



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

Mouchette

SPOILER WARNING The following notes give away the film's ending.

After the manifold splendours of *Balthazar*, *Mouchette* seems an altogether thinner experience, exquisite but frail, as though Bresson this time had chosen to tell only the story of Marie without the counterpoint of Balthazar. Unlike the earlier film, which develops as a series of concentric circles spreading from the tethered souls of Marie and Balthazar, *Mouchette* drives straight as an arrow towards its inevitable end in Mouchette's abdication from life.

Everything is said in the opening sequence as, watched over tormentedly by Mouchette's dying mother, an anonymous hand stealthily sets a snare and a trapped partridge fights stubbornly, painfully, tightening the noose which will strangle it. It only remains for Mouchette to fulfil her destiny by struggling against the snare which poverty and indifference have set for her. Compare the opening of *Balthazar* in which the children gaze in wonder at the infant donkey, and which barely hints at the complex, interlocked spiritual process—Marie descending, Balthazar ascending – which will be the subject and style of the film.

No doubt the difference in texture between the two films is largely illusory – after all, it isn't every day one finds a protagonist with as many built-in reverberations as Balthazar – but it does exist. Magnificent as it is, for instance, Mouchette's moment of transcendent joy among the dodgem cars pales into insignificance beside the almost mystic scene where Marie garlands Balthazar with flowers in the moon light and plants a secret kiss on his muzzle. One is simply an intimation of human attraction; the other is... many things, none of them reducible to words without stumbling into banality.

At the same time, by any other standards than *Balthazar*, *Mouchette* is a masterpiece: a Bresson film pure and simple with its extraordinary *correspondances* between sound and gesture to evoke the unspoken and the unseen. No one but Bresson, for instance, could have conceived that extraordinary dialogue between hands, veiled eyes and inanimate objects which pinpoints the triangle relationship between Arsene, Louisa and the gamekeeper. And no one but Bresson, surely, could have imagined the extraordinary ritual of the ending, which offers Mouchette three chances of salvation but leaves her to find her own grace in death.

The real importance of *Mouchette*, however, is that it confirms a new departure in Bresson's work which began with *Balthazar*. Always a solitary, the Bresson hero has hitherto lived apart, in a world almost of his creation, isolated not only by circumstance but by his own nature. For Lieutenant Fontaine, for instance, the fact of imprisonment is only half his solitude; the other springs from his Bressonian need to seek himself within himself. With Marie and Mouchette, Bresson describes a different kind of solitude: one which exists *within* the world rather than apart from it, and which is resisted rather than courted. (Marie and Mouchette, with their wistful love/hate attraction to other people, are never even temporarily sufficient unto themselves in contemplation like Fontaine or the country priest.) Ultimately, the earlier heroes all achieve a kind of reconciliation with the world, whether

they leave it like the priest and Joan of Arc, or re-enter it like Fontaine and Michel the pickpocket. But for Marie and Mouchette there is no reconciliation: after fighting tooth and nail for survival against society, they retire defeated but undaunted.

Accordingly, the Bresson landscape has changed. Formerly a reflection of the protagonist's mental state, it is now completely at odds with him (or rather, her). Only secondarily a real city, the Paris of *Pickpocket* is primarily an abstraction echoing Michel's obsession, in which the same Metro station and the same anonymous crowd constantly recur, just as the village in *Journal d'un curé de campagne* is primarily a *correspondance* for the young priest's dark night of the soul. In *Balthazar* and *Mouchette*, however, the landscapes are first, foremost and always real.

It was something of a shock, as most critics duly noted, to find with *Balthazar* that the tinny emblems of modern living had finally encroached upon Bresson's spiritual domain. Undoubtedly the transistors, scooters and juke-boxes which figure so prominently in *Balthazar* lend a more urgent, tangible presence to the world described; but they are, I think, less important in themselves (they do not reappear in *Mouchette*) than as a signpost to Bresson's new concern with the physical world of objects. A motor-cycle figures in *Journal d'un curé de campagne*, but it is there to illuminate the priest's sense of exclusion from the normal pleasures of youth; there is a close-up of a gear-shift in *Un condamné à mort*, but it is there as a key to escape from a moving car. In these films, which concentrate so closely on the inner world that the outer one is reduced – whether figuratively or literally – to four blank walls, objects are important chiefly for their symbolic connotations, like the spoon, secretly treasured and sharpened to a point by Fontaine in *Un condamné à mort*, which represents the possibility of escape.

In *Mouchette*, as in *Balthazar*, the apprehension of the physical world is extraordinarily acute, both visually and aurally. Apparently irrelevant shots – close-ups of glasses on a counter, of the headlamps on a lorry, of the gamekeeper's hands as he talks to Louisa – are given an inexplicable, lowering significance, precisely because the objects seen are autonomous, completely without symbolism. Like the squalor of the village and the beauty of the surrounding countryside, they are simply there, impartial witnesses to rather than actors in Mouchette's tragedy. So, too, with the soundtrack. Throughout the film, Bresson's distrust of the actor seems to have spread to the spoken word. Dialogue is kept to a minimum, replaced by vivid, almost tangible noises – the clinking of bottles, traffic roaring past on the unseen highway, shattering china – to a point where emotions are so completely conveyed by gestures, sounds and objects that a non-French speaker would have no difficulty in understanding *Mouchette* even without subtitles. Mouchette's love of her mother and hatred of her father, for instance, is conveyed almost entirely by tonalities: of gesture as Mouchette unconsciously and almost imperceptibly shifts her stance before mother and father; of sound, as a curious kind of tranquillity, undisturbed by either the mother's groans or the baby's crying, is strangely shattered when the father enters drunk, goes straight to bed, and lies there quietly amusing himself by imitating a lorry.

This process of exteriorisation, shifting the emphasis from the malleability of the Christian soul to the implacable indifference of the Christian world, leads Bresson not into black pessimism as one might have expected, but to an undefined, almost pantheistic heresy. Rejected by her parents, stripped and

beaten by her former lover and his friends, Marie finds redemption in the death of Balthazar among the sheep on the mountainside; so, too, one feels assured, does Mouchette – perhaps in the sunlight sparkling on the waters that close over her head. I doubt whether the image of the Cross could close these two films as it does *Journal d'un curé de campagne* and *Procès de Jeanne d'Arc*; but for the first time the epilogue might read, with complete accuracy, 'Tout est grace.'

Tom Milne, *Sight and Sound*, Summer 1968

MOUCHETTE

Director: Robert Bresson
Production Companies: Argos-Films, Parc Film
Executive Producer: Anatole Dauman
Producer: Mag Bodard *
Production Managers: Philippe Dussart, Michel Choquet
Unit Manager: René Pascal
Production Administrator: Jean-Marc Garrouste *
Assistant Director: Jacques Kébadian
2nd Assistant Director: Mylène van der Mersch
Script Supervisor: Françoise Renberg
Screenplay: Robert Bresson
Based on the novel by: Georges Bernanos
Director of Photography: Ghislain Cloquet
Camera Operator: Jean Chiabaut
Assistant Camera: Emmanuel Machuel, Paul Bonis
Key Grip: Bernard Largemains *
Gaffer: Pierre Cornier *
Editor: Raymond Lamy
Assistant Editor: Arlette Lalande
Art Director: Pierre Guffroy
Properties: Jean Catala
Costumes: Odette Le Barbenchon
Magnificat by: Claudio Monteverdi
Fairground Music/Song: Jean Wiener
Music Interpreted by: Chanteurs de Saint-Eustache
Choir Conducted by: R.P. Emile Martin
Sound: Séverin Frankiel, Jacques Carrère
Sound Effects: Daniel Couteau

Cast

Nadine Nortier (*Mouchette*)
Jean-Claude Guilbert (*Arsène*)
Paul Hébert (*father*)
Maria Cardinal (*mother*)
Jean Vimenet (*Mathieu, the guard*)
Marie Susini (*Mathieu's wife*)
Suzanne Huguenin (*visitor for the dead*)
Marine Trichet (*Louisa*)
Raymonde Chabrun (*grocer*)
Liliane Pringet (*teacher*) *
Robert Bresson (*passer-by at the fair*) *

France 1966
90 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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