



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

Les Dames du Bois de Boulogne

Based on an anecdote in Denis Diderot's novel *Jacques le fataliste*, this tale of sexual rivalry and revenge boasts glittering dialogue by Jean Cocteau and a magnificent performance by Maria Casarès as the socialite scheming against a cabaret dancer she suspects of stealing her lover's affections.

Notwithstanding the stylisation and sexual intrigue, thematically this film remains a Bressonian study of the pitfalls and power of love.

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On the face of it, this brittle, sophisticated romance seems like more natural territory for Marcel Carné than for as famously austere a filmmaker as Bresson. Set in Paris in the aftermath of World War Two, it tells of a wealthy, beautiful woman (Maria Casarès) who cold-bloodedly plots revenge on the man who spurned her by tricking him into a marriage with an ex-prostitute (Elina Labourdette).

With poetic, fatalistic dialogue courtesy Jean Cocteau, luminous black-and-white cinematography, and superb performances from the two actresses, this is an exercise in high style. Beneath the gloss, it is also surprisingly intense. Thanks to class prejudice and convention, the characters here are every bit as much hemmed in as the prisoner in *A Man Escaped*.

Sight and Sound, February 1997

The most extraordinary thing about *Les Dames du Bois de Boulogne* is the way Bresson brings into play various levels of abstraction.

First of all, his scenario is an abstraction of Diderot's realistic 18th century story on which it is based. Jean Cocteau's magnificent dialogue is itself a stylisation or an abstraction of the speech of today. It seldom describes the action of the characters: rather it counterpoints them with an interaction of one mode of reality against another, somewhat in the manner of Ivy Compton Burnett.

One notes too that the costumes are an abstraction of the clothes of 1944: Hélène is always seen in a long black velvet dress, whatever the occasion, and Agnès in a white trench coat. This Manichean symbolism is echoed in the sets: Hélène's flat is dark, Agnès' light and airy. The elements of daily life – telephones, lifts, automobiles – are constantly set off by the unreal, abstract nature of the sets and costumes: in a sense, they play the role of the *trompe l'oeil* bits in cubist paintings.

The actors are directed by Bresson in such a way that they are constantly playing against the grain. Maria Casarès, who in other films of the same period (*Les Enfants du paradis*) displayed her own brand of baroque emotionality, is here obliged to bank her fires. Elina Labourdette, who usually played elegant women of the world, is here a pure-hearted girl.

One can wonder what is the point of all this abstraction, this counterpointing of reality with reality. Abstraction, of course, has its own plastic beauty, and is ultimately its own justification. But, through abstraction, Bresson has also been able to make a tragic film in which the tragedy is implicit not only in the plot but also in the form.

Monthly Film Bulletin, March 1966

In the cinema, the move from the novel to the fable goes back, I would say, to Bresson's *Les Dames du Bois de Boulogne* (1945), although I am sure one could find earlier examples – cases might be made out for *La Règle du jeu* and for *L'Atalante*. But *Les Dames du Bois de Boulogne* provides as good a starting point as any other, and consideration of it will help to pinpoint the differences between the novel and the fable.

The novel, briefly, means what it is about. In a good novel, emotion is expressed by finding (to use Eliot's words) a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which will be the formula of that particular emotion. Artistic inevitability, says Eliot, lies in the complete adequacy of the external to the emotion. The feeling of dissatisfaction, of something baffling about the film, experienced by critics and audiences at the time *Les Dames* was first shown proceeded, I think, from the fact that the plot of the film and its theme – what Bresson is saying – are not objectively correlated. There is an enormous difference between the story (the apparent subject) and the theme (the real subject).

The apparent subject of *Les Dames* is a not very believable intrigue, adapted from Diderot's *Jacques le fataliste*, about how a woman connives to make her former lover marry a prostitute in order to revenge herself on him. The real subject is the triumph of love over hate: love can create, hate can only destroy. Why does Bresson choose such a simple and not very interesting plot to express himself? The answer is, presumably, that he does not want us to get lost in the labyrinth of the well-constructed plot, he does not want us to become so involved with lifelike and identifiable with characters that we will fail to grasp the more general aspects of his theme. Furthermore, the choice of a deliberately artificial plot allows him to 'eliminate anything which might distract from the interior drama,' as he himself declared.

The whole *mise en scène* of the film is not subjugated to an expression of the plot or a pointing up of the story; plot, theme and form are related, but in a much more complex and interesting manner. The whole becomes equal to the multiplication of the parts, not to their sum.

Richard Roud, *Sight and Sound*, Spring 1962

LES DAMES DU BOIS DE BOULOGNE

Director: Robert Bresson
Production Company: Films Raoul Ploquin
Production Manager: Robert Lavallée
Technical Collaborators: Charlot, Karabanoff, Marc-Helin, Rebilly, [Robert] Turlure, Guillot, Bailly, Barbellion, Clerice
Assistant Director: Roger Mercanton
Script Supervisor: Suzanne Bon
Scenario/Adaptation: Robert Bresson
Dialogue: Jean Cocteau
Based on a story by: Denis Diderot
Director of Photography: Philippe Agostini
Operators: Maurice Pecqueux, Marcel Weiss
Editor: Jean Feyte
Art Director: Max Douy
Assistant Art Directors: James Allan, Robert Clavel
Music: Jean-Jacques Grünenwald
Sound Engineers: René Louge, Robert Ivonnet, [Lucien] Legrand

Cast

Paul Bernard (*Jean*)
Maria Casarès (*Hélène*)
Élina Labourdette (*Agnès*)
Lucienne Bogaert (*Madame de..., Agnès's mother*)
Jean Marchat (*Jacques*)
Yvette Etiévant (*maid*) *
Lucy Lancy *
Nicole Regnault *
Emma Lyonel *
Marguerite de Morlaye *
Marcel Rouzé *
Bernard Lajarrige *

France 1945

86 mins

* Uncredited

OF SIN AND SALVATION: THE CINEMA OF ROBERT BRESSON

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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