



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

L'Argent

Where L'Herbier's *L'Argent* began with the stock exchange, Bresson's starts from the very opposite end of the financial spectrum: with a schoolboy who gets too little pocket money, whose father is too preoccupied to listen to his plea about an urgent debt, whose mother closes her handbag with a casual 'not today', whose money-lending classmate amiably gives him a forged banknote and a lesson in how to use it. From there, with an ineluctability that is superlative even for Bresson, and makes Lang's famed rigour look like child's play, the first half-hour of *L'Argent* builds a chain of cause and effect that is almost frightening in its social logic.

Everybody has his reasons. The photographer's wife, for instance, who was serving in the shop and accepted the note as genuine, hates to think that two snotty kids got the better of her. So while her husband resorts to bribery to cover his own peccadillo, she visits the local *lycée* to make enquiries; the worried boy hurries home to consult his mother; and the mother, with an envelope discreetly masking her peace offering, visits the shop to ensure that the boy's name will, in all decency, be kept out of the affair.

Thus a line is drawn that flies straight as an arrow through the film, linking these decent, averagely honest citizens to the decent, averagely honest citizen whose life suddenly takes an uncontrollable plunge down an equally straight line from innocence to the mortal sin of murder. So far, you might say, the film is the devil's riposte to the Catholic faith of Hitchcock's *The Wrong Man*, arguing that there is no wrong man, only a wrong society. But where the famous 'doubling' noted by Godard in *The Wrong Man* springs from the fact that there is an innocent man and a guilty one who looks like him, the dichotomy in Bresson springs from two opposing reactions to this 'wrong society'.

First there is Yvon, staggering helplessly under one blow after another, and seemingly accepting his fate with Christian resignation until driven over the edge. Then there is Lucien, slyly playing by the rules society has drawn up ('I thought dishonest people understood each other', he tells the outraged photographer), offering atonement for the sin of perjury he was persuaded to commit by turning himself into a latterday Robin Hood, and priding himself that no one was offered violence during his reign of crime.

This last proud boast of Lucien's is obliquely called in question in a curious exchange when Yvon rejects his offer to atone by helping him escape ('I'd kill you rather than go with you' – 'Neither of us are killers; we have no one on our conscience' – 'You have me on your conscience'). The implication, of course, is that Lucien cannot expect to atone for dishonesty and deceit by using dishonesty and deceit to further good ends, and that no distinction can be drawn between a minor peccadillo (accepting a bribe) and a major sin (committing murder), since one leads irrevocably to the other.

But there is something more intangible here, something which leads to the extraordinary apotheosis of the final sequence, which Bresson has casually described as a routing of the forces of evil. A startling interpretation, on the face of it, for brutal murder and abrupt confession, yet one confirmed rather

than denied by the sense of tranquil finality in the image of Yvon watching as the ripples close over his bloody axe in the pond, and of breathless wonderment in the last shot of onlookers frozen as they gaze into the empty room from which all evidence of crime has gone.

This ending is perhaps prepared for earlier in the film when Yvon goes momentarily berserk under provocation in the prison refectory, and the warden considering his case observes, 'A man who never killed may be more dangerous than a murderer'. Yvon insists at this point that he would have hurt nobody, and one believes him. The warden's words, on the other hand, are an exact definition of Lucien (and, by extension, of the society which he both rejects and represents); and later, with his first double murder in the hotel, Yvon accepts the definition in playing out the role for which he has been cast. His final bloodbath, however, is something else again – grimly detailed (his first victims were never seen at all) yet as strangely theoretical as his search which ends with the unanswered question, 'Where's the money?' – a question to which the answer, Bresson suggests, is 'Everywhere'.

Here one gets into familiar difficulties in trying to pin down the emotional resonance of Bresson's images: where a shot of a gardening fork left stuck in a potato patch can evoke aeons of toil and suffering; where a tiny orchard strung with washing lines can suggest paradise lost; where a woman slapped as she is carrying a bowl of coffee, yet still preserving most of its contents from spilling, can recall the humble penitence of Mary Magdalene. It isn't even as if there were any overt religious dimension, rather the opposite in fact ('What are you waiting for, a miracle?' Yvon taunts his benefactress as she wears herself out in drudgery for others). Yet the meaning of Yvon's final suite of murders is inescapable: deliverance for the woman, retribution for society, expiation for his own membership of that society. Even bleaker than *The Devil, Probably*, *L'Argent* is even more unmistakably a masterpiece. And even here, finally, 'All is Grace', just as it was in *Journal d'un curé de campagne*.

Tom Milne, *Monthly Film Bulletin*, July 1983

L'ARGENT

Director: Robert Bresson

Production Companies: Marion's Films, France 3, EOS Films

Executive Producer: Antoine Gannage

Producer: Jean-Marc Henchoz *

Associate Producers: Jean-Pierre Basté, Patricia Moraz

Unit Managers: Richard Dupuy, Emilienne Pecqueur

Assistant Unit Managers: Olivier Ricoeur, Sylvestre Guarino

Production Administrators: Simone Tabarly, Catherine Huhardeaux, Françoise Thouvenot

1st Assistant Director: Mylène van der Mersch

2nd Assistant Directors: Thierry Bodin, Pascal Bony

Script Supervisor: Françoise Renberg

Screenplay: Robert Bresson

Inspired by a story 'Faux billet' by: Leo N. Tolstoy

Directors of Photography: Pasqualino De Santis, Emmanuel Machuel

Camera Operator: Mario Cimini

Assistant Camera: Michel Abramowicz, Philippe Tabarly

Key Grip: Jean Hennau

Grip: Gérard Guingne *

Gaffers: Luciano Leomi, Eric Gigandet

Lamp Operator: Michel Védie

Editor: Jean-François Naudon

Assistant Editor: Juliette Welfling

Art Director: Pierre Guffroy

Assistant Art Director: Claude Moesching

Set Decorator: Pierre Lefait

Properties: René Candido, Pierre Biet

Costumer: Monique Dury

Make-up: Thi-Loan Nguyen

Pianist: Michel Brigueot

Sound: Jean-Louis Ughetto, Luc Yersin

Assistant Sound: Philippe Donnefort

Mixer: Jacques Maumont

Sound Effects: Daniel Couteau

Subtitles: Anne Head

Cast

Christian Patey (*Yvon Targe*)

Vincent Risterucci (*Lucien*)

Caroline Lang (*Elise Targe*)

Sylvie van den Elsen (*the woman*)

Béatrice Tabourin (*woman photographer*)

Didier Baussy (*man photographer*)

Marc Ernest Fourneau (*Norbert*)

Bruno Lapeyre (*Martial*)

François-Marie Banier, Jeanne Aptekman, Alain Aptekman,

Dominique Mullier, Jacques Behr, Gilles Durieux, Alain Bourguignon,

André Cler, Claude Cler, Anne de Kervazdoue, Bernard Lamarche Vad,

Pierre Tessier, Eric Franklin, Jean-Louis Berdot, Yves Martin,

Luc Solente, Valérie Mercier, Alexandre Pasche, Jean-Michel Coletti,

Stéphane Villette Michel Brigueot (*the woman's father*) *

France/Switzerland 1983©

84 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

BECOME A BFI MEMBER

Enjoy a great package of film benefits including priority booking at BFI Southbank and BFI Festivals. Join today at [bfi.org.uk/join](https://www.bfi.org.uk/join)

BFI PLAYER

We are always open online on BFI Player where you can watch the best new, cult & classic cinema on demand. Showcasing hand-picked landmark British and independent titles, films are available to watch in three distinct ways: Subscription, Rentals & Free to view.

See something different today on player.bfi.org.uk

Join the **BFI mailing list** for regular programme updates. Not yet registered? Create a new account at www.bfi.org.uk/signup

BFI SOUTHBANK

Welcome to the home of great film and TV, with three cinemas and a studio, a world-class library, regular exhibitions and a pioneering Mediatheque with 1000s of free titles for you to explore. Browse special-edition merchandise in the BFI Shop.

We're also pleased to offer you a unique new space, the BFI Riverfront – with unrivalled riverside views of Waterloo Bridge and beyond, a delicious seasonal menu, plus a stylish balcony bar for cocktails or special events. Come and enjoy a pre-cinema dinner or a drink on the balcony as the sun goes down.