



# Au hasard Balthazar

**SPOILER WARNING** The following notes give away some of the plot.

Robert Bresson drafted the rules of a new cinema and realised them in *Au hasard Balthazar*, his masterpiece. This seemingly aloof, cold film, inspired by a passage in Dostoevsky's 1868 novel *The Idiot*, burns with a yearning for justice and beauty. Bresson's disciplined portraiture of a donkey and the way of life in the French countryside is a lesson in seeing the world anew through the cinema and noticing the potential that endeavour contains.

**Kaya Genc, *Sight and Sound*, Winter 2022-23**

## Contemporary reviews

After the impurities and simplifications of *Proces de Jeanne d'Arc*, *Au hasard Balthazar* is a welcome return to form for Bresson, perhaps his greatest film to date, certainly his most complex. The religious references are there for the asking – Balthazar's name, Marie's name, the baptism in the stable, the parade of the seven deadly sins, and so on. But, as Bresson himself has suggested, these analogies are not merely guide-points to a simple Christian parable: they are rather echoes, designed to give depth and resonance to what one might call his study of free will and the immutability of suffering. Marie chooses, Balthazar does not; Marie acts, Balthazar is acted upon; but they both end up in misery and despair (though with that indefinable breath of grace hovering near them) in the harsh world of today, which is much more present than in any other Bresson film, with its scooters, transistors, cars, juke-boxes and unthinking violence.

From the moment when Marie is called to witness the wonder of the infant Balthazar, to the twin finales when Marie crouches naked in the corner of an empty room and Balthazar lies dying amid a flock of sheep on the mountainside, their destinies are inextricably linked, mysteriously merging for a moment in the wonderful, almost mystical scene where she garlands his head with flowers and secretly places a kiss on his muzzle. Marie descending, Balthazar ('C'est un saint') ascending. Marie, longing to be elsewhere and other than she is, torn between the known security of Jacques and the unknown excitement of Gérard, appears as a lost soul, wandering tethered to a fixed point which is Balthazar, and accompanied by the cry of 'Marie ... Marie' which echoes like a motif throughout.

But the paradox of the film is that, physically speaking, it is actually Balthazar who wanders from adventure to adventure, while Marie remains exactly where she is; spiritually, however, their roles are reversed. The two of them are inscribed within a circle, evoked by Bresson in the movement of his film, which not only begins and ends with Balthazar coming full circle in his life, but constantly rounds on itself (Balthazar returning home after his escape and walking round the stable building before entering his stall; the reiterated cry of 'Marie, Marie, viens voir!'; Gérard's pursuit of Marie round Balthazar, etc.). This movement is continued in Bresson's style, a delicate and perfectly timed mechanism with each shot and sequence linking with the next to conjure not only something unspoken, but something already experienced. It is almost impossible to describe a shot or a scene out of context without falsifying it hopelessly: in the space available here, one can only admire.

Admire, too, Bresson's extraordinary use of non-actors. There is a whole treatise to be written on Bresson's use of eyes in this film, starting on the one hand with the unwinking stares, full of secret knowledge and complicity, which pass between Balthazar and the animals in the circus; and on the other, the veiled secrecy of the humans – except Gérard, who stares boldly straight at Marie and at the camera – as they cast their eyes downwards to place a question mark to their utterances.

**Monthly Film Bulletin, January 1967**

The world changes, but not Bresson. *Au hasard Balthazar* is his greatest and most Bressonian film, but not merely because it echoes the arrogance of *Les Anges du péché*, the waterfall of *Les Dames du Bois de Boulogne*, the letter reading of *Le Journal d'un curé de campagne*, the gear-lever of *Un condamné à mort*, the hands of *Pickpocket*, the naked feet of *Jeanne d'Arc*. It is great because in the harmonies and dissonances between the characters (Marie in particular) and the donkey, Balthazar, and between successive images, between images and soundtrack, there is a dynamic exchange reaching to the limits of possibility whereby each is enriched, transformed by the contact. Motion and stasis, repetition and fulfilment, transition, resonance of sequence against sequence, reality against fantasy, flesh against spirit, sight against sound: Bresson's style is in perfect working order, a well-oiled machine set to reveal the secret, inner movement he cherishes.

Assuming his audience to be adult, and refusing to do their work for them, Bresson does not explain his film or stress its few scattered keys. The principal themes to be orchestrated throughout the film are introduced right from the beginning. We see a foal suckled by its mother, a child's caressing hands, a strange baptism in the salt of wisdom, children playing in the straw, a bench, a swing, the death of a little girl, a carriage laden with luggage; a murmured phrase, 'Till next year!' which an irony of fate renders meaningless as soon as it is uttered (the father has no intention of coming back). Then a swift transition: blows raining on the donkey, the donkey being shod. After the petting, the years of work and hardship, the sand to be carted, the fields to be ploughed. The sequence ends on an image of the donkey, injustice and hypocrisy already lashing him like blows from a whip.

Already Bresson has introduced the main themes from his concerto for donkey and orchestra. The carriage represents departure and escape (there are numerous attempts, successful, unsuccessful, or simply projected); the bench and the swing, respectively, represent stability (marriage, family, wealth – the Jacques theme) and movement, excitement, risk (carnal love, truancy, perdition – the theme of Gérard, Arnold, the old miser). The whole film hangs hesitating in a balance between two poles: between good and evil, richness and poverty, honesty and dishonesty, justice and injustice, love and hatred, novelty and tradition, sacred and profane love, the folly of the modern world and the wisdom of a return to the simple life, to the soft, shadowy hillside landscapes which Bresson has portrayed with the nuanced delicacy of a Corot.

In a cinema still struggling to find expression, Bresson's work soars like the spire of a cathedral. Yielding nothing, accepting no compromise, he makes his own grace – and his own isolation. After *Balthazar*, we know that only Bresson can make us sense the ineffable, see the invisible, touch the intangible.

**Gilles Jacob, *Sight and Sound*, Winter 1966-67**

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## AU HASARD BALTHAZAR

Director: Robert Bresson

Production Companies: Parc Film, Argos-Films, Athos-Films, Svensk Filmindustri, Svenska Filminstitutet

Associate Producer: Mag Bodard

Production Manager: Philippe Dussart

Assistant Production Managers: Michel Choquet, René Pascal

Location Manager: Maurice Jumeau

Assistant Directors: Jacques Kébadian, Sven Frostenson, Claude Miller

Script Supervisor: Geneviève Cortier

Screenplay: Robert Bresson

Director of Photography: Ghislain Cloquet

Camera Operator: Jean Chiabaut

Assistant Operator: Emmanuel Machuel

Supervising Editor: Raymond Lamy

Editor: Geneviève Billo

Art Director: Pierre Charbonnier

Set Decorator: Dominique Ribeyrolles

Props: Jean Catala

Dresser: Guy Renault

Sonate No 20 by Franz Schubert performed on piano by: Jean-Joël Barbier

Jazz/Songs: Jean Wiener

Sound Engineers: Antoine Archimbaud, Jacques Carrère

Jean-Claude Guilbert (*Arnold*)

Philippe Asselin (*schoolteacher*)

Pierre Klossowsky (*the miser*)

Nathalie Joyaut (*Marie's mother*)

Marie-Claire Frémont (*the baker's wife*)

Jean-Joël Barbier (*le doyen*)

Guy Renault

Jean Rémignard (*the notary*)

Guy Bréjac (*the vet*)

Mylène Weyergans (*the nurse*)

Jacques Sorbets (*police captain*)

François Sullerot (*the baker*)

Henri Fraisse

Gilles Sandier

Dominique Moune

Tord Paag (*Louis*)

René Bazart

Pascale Savornin

Isabelle Petit

Roger Fjellstrom (*Gérard's friend*)

Isabelle de Winter

Sven Frostenson (*Gérard's friend*)

José Ruiz Pernias

Rémy Brozeck (*Marcel*)\*

## Cast

Anne Wiazemsky (*Marie*)

Walter Green (*Jacques*)

François Lafarge (*Gérard*)

France/Sweden 1966

95 mins

\* Uncredited

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Thu 2 Mar 20:50; Mon 6 Mar 18:30

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Thu 2 Mar 21:00 BFI IMAX; Fri 3 Mar 18:10; Mon 13 Mar 20:40

### La Règle du jeu (The Rules of the Game)

Fri 3 Mar 14:30; Sat 4 Mar 13:20; Sat 11 Mar 18:05

### Persona

Fri 3 Mar 18:30; Thu 9 Mar 21:05

### Portrait of a Lady on Fire (Portrait de la jeune fille en feu)

Fri 3 Mar 20:30; Wed 8 Mar 20:30

### Do the Right Thing

Fri 3 Mar 20:35; Sat 11 Mar 18:10

### Singin' in the Rain

Fri 3 Mar 20:40; Thu 9 Mar 18:10 (+ intro by Miles Eady, Film Writer and Curator); Tue 14 Mar 14:30

### Man With a Movie Camera (Chelovek s kino-apparatom)

Sat 4 Mar 15:30; Sun 5 Mar 10:30 BFI IMAX; Thu 9 Mar 20:50

### Playtime

Sat 4 Mar 17:00; Sat 11 Mar 20:30

### The Searchers

Sat 4 Mar 17:40; Tue 7 Mar 20:35

### Seven Samurai (Shichinin no samurai)

Sat 4 Mar 18:50; Tue 14 Mar 18:40

### Apocalypse Now: Final Cut

Sat 4 Mar 19:40; Sun 12 Mar 20:00 BFI IMAX

### Tokyo Story (Tôkyô monogatari)

Sat 4 Mar 20:15; Fri 10 Mar 18:00; Wed 15 Mar 14:30

### Shoah

Sun 5 Mar 11:00; Sun 12 Mar 11:00

### Sunrise: A Song of Two Humans

Sun 5 Mar 11:45; Mon 6 Mar 14:00; Mon 13 Mar 20:35

### The Passion of Joan of Arc (La passion de Jeanne d'Arc)

Sun 5 Mar 14:00 (with live accompaniment); Wed 15 Mar 20:40 (with score)

### Citizen Kane

Sun 5 Mar 16:15; Tue 7 Mar 20:30

### Cléo from 5 to 7 (Cléo de 5 à 7)

Sun 5 Mar 17:45; Wed 8 Mar 21:00

### 2001: A Space Odyssey

Sun 5 Mar 19:00; Thu 9 Mar 18:00

### Vertigo

Mon 6 Mar 20:30; Thu 9 Mar 14:30; Wed 15 Mar 18:10

### In the Mood for Love (Fa yeung nin wah)

Mon 6 Mar 20:40; Fri 10 Mar 21:00; Sun 12 Mar 18:30

### Late Spring (Banshun)

Mon 6 Mar 20:45; Tue 7 Mar 14:30; Sun 12 Mar 18:20

### The Night of the Hunter

Tue 7 Mar 18:00; Sat 11 Mar 20:45

### Mulholland Dr.

Tue 7 Mar 20:10; Tue 14 Mar 20:15

### Beau Travail

Wed 8 Mar 14:30; Fri 10 Mar 20:45; Mon 13 Mar 18:20 (+ intro by Catherine Wheatley, Reader in Film Studies, King's College London)

### Daisies (Sedmikrásky) + Meshes of the Afternoon

Wed 8 Mar 18:20 (+ intro)

### Close-Up (Nema-ye Nazdik)

Fri 10 Mar 18:30; Wed 15 Mar 20:50

### The Godfather

Fri 10 Mar 19:00; Sun 12 Mar 18:15

### Jeanne Dielman, 23 quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles

Sat 11 Mar 18:50

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