



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

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

Good evening, and welcome to this event devised to serve as an introduction to our retrospective of the films of Robert Bresson (1933-1999). Though I am the programmer of the BFI Southbank season, I didn't feel I had sufficient specialist knowledge of Bresson's work to deliver a full-length talk about it all by myself. So in this instance, after I have given a general introduction about his very distinctive style and the themes that recur in his films – which, including several clips, should last around 40-45 minutes – you will also be hearing from two Bresson enthusiasts, Alex Barrett and Jonathan Hourigan, who will each screen a clip and speak for around ten minutes. We shall then sit down together, also with Nasreen Munni Kabir, to discuss further any points that may have arisen and to take comments and questions about Bresson and his work from the audience.

One reason I felt it would be good to have more than one speaker this evening was that Bresson is in some ways quite a divisive figure. Though he is widely acknowledged as a major director – and it is my contention that he has also been an inspiration to and influence on many of today's 'art house' directors – it is also the case that his work probably strikes many as somehow a little 'challenging'. Not that his films are especially demanding intellectually; nor, indeed are they long or slow. But his highly distinctive filmmaking methods – most particularly, perhaps, the casting of non-professional 'models', whom he discouraged from 'acting' in the usual sense of the word – do lend his work a rare quality, which might be described as a kind of 'flatness'. I use this term not pejoratively but neutrally. It is, after all, one of the characteristics of Bresson's cinema which many of his admirers cherish. But for some other viewers it may, I think, represent an obstacle to full enjoyment. Perhaps we need to get accustomed to Bresson's work; perhaps we need to find a way into his world by watching more than a single film. But then that is often the case with artists who try to do something a little different with their chosen medium. And it is usually worth the effort. So if by any chance your first encounter with Bresson doesn't turn out to be a totally revelatory experience, you might consider giving him another try. After all, he did end up with more films than any other director in *Sight and Sound's* Greatest Films of All Time poll ten years ago – no mean feat, given that the far from prolific Bresson made only 13 features.

When I say that Bresson is a divisive figure, I don't mean merely that some adore his work while others are left unmoved by it; I also mean that it's possible (and I know this from personal experience!) for an individual to love some of his films while getting less out of others. That's partly because his first two features are noticeably different in some respects from what followed, partly because some people prefer the films shot in black and white to the later ones made in colour. But it's still not as simple as that. I myself like some

of the black and white films rather more than others, and the same is true of the colour films. For what it's worth, you will find out a little more about my personal preferences regarding specific titles this evening.

There is one thing worth stressing at this point. Over the years much has been made of Bresson's Catholicism. He was a devout Catholic, and some of his films are concerned with matters of grace and redemption. But I must emphasise that one need not be a Catholic, or knowledgeable about or interested in Catholic notions of grace and redemption, or indeed a believer in any religion, to find Bresson's work relevant, rewarding and meaningful. His work is sufficiently preoccupied with the world we inhabit on a daily basis for it to succeed as cinema that is comprehensible and illuminating both emotionally and intellectually. As an atheist, I know this from personal experience; some of Bresson's films have affected me very deeply indeed.

Bresson's films are so distinctive – and so widely revered – that they have prompted many fine writers to extol their virtues; not only major film critics but Susan Sontag, Roland Barthes and Alberto Moravia, and of course countless filmmakers. Not for the first time, I should like to quote from David Thomson's *Biographical Dictionary of Film*, which manages incisively to touch on what makes Bresson different, important, and worth persevering with. 'He is an example of pure cinema in the sense that he photographs reserved faces to evoke all the wildest emotions of the spirit. To see his films is to marvel that other directors have had the ingenuity to evolve such elaborate styles and yet restrict them to superficial messages. ... He seems to shame the extrinsic glamour and extravagance of movies. For that reason alone, he is not an easy director to digest. ... Although there is a matter-of-fact quality to his work, concentrated viewing brings out an extraordinary sense of passion. It is as if his characters are straight-faced for fear of exploding.'

I hope you enjoy our discussion of Bresson this evening, and that it helps some of you to discover that 'extraordinary sense of passion' for yourselves.

**Geoff Andrew** is Programmer-at-large for BFI Southbank. Formerly Head of Film Programme for BFI Southbank, he was also film editor of *Time Out* magazine for many years, and is a regular contributor to *Sight and Sound*; he is also a programme advisor to the BFI London Film Festival. His numerous books on the cinema including studies of Nicholas Ray and the American 'indie' filmmakers of the 1980s and '90s, and BFI Classics monographs on Kieslowski's *Three Colours Trilogy* and Kiarostami's *10*. He is the editor of the recent *Sight and Sound* anthologies devoted to Jean-Luc Godard, Martin Scorsese, Spike Lee and the New Hollywood of the '60s and '70s. He has contributed to many anthologies and DVD extras, lectured widely on the cinema, and served on film festival juries in Cannes, Venice, Istanbul, Turin, Krakow, Morelia, Sarajevo and elsewhere. In 2009 the French government made him a *Chevalier de l'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres*. He writes on film, music and the other arts at [geoffandrew.com](http://geoffandrew.com)

**Jonathan Hourigan** worked as assistant to Robert Bresson on Bresson's Cannes prize-winning final film, *L'Argent*. He chairs the Robert Bresson Practice-Based Research Group and is co-chair of next year's major conference, Notes on Bresson, to be hosted primarily at University of Manchester.

Jonathan is a screenwriter, script consultant and educator. He has been Programme Director for MA Screenwriting at University of Manchester for the

last year, after four years as Course Leader for MA Screenwriting and Head of Screenwriting at London Film School.

Jonathan is a graduate of the National Film and Television School. He directed the feature film *Almost Home* and plays Head of Script in Joanna Hogg's critically acclaimed *Souvenir I* and *Souvenir II*. Current screenwriting projects include a feature screenplay set in the world of 1980s darts and co-writing the debut feature film of acclaimed Serbian documentary filmmaker Maja Novakovic.

**Alex Barrett** is an award-winning independent filmmaker and critic based in London. As director, he has made two feature films, *Life Just Is* (2012) and *London Symphony* (2017), both of which were nominated for the Michael Powell Award for Best British Film at the Edinburgh International Film Festival, before being released theatrically and on DVD/VOD in the UK. *London Symphony* featured in Mark Kermode's BBC roundup of the best films of 2017, and was selected by *Little White Lies* as one of the '100 Greatest British Films' in their July/August 2019 issue. His work has screened at festivals around the world, and his short films have enjoyed non-festival screenings at venues including the Victoria & Albert Museum in London, and the National Gallery of Art in Washington. More recently, he worked alongside director Andrey Paounov on the screenplay for the award-winning feature *January*, which is currently on the festival circuit.

Born in India, **Nasreen Munni Kabir** is a London-based filmmaker/author who has written several books on Hindi cinema and made over 100 TV programmes on Indian film for Channel 4. Former governor on the BFI Board, Nasreen has also curated Channel 4's annual Indian film season since the early 1980s.

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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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