



**OF SIN AND SALVATION:  
THE CINEMA OF ROBERT BRESSON**

# Diary of a Country Priest

This portrait of an ailing young curate haunted by his perceived failures in saving human souls is something of a transitional work; the literary script (from a novel by Georges Bernanos) is played out by a partly non-professional cast, while a new, stark visual simplicity is introduced. The dark subject matter is transformed by Bresson's distinctive narrative style – the illuminating interplay of voiceover and image, leading to an evocation of liberating grace.

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Robert Bresson's third feature was the first to unveil his mature style: non-professional 'models' instead of actors, a heavy reliance on voiceover to convey his protagonist's inner thoughts, and an acute sensitivity to the counterpoint of image and soundtrack, the latter often more dramatically and psychologically important than the former.

It's Bresson's longest film but he doesn't waste a frame, and the final image of a stark, bare cross exudes enough spiritual potency to convert even the most convinced unbeliever.

**Michael Brooke, *Sight & Sound*, May 2008**

Pauline Kael described Bresson's adaptation of Georges Bernanos' novel as 'one of the small body of film masterpieces hopelessly doomed to commercial failure.'

The young priest's disingenuous opening claim that his diary merely records 'the insignificant secrets of a life without mystery' is contradicted by the evident complexity of his troubled relationship with his unsympathetic parishioners, his own religious faith, and the cancer growing inside him. The rapt conclusion in particular approaches the purity and spiritual intensity of a Bach passion. All is grace, indeed.

**Michael Brooke, *Sight & Sound*, November 2007**

## **Bruno Dumont on 'Diary of a Country Priest'**

*Diary of a Country Priest* is a film that overwhelms me each time I see it. It has a spiritual vein that touches me very deeply; it's a film that results in grace. It's all crafted to take us to that final shot, which is absolutely extraordinary. That, for me, is cinema: how to lead, shot by shot, to an end result that's totally strong.

***Sight & Sound*, November 2007**

## **A contemporary review**

Robert Bresson's film follows the novel by Bernanos closely in form, presenting a series of episodes linked together by the young priest's journal, which we see frequently on the screen and which provides a spoken accompaniment in the style of a low-toned monologue. The narrative proceeds with an uncompromising austerity, spare and controlled, with little

'cinema' as such; at first the approach may disconcert, but then one realises that, laden with words though the film is, they have been integrated with the images in a daringly original way; *Journal d'un curé de campagne* is a unique piece of interior cinema, scrutinising character in a series of recurrent, expressive close-ups reminiscent in their concentration of Dreyer's. The young priest's loneliness, doubts, illness and anguish are anatomised before our eyes with a classical purity and force.

Where Bernanos' novel was almost unremittingly grim, Bresson's film has a kind of interior exaltation which – though the same incidents are related – seems finally to create a more positive monument to faith. To a non-Catholic the masochistic element – so noticeable in most modern Catholic writing – both disturbs and fascinates; and though one may not be able to share it, though in some respects it repels, one can recognise a nobility, a grandeur that is not apparent in, say, Mauriac or Graham Greene. (Those who have seen or read Bernanos' *Dialogue des Carmelites* will appreciate the continuity of these qualities in his work, as also in Bresson's, whose first film, *Les Anges du péché*, bears very similar traits.)

The performances, mainly by unknown actors, are all outstanding; in the case of Claude Laydu, one feels that Bresson has purposely handled him to fill a passive part, using his remarkably expressive face as plastic material. He seems less, perhaps, a performer than a perfect willing subject. Mme Arkell's Comtesse contributes much to one of the most moving scenes in the film, and Andre Guibert as the Curé de Torey creates a rich, generous character. Burel's delicately monotone, diffused photography and Grunenwald's spare, angular music are other ideally fused elements in a film quite extraordinary for its artistic control. It was shot entirely on location, exterior and interior, in the Artois region, and also awarded the Prix Louis Delluc in 1950.

### **Monthly Film Bulletin, June 1953**

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#### **DIARY OF A COUNTRY PRIEST (JOURNAL D'UN CURÉ DE CAMPAGNE)**

*Director:* Robert Bresson  
*Production Company:* U.G.C.  
*Producer:* Léon Carré  
*Production Manager:* Robert Sussfeld  
*Unit Production Manager:* Michel Choquet  
*1st Assistant Director:* Guy Lefranc  
*Script Supervisor:* Odette Lemarchand  
*Scenario/Adaptation:* Robert Bresson  
*Based on the novel by:* Georges Bernanos  
*Director of Photography:* L.H. Burel  
*Cameraman:* Robert Juillard  
*Stills Photography:* Roger Corbeau  
*Editor:* Paulette Robert  
*Art Director:* Pierre Charbonnier  
*Set Decorator:* Robert Turlure  
*Make-up:* René Daudin \*  
*Music:* Jean-Jacques Grunenwald  
*Sound Supervisor:* Jean Rieul

#### **Cast:**

Claude Laydu (*Curé d'Ambricourt*)  
Léon Arvel (*Fabregars*)  
Balpêtré (*Docteur Delbende*)  
Jean Danet (*Olivier*)  
Jeanne Etiévant (*housekeeper*)  
André Guibert (*Curé de Torcy*)  
Bernard Hubrenne (*Abbé Dufréty*)  
Nicole Ladmiral (*Chantal*)  
Martine Lemaire (*Séraphita Dumouchel*)  
Nicole Maurey (*Mademoiselle Louise*)  
Martial Morange (*deputy*)  
Jean Riveyre (*Le Comte*)  
Gaston Séverin (*canon*)  
Gilberte Terbois (*Madame Dumouchel*)  
Marie-Monique Arkell (*La Comtesse*)  
Yvette Etiévant (*young woman*)\*  
Serge Benneteau \*  
Germaine Stainval \*  
François Valorbe \*

France 1951  
110 mins

\* Uncredited

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**Diary of a Country Priest (Journal d'un curé de campagne)**

Thu 2 Jun 20:10; Sat 4 Jun 12:40; Mon 20 Jun 18:10

**Les Anges du péché (Angels of Sin)**

Fri 3 Jun 14:20; Sun 12 Jun 12:30

**Les Dames du Bois de Boulogne**

Fri 3 Jun 18:30; Mon 13 Jun 20:40

**Mouchette**

Fri 3 Jun 20:30; Fri 10 Jun 18:30; Wed 15 Jun 18:20; Wed 22 Jun 20:45

**A Man Escaped (Un Condamné à mort s'est échappé)**

Sat 4 Jun 15:40; Sat 18 Jun 18:10 (+ intro by independent filmmaker and critic Alex Barrett); Thu 23 Jun 20:45

**Au hasard Balthazar**

Sat 4 Jun 18:20; Tue 7 Jun 20:45; Fri 17 Jun 18:30

**L'Argent (Money)**

Sun 5 Jun 16:00; Thu 16 Jun 20:30

**The Trial of Joan of Arc (Procès de Jeanne d'Arc)**

Sun 5 Jun 18:40; Wed 29 Jun 20:50

**Style, Anti-style and Influence: Robert Bresson Re-assessed**

Tue 7 Jun 18:20

**Une Femme douce (A Gentle Creature)**

Thu 9 Jun 20:40; Sat 18 Jun 13:30

**Lancelot du Lac (Lancelot of the Lake)**

Thu 16 Jun 18:30; Mon 20 Jun 20:45

**The Devil, Probably (Le Diable probablement)**

Sun 19 Jun 18:10; Mon 27 Jun 20:30

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