



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

Lancelot du Lac

It won't be to all tastes, but there's an aesthetic purity to Robert Bresson's approach that gives *Lancelot du Lac* a startling, timeless quality. He chooses to shoot only parts of the body, often clanking armour-clad legs and torsos, to convey the disorienting strangeness of this archaic world. Far from exemplifying the glories of chivalry, the court is at crisis point: the Grail quest has failed, Arthur awaits word from God, Lancelot feels shamefully tainted by his past assignation with Guinevere. Everyone's blighted by their inability to live up to their own high ideals, and it will end in the bleakest finale of any Arthurian movie.

As a viewer, you need to adjust to Bresson's way of seeing, with its undemonstrative performance style and avoidance of conventional action. Yet his fierce ability to focus only on the essential becomes truly captivating – notably in the set-piece of a crucial jousting tournament cut from the rhythms of hoisted pennants, galloping hooves and fallen combatants. Mesmerising.

Trevor Johnston, bfi.org.uk, 23 September 2021

Twenty years [at time of writing] after its original release, *Lancelot du Lac* is bound to shock, frustrate and overwhelm in equal measure, partly because of its treatment of the Arthurian Myth and the trappings of Camelot kitsch that attach themselves to celluloid visions of the Middle Ages. By an uncomfortable coincidence, the recent press preview of *Lancelot* occurred the day after a television screening of John Boorman's *Excalibur* – truly a case of the sublime following the ridiculous – but the contrast is instructive in terms of just those expectations that Bresson has consistently sought to disown in his filmmaking.

In his collection of aphorisms *Notes on the Cinematographer*, Bresson names his entirely individual conception of filmmaking as 'cinematographie ... a writing with images in movement and with sounds'; and at one level *Lancelot* can be seen as the Bressonian method attaining a particular degree of refinement and consummation. All the elements normally associated with Bresson's film language are present: the use of 'models' in the place of professional actors; unemphatic and minimally expressive presences denied psychological depth and existing as human surfaces amongst what the director describes as 'the visible parlance of bodies, objects, horses, roads, trees, fields'; a highly-wrought attention brought to bear on the soundtrack and an anti-dramatic attenuation of the narrative.

So much of Bresson's work takes place after the event that narrative convention would consider central. His is always an interstitial reading, on the edges of the action, privileging the ripples on the surface of the water rather than the Lady in the Lake herself. In keeping with this tendency *Lancelot* begins at the end of the myth, with the return of the Knights who have failed in their quest for the Grail, and concentrates on Lancelot as the anguished suitor of the Queen and on the bloody decimation of the codes of chivalry. This organising principle covers not only the plot structure but extends through the arrangement of the sequences down to the manner in which individual shots are attacked.

Each of Bresson's films contains moments that stand to both crystallise and characterise such an approach: the oblique effectiveness of the shot/counter-shot exchanges in *Le Procès de Jeanne d'Arc*; the eroticised ballet of thieving, caressing hands in the Gare de Lyon sequence of *Pickpocket*; the off-screen robbery conveyed entirely through sound in *L'Argent*. Likewise, in the tournament sequence, *Lancelot* has what might be called its own ur-Bresson moment. The jousting in this sequence is conveyed through a brilliantly rhythmic montage of shots of the reaction of the spectators, of musicians piping between heats, of the raising of pennants, of the horses stamping and charging, the visible impact of lance on shield is withheld until one no longer expects to see it, by which time the impact has gathered in latent power. Sound is crucial to this sequence, as it is to the entire film, armour being sheared by the blow of a sword, the sound of the horses; these participate in an extraordinary orchestration of details, the visual and aural truly interacting.

If *Pickpocket* remains his masterpiece, *Lancelot du Lac* is proof that Bresson cannot age badly, and it is representative of an uncompromisingly singular cinematic vision – discomfiting, a little intimidating but thoroughly remarkable and unlike any other in cinema. Godard got it right when he commented that Bresson's films owe their power to 'an idea of the world applied to cinema, or an idea of cinema applied to the world; ultimately it comes to the same thing': *Lancelot* is the idea given unforgettable form.

Chris Darke, *Sight & Sound*, November 1994

Lancelot du Lac embodies the perfection of a language that has been in the process of development and refinement for over 30 years. If it stuns and overwhelms one's sense of the possibilities of that language – in a way, perhaps, that no predecessor has done, at least since *Au hasard Balthazar* – this is not because it represents a significant departure or deviation from the path Robert Bresson has consistently followed. The source of amazement lies in the film's clarity and simplicity, a precise and irreducible arrangement of sounds and images that is so wholly functional that nothing is permitted to detract from the overall narrative complex, and everything present is *used*. It is a film where the rattle of armour and the neighing of horses are as essential as the faces and bodies of the characters, where indeed each of these elements serves to isolate and define the importance and impact of the others.

The sheer rawness of what is there disconcerts, but it shouldn't lead one to focus unduly on what isn't there, or track down some elusive clue to the Bressonian mystery. To a certain extent, Bresson's films are *about* mystery, but their manner of arriving there is always quite concrete, just as the fictions of Kafka and Beckett are carefully constructed around certain principles of omission. Filling in these omissions is an act that every spectator/reader has to perform on some level, but anyone wishing to describe a Bresson film – as opposed to the experience of one – is obliged to leave these 'white spaces' intact rather than attempt to fill them in, for otherwise he runs the risk of merely taking his own pulse. The evidence, one can argue, is clearly intelligible to the eyes and ears, if only one can look and listen. For this reason, it seems useful to speak of Bresson's art as one of immanence, not one of transcendence, and one where the inside is always revealed by remaining on the outside. 'There is a nice quote from Leonardo da Vinci,' Bresson has remarked, 'which goes something like this: "Think about the surface of the work. Above all think about the surface".'

Jonathan Rosenbaum, *Sight & Sound*, Summer 1974

LANCELOT DU LAC (LANCELOT OF THE LAKE)

Director: Robert Bresson
Production Companies: Mara Film, Laser Productions, ORTF – Office de Radiodiffusion Télévision Française, Gerico Sound
Presented by: Jean Yanne, Jean-Pierre Rassam
Producer: Alfredo Bini *
Associate Producers: Jean-Pierre Rassam, François Rochas
Unit Production Manager: Jean Pieuchot
Unit Manager: Philippe Lièvre
Production Manager: Michel Choquet
Administration: Robert Chevereau, Claude Bertonazzi
Production Secretary: Blanche Cochet
1st Assistant Director: Mylène van der Mersch
2nd Assistant Directors: Bernard Cohn, Robert Baroody, Gilles Bérault
Script Supervisor: Geneviève Cortier
Screenplay: Robert Bresson
Director of Photography: Pasqualino De Santis
Camera Operators: Jean Chiabaut, Mario Cimini
Assistant Operators: Jacques Dorot, Dominique Le Rigoleur
Stills: Jacques-Henri Lartigue *
Special Effects: Alain Bryce
Special Effects Assistant: Leslie Gilles
Editor: Germaine Lamy
Assistant Editor: Arlette Lalande
Art Director: Pierre Charbonnier
Associate Art Director: Pierre Cadiou
Assistant Art Director: Arakel Arakelian
Set Decorator: Jean Boulet
Props: Michel Suné
Gowns: Gres
Wardrobe Master: Raymonde Ventura
Make-up Supervisor: Éliane Marcus
Hairdresser: Carita *

Music: Philippe Sarde
Sound: Bernard Bats
Boom Mar: Bernard Rochut
Sound Mixer: Jacques Carrère
Sound Effects: Daniel Couteau
Stunt Arranger: Yvan Chiffre
Armourer: Billy Callaway

Cast
Luc Simon (Lancelot du Lac)
Laura Duke Condominas (Queen Guenièvre)
Humbert Balsan (Gauvain)
Vladimir Antolek-Orosek (Artus)
Patrick Bernard (Mordred)
Arthur de Montalembert (Lionel)
Charles Balsan
Christian Schlumberger
Joseph Patrick Le Quidre
Jean-Paul Leperlier
Marie-Louise Buffet
Marie-Gabrielle Cartron
Antoine Rabaud
Jean-Marie Bécár
Guy de Bernis
Philippe Chleq
France-Italy 1974
80 mins

* Uncredited

Introduced by Jason Wood, BFI Director of Public Programme & Audiences (Thursday 16 June only)

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Lancelot du Lac (Lancelot of the Lake)
Thu 16 Jun 18:30; Mon 20 Jun 20:45
L’Argent (Money)
Thu 16 Jun 20:30
Au hasard Balthazar
Fri 17 Jun 18:30
Une Femme douce (A Gentle Creature)
Sat 18 Jun 13:30
A Man Escaped (Un Condamné à mort s’est échappé)
Sat 18 Jun 18:10 (+ intro by independent filmmaker and critic Alex Barrett); Thu 23 Jun 20:45

The Devil, Probably (Le Diable probablement)
Sun 19 Jun 18:10; Mon 27 Jun 20:30
Diary of a Country Priest (Journal d’un curé de campagne)
Mon 20 Jun 18:10
Mouchette
Wed 22 Jun 20:45
The Trial of Joan of Arc (Procès de Jeanne d’Arc)

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