



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

A Man Escaped

(Un condamné à mort s'est échappé)

The subject is simple. It comes from an escape story by a member of the French secret service called André Devigny. In 1943 he was arrested and interrogated by the Gestapo at Lyons. He made an attempt to escape from a moving car while being taken to prison. It failed. Recaptured and beaten up, he was placed in solitary confinement at the prison called Fort Montluc. He was still determined to escape, only more carefully. After several weeks he managed to dissect three panels from his wooden cell door with an iron spoon that he'd sharpened against the floor. The next stage was to make a rope. The springs of his bed, uncoiled one by one, were a starting point. A parcel of shirts and pyjamas from his family arrived fortunately to be torn into strips and knotted round the springs. Months have passed now. He is ready and yet he does nothing, suddenly overtaken by an inner lethargy. It is only another interview with the Gestapo and the pronouncement of his death sentence that impel him to action. He will escape now. But a 16 year old boy is put in the same cell with him. Is he an informer for the Germans? Ragged and lousy, he tells a story of hiding out and eventual capture, but he wears part of a German uniform. For two days Fontaine, as the hero is called, wonders whether to trust him or kill him. They escape together.

The book is apparently a straightforward personal record of the kind that has served as a basis for many post-war war films, most of them 'dignified' and superficial. Robert Bresson uses *Un condamné a mort s'est echappé* to make a film that is only indirectly about war, directly about a human being in isolation. The result is a work of art that raises inner experience to a very pure, intense, concentrated level. 'This is a true story. I show It as it happened, without any embellishment,' Bresson says characteristically in a preface. I suppose the important distinction is between 'true' and 'factual'. One can think of many recent war films, particularly those made in Britain, which are impeccably factual and utterly untrue, because they have no angle of vision. With Bresson the vision is everything. He has changed many of the facts in Devigny's book. And he himself was taken prisoner by the Germans in 1940. During his stay in prison of more than a year, he met Father Bruckberger, who was to become an important friend and influence in his life and wrote the story for Bresson's first film, *Les Anges du péché*. Bresson has given this one an alternative title: *Le Vent souffle où il veut*.

In *Un condamné a mort*, war is a presence felt but very little seen. We see, mainly, a grey forbidding world enclosed within high medieval walls. Shabby figures move down corridors on their way to a melancholy yard or sit in a stifling cell. Violence happens off-screen, behind a closed door. Sometimes a cry is heard. The Gestapo and even the prison guards are fugitive, momentary figures. As a woman crosses the yard with a slop bucket, the sound of firing is heard. She hesitates for a moment and walks on. Inmates of the fortress, glimpsed in furtive conversation in the washroom or on the stairs, appear and disappear mysteriously. They may have been transferred, tortured, executed. One doesn't know.

The effect of war, though, is always present. It is seen in almost every face and action. It is like a developing tank in which the exposed human negative is laid. The picture comes out, character and personality have taken outline. Fontaine often talks in the washroom to a man with a thin, shifty, haunted face. He learns that he was betrayed to the Germans by his wife. The man is living with this fact in a little cell and each day he looks more desperate and unforgiving. One day he makes a futile, hysterical attempt at escape and that is the end of him. In the cell next to Fontaine's is an old man who always wears a crumpled hat. Morose and aloof, he disparages Fontaine's plans to escape. It will never work. Better to accept imprisonment and hope to escape with your neck. But on his first day in prison Fontaine also looks out from his window at a man walking in the yard. He comes up and offers to smuggle out a letter to his family. Later, he manages to get a safety pin to him which will unlock his handcuffs. Later, he disappears.

All these people come as if from nowhere and encounter each other for the first time. Some feel instinctive solidarities: Others are cautious and mistrustful. So-and-so is reported to be in the confidence of the Gestapo, so-and-so is all right, so-and-so plans to escape but his plan is no good, so-and-so was taken off for questioning today. All this in brief muttered conversations, before returning again to solitude.

So all the real dramas are interior. At the centre of the story, Fontaine refuses to despair. He plans and works patiently, minutely for escape. Like the hero of *Journal d'un curé de campagne*, he is a quiet, withdrawn, compassionate man who lives at a distance from his fellows. At first they are uncertain of him, later they recognise his strength. But unlike the priest his end is not in agony but in ecstasy. With Jost, the boy, he has scaled the last wall. Jost looks round with an incredulous grin: 'If my mother could see me now!' Fontaine smiles. They walk off together into a cold night, towards smoke from a train passing under a nearby bridge. It is a moment of appropriately strange and muted elation. They are going back into an occupied country and the danger is not over.

Bresson has built up this point with a slow, deliberate concentration. One might think his approach too slow for a story that also contains physical tension, but there is always an inner meaning behind the physical action and the one heightens the other. (Interesting to compare the first part of the film with the first part of Hitchcock's *The Wrong Man*. The Hitchcock is brilliant in its way, which is that of immediate melodramatic effect. He creates no world of prison, only a series of surface impressions.) The prison world created by Bresson suggests Kafka in some externals: grey, dreamlike routine, claustrophobia, isolation of the spirit. Yet because of the central character, the effect is never merely passive. The sequences of Fontaine preparing his escape – the iron spoon scraping at crevices in the door, the pyjamas torn in strips and plaited round the bedsprings, the tell-tale shavings whisked out of sight as a guard approaches – are long and detailed and always exist on two levels. Behind the slow, pathetically improvised physical effort one senses the inner dedication. Bresson impregnates each action with faith. And for the first time he finds his most impressive moments in affirmation. The use of the Mass in C Minor by Mozart is a daring example. It accompanies sequences of the most drab routine – emptying of slops, the shuffles down the corridor – and transposes them to a key of pity and exaltation. For throughout this film is sounded a note, faint at first but growing louder, of the release to come.

Most remarkable of all are the closing scenes between Fontaine and Jost. They have an intimacy and implied tenderness that Bresson has never achieved before. With his worried, shifty expression, his hesitant answers and tactless questions, Jost is a wonderfully ambiguous character. Sometimes he has a strange innocence, at others one is sure he is corrupted. He is a test for Fontaine's human instincts. And the escape itself, losing none of its excitement because the film's title predicts the outcome, is also the occasion for a trust and attachment to grow up between them.

The actors are all non-professional, and all perfect. Fontaine is played by François Leterrier, formerly a student of philosophy at the Sorbonne. He has what one might call, after Claude Laydu, the 'Bresson face': gentle, strong, with large deep eyes and a mysterious, sexless authority. A clear mirror, it reflects the loneliness, vision, occasional despair and ascetic humanity which lies at the heart of this extraordinary film.

Gavin Lambert, *Sight and Sound*, Summer 1957

A MAN ESCAPED (UN CONDAMNÉ À MORT S'EST ÉCHAPPÉ OU LE VENT SOUFFLE OÙ IL VEUT)

Director: Robert Bresson

Production Companies: Société Nouvelle des Etablissements Gaumont, Nouvelles Editions de Films

Associate Producers: Jean Thuillier, Alain Poiré

Production Manager: Robert Sussfeld

Assisted by: Irénée Leriche

Production Assistant: Louis Malle *

Assistant Directors: Michel Clément, Jacques Ballanche

Script Supervisor: Annie Dubouillon

Screenplay/Dialogue: Robert Bresson

Based on a story by: André Devigny

Director of Photography: L.H. Burel

Assistant Photographer: Henri Raichi

1st Assistant Operator: Jean Charvein

2nd Assistant Operator: Jean Chiabaut

Stills Photography: Jean-Louis Castelli

Editor: Raymond Lamy

Art Director: Pierre Charbonnier

Assistant Art Director: Sydney Bettex

Music: Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart

Orchestra Conductor: I. Disenhaus

Sound Recordist: Pierre-André Bertrand

Assistant Sound: Joseph Abjean, Guy Rophé

Studio: Studios Saint-Maurice

Cast

François Leterrier (*Lieutenant Fontaine*)

Charles Le Clainche (*Jost*)

Maurice Beerblock (*Blanchet*)

Roland Monod (*Curé de Leiris*)

Jacques Ertaud (*Orsini*)

Jean Paul Delhumeau (*Hébrard*)

Roger Treherne (*Terry*)

Jean-Philippe Delamarre (*prisoner 110*)

César Gattegno (*prisoner X*)

Jacques Oerlemans (*chief warder*)

Klaus Detlef Grevenhorst (*German intelligence officer*)

Leonhard Schmidt (*German escort*)

France 1956

90 mins

The screening on Saturday 18 June will be introduced by independent filmmaker and critic Alex Barrett.

* 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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