les Affaires publiques*, filmed in 1935, was considered lost until its discovery in 1987 at La Cinémathèque Française.) Although perhaps not as prodigious as the output from other directors, Bresson's body of work, with all its passionate austerity, has had an inestimable influence on the history of cinema.

Jean-Luc Godard says, "Robert Bresson is French cinema, as Dostoevsky is the Russian novel and Mozart German music." Yet few of Bresson's films are available in any form in North America and little has been written on him in English. Accompanying the new series of 35mm prints by Cinematheque Ontario for The Bresson Project, is *Robert Bresson*, a 600-page collection of essays in English from writer/critics such as André Bazin, Susan Sontag, Alberto Moravia, Jonathan Rosenbaum and René Prédal. Following its debut showing at the Art Gallery of Ontario in Toronto last fall, The Bresson Project travels to more than an dozen centres across North America this year.



Lancelot du lac

**Travelling** across central France toward Lyon, as you near Bromont-Lamothe, the spare hillside village Robert Bresson came from more than 70 years ago, you find yourself climbing up the spine of the country—the Massif Central.

Even if you turn the words around into English, you get the idea of it, the feel and weight of it. The world weighs in on you here; gravity seems to pull harder. What it lacks in spectacular Alps-like heights or luxury resorts, the Massif Central makes up in bulk. It's the national backbone. Driving to the far eastern side of it, then down into the Rhône Valley, takes you over great humps of black rock bunched like muscles. This, you cannot help but think, is the landscape of Bresson's *Le Journal d'un curé de campagne* from 1951, with its many metal crosses and severe memories. George Berenanos's book provided the director with his story for *Le Journal*, but it's in the memory of these rocks and hills where the film was born.

It's less than an hour's drive to Clermont Ferrand and its massive Michelin tire factory, and not much more to Thiers, the hillside town devoted to cutlery making where François Truffaut shot *L'Argent de poche* in 1976. So it's less than an hour to modern France and modern multilane Europe, where turbo Saabs and the big Mercs roar south down the autoroute from Cologne and Copenhagen at 210 kilometres per hour, honking, blinking and threatening to crush the lagging old Renaults which have been driven out onto the highway by the poor, cowering locals who are only looking for a quick short-cut to their cousins in the next town.

But Bromont-Lamothe seems decades, not minutes, away from this. And you can sense something here you wouldn't expect from this austerity—the sensuality it radiates. It's the sensuality of feelings of longing, not of having; of silence, not of talking; of hiding behind an expressionless mask; of what's left, not what once was. In Bresson, it's translated into the sensual pewter colour of the armour in *Lancelot du lac*, 1974, or the professional, noncommittal expression of the faces in *Pickpocket* from 1959, or in just about every dramatically desolate scene in *Le Procès de Jeanne d'Arc*, 1962.

Turning this mid-morning into Bromont-Lamothe, brings a surprise. It's a bit larger than I imagined. I've followed

this route more times than I can recall, more often than not on the way to the Cannes Film Festival. But Bromont-Lamothe is hidden from view from the road, the houses tucked into folds in the hills to the north. You have to want to go there. It's mostly unoccupied this morning except for an old guy fussing over his geraniums. I ask if anyone named Bresson still lives here, but he says no, smiles, and goes back to the pink flowers. The central square has a war memorial and a dumpster nearby. I go looking for Bressons in the phone book. No one.

It's not Bresson himself I'm after in Bromont-Lamothe—he's lived in central Paris his entire adult life, after all. Maybe there was an old acquaintance, a relative, although that wasn't likely. Bresson is 91 (at least by most accounts). I'm after something else, really—a way of describing what I see in his films. I've always felt I've been seeing something that supposedly is not there.

I don't see this "poetry of precision," as Cinematheque Ontario calls its massive Bresson retrospective to be shown in the United States after its October Toronto debut. Anything but. I see—and hear—in *Pickpocket* and *Lancelot du lac* the sort of refined, absolutely pure, distilled expressiveness that I first met-up with in France before it became part of modern Europe; the France of out-of-the-way places like this, in its bars and the mornings when the farmers come in for that first little glass of *rouge*. It's the kind of expressiveness that can only come from those who can't imagine a life that's not daunting in one way or another; those who don't like to give too much away least they give it all away. It's all very conservative, very old-Catholic. It's very, very old country. It's also very, very tough-minded. Only Bresson could say: "Bach's music is always sentimental."

As a young student, Bresson, who's tight-lipped about his youth here—tight-lipped about everything, really—excelled at those very disciplines that priests in cold places teach best: Latin, Greek, philosophy and desire. But knowing full well what happens if one stays in places like this, he got the hell out of town as fast as he could and headed to Paris. He had thoughts of becoming an artist as did so many filmmakers of his generation like Raymond Borderie or Claude Autant-Lara. He settled in and



and at 19 was married (those priests, again).

He found French cinema in turmoil. Its genius was emerging—the mid-1930s would be glorious with radiant realism—but so was its conscience. Artists were organizing on various fronts, even the Dada/lunatic fringe and Le Groupe Octobre. In the little magazines, the newspapers and cafés, there was a growing argument in favour of the filmmaker as artist and this attracted Bresson the most. His first screen credit came in 1933 on *C'était un musicien*. "This new age of the cinema," wrote critic Alexandre Astruc, "(implies) that the scriptwriter himself shoot his films. Or rather, that there should no longer be scriptwriters, for in such a cinema, that distinction between writer and director is meaningless."

The following year Bresson directed his first film, the short *Les Affaires publiques*, a kind of knock-down comedy he later thought was like Buster Keaton, "only worse." A long-lost print was found in 1987 at La Cinémathèque Française, doing little to dispute Bresson's own dour conviction of the film's merits. Yet, as William Johnson notes in Cinematheque Ontario's *Robert Bresson*, the collection of essays devoted to the director, the young director's decision to use the famous clown Béby in a two-dimensional comic romp, "certainly prefigures his later exfoliation of expressiveness from his players—or, as he prefers to call them, *modèles*."



*Une Femme douce*

Bresson lived on his screenwriting through the 1930s; however, he was tossed into prison by the Nazis and was kept there for some 18 months. It proved to be an experience that informed the making of *Un Condamné à mort s'est échappé* in 1956. It also further sharpened his interest in a book, *The Dominicans of the Prisons*. Here was a history of Bethany,

# BRESSON

a Dominican order of nuns, which cared for former prisoners. Control and redemption, the two great themes of *Les Anges du péché*, made in 1943—which Bresson has always maintained was his first film—can be found in all the extraordinary 12 films that followed.

"The Poetry of Precision: The Films of Robert Bresson" is the title of Cinematheque Ontario's travelling Bresson movie show. And as titles go, it's pretty good. And pretty ominous. It means to evoke certain aspects of the director's methods and style; the rigorous refutation of any actorly expressiveness, the controlled editing, the use of music-as-effect and not as an emotional underpinning. This portrait of a severe, thin-lipped hectoring Bresson gives rise to the use of the word "parametric" in the Cinematheque's notes on the series, whatever that means.

("Parametric" is used often in the notes. I wish the Cinematheque had found new parameters to rein in the use of "parametric.") In the book *Robert Bresson*, Gilles Jacob, who is the head of the Cannes film festival, uses the phrase "spire of a cathedral" to describe Bresson. Yikes, more pointy, needle-like imagery. If you did not know otherwise, you might think that





*Le Journal d'un curé de campagne*

# B R E S S O N

*Balthazar* and *Pickpocket*—what results is refined past any point of original recognition. But this paring down doesn't strip away any feeling. On the contrary, it focuses it. *Les Dames du bois de Boulogne* from 1945, can almost be reduced to one extraordinary, sensual, yet noncommittal image: the curious half-smile on Hélène's (Maria Casarès) face, which is almost unchanged before she hears of her lover's boredom and after. Casarès's determined effort at being both passionate and enigmatic wasn't enough for Bresson. *Les Dames* was his last film to use professional actors. He wanted more control over the image, not for the sake of less emotion but rather to control and compact it better—all the more to increase its potency. And, so, in *Le Journal d'un curé de campagne*, much the same refinement upon refinement happens in the story itself as the priest searches his soul to discover his worth.

If Bresson has a film that doesn't work, it's *Au hasard, Balthazar*, where the story of a donkey is meant to reflect the humanity around it. (I suppose having a donkey is fabulous for symbol junkies—all that Christian, sexual, eco-serious imagery.) Yet, here you can also sense Bresson being seduced by something beyond this further refinement of life itself. He's seduced by death. The donkey's death prefigures Mouchette's in *Mouchette*, the suicide in *Une Femme douce*, the stylized slaughter in *Lancelot du lac*, the deaths in *Le Diable probablement* and *L'Argent*.

In talking to critic and scholar Michel Ciment after the release of *L'Argent*, his last film, Bresson tried to distance himself from his own reputation. "I've been called an intellectual," he says, "but of course I'm not. I've been called a Jansenist, which is madness. I'm the opposite. I'm interested in impressions."

Bresson's profession was medicine, not cinema. He's "relentlessly precise," says Raymond Durgnat. And so it goes.

With *Un Condamné à mort s'est échappé*, Bresson turns a true story of a Nazi

Not far from Bromont-Lamothe is the towering Puy-de-Dôme, hectares of bleak

For the most part, the essays are well-chosen, yet as richly intelligent as *Robert Bresson* (the book) is, it also provides vast series of contradictions, which are only what one should expect dealing with someone as private and unforthcoming as Bresson is. On one hand, his musical savvy is praised. On the other, it's noted how he, in fact, uses music against its own grain, like the squall of medieval crumhorns in *Lancelot du lac* or the snippet of Mozart over scenes of domestic chores in *Un Condamné à mort s'est échappé*.

More helpful—to me, anyhow—is Jonathan Rosenbaum's "The Last Filmmaker: A Local, Interim Report," which places the director in an entirely contemporary context (after all, Bresson's last film, *L'Argent*, was released only 15 years ago). Rosenbaum wonders why "Bresson's work doesn't register on video," and while I don't exactly agree with Rosenbaum, he does get into Bresson's "elemental" approach: to the film image, which Bresson prefers as flat as possible, to the sound, which he controls rigidly, to his nonactors, whom he refuses to let act in any conventional sense.

Whatever Bresson's point of departure—like Dostoevsky for both *Au hasard*,



*Les Dames du bois de Boulogne*

prisoner, André Devigny, who escaped a matter of hours before his execution, into a version all his own. And in the course of making an action flick, Bresson creates a thriller of another sort. It offers so little information about who these men are, we're confronted by our own question of who, in fact, they are. *Pickpocket* is even more illusive. Watching it is like slipping in and out of a dream. Some of it seems real all right: the thieves in the bars, the cop on their trail. But so much of it is less real: all those sensual hands slipping sexually in and out of pockets.

volcanic ash, and the forbidding view of humped-up hills, too ugly and squat to be called mountains, but nevertheless jutting up past the treeline. Except in the summer's extreme heat, the air always seems damp here. And even in summer you can find traces of wood smoke in the air. There's some behind me now as I head back out to the main road, trying to make Cannes by night—wood smoke on a warm spring day, a reminder of Bresson's own kind of big chill, like seeing the ripples across the pond telling us of Mouchette's drowning. ■