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DVD

The Austerity Campaign That Never Ended

By **TERRENCE RAFFERTY**

Published: July 4, 2004

It is more or less compulsory — see Page 79 of the official movie critic's handbook — to describe the works of the French filmmaker Robert Bresson as austere, which is not the sort of praise that sets off stampedes to the box office, even in France. In 1965, Susan Sontag wrote: "Bresson is now firmly labeled as an esoteric director. He has never had the attention of the art house audience that flocks to Buñuel, Bergman, Fellini — though he is a far greater director than these." And that was in his (relative) heyday: he had at that point made 6 of his 13 films, including his four best — "Les Dames du Bois de Boulogne" (1945), "The Diary of a Country Priest" (1951), "A Man Escaped" (1956) and "Pickpocket" (1959). Those pictures, it turns out, were about as audience-friendly as he ever got, and, probably, as he ever wanted to be.

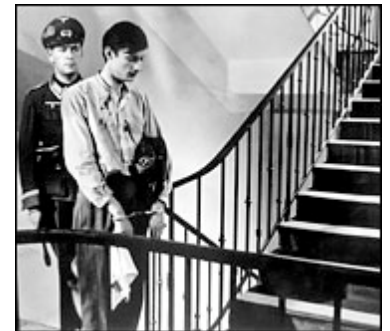
Now that Bresson's films are finally beginning to trickle out on DVD, a new generation will have its chance to be daunted by this imperious, stubbornly uningratiating body of work, and while I wouldn't suggest that the two most recent releases, "A Man Escaped" and "Lancelot of the Lake" (1974), answer to any reasonable definition of fun, they are, if you surrender to their inexorable rhythm and the rigorous perversities of their style, utterly compelling. (And they're short.) Taken together, they also tell a fascinating and terribly sad story about their maker, who resisted change both in the world and in his own art but wound up changing nonetheless, in ways that could only have dismayed him.

These new DVD's are the first Bressons to be released by New Yorker Video, which holds the rights to most of his catalog. (Discs of "Les Dames du Bois de Boulogne" and "Diary of a Country Priest" have been issued within the past year by Criterion.) New Yorker may have selected "A Man Escaped" and "Lancelot of the Lake" as the most apparently accessible of the Bresson pictures it had on hand:

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François Leterrier as a condemned Frenchman in a Nazi prison in Robert Bresson's "A Man Escaped."

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could, even at a stretch, be considered examples of recognizable commercial genres — the prison-break movie and the Arthurian romance, respectively.

But devotees of those genres are not likely to be satisfied by Bresson's approach in either case. "A Man Escaped," which is based on the true story of a condemned Resistance fighter's escape from a Nazi prison in Lyon in 1943, wholly lacks the humor and the bonhomie of, say, "The Great Escape"; it's the tale of a solitary, mysteriously courageous obsessive, whose determination to be free is expressed in the long, tedious labor of removing narrow panels from his cell door and making ropes and hooks out of the sparse materials available to him. This is a patient movie, dense with physical detail and spookily quiet: there are a few terse exchanges of dialogue, some flatly recited voice-over narration and, very occasionally, a quick burst of Mozart (the Mass in C Minor) on the soundtrack. You feel the passage of time, the crushing weight of it, as you do in no other prison movie, and so when the hero makes it over the last wall you feel a deep, overpowering joy — a sense of deliverance, as much spiritual as it is physical.

That's what Bresson was aiming for in the first, and better, half of his career. The two remarkable films that bookended "A Man Escaped" — "Diary of a Country Priest" and "Pickpocket" — are, like that movie, profoundly religious works, and they end, as it does, with manifestations of what has to be called divine grace: at any rate, something unexpected, inexplicable, exalting. Those moments of grace are the fruit of Bresson's famous austerity, of his rigorously cultivated attentiveness to the humblest materials of the world.

His art, in those days, was based on the ascetic principle of affirmation through negation — pruning the resources of the cinema so that it could produce something harder, more beautiful and more nourishing. (He didn't make a film in color until 1969.) It's moviemaking that has taken the vows of poverty, chastity and obedience, and though that may not sound like a very good idea (it certainly wasn't for Lars von Trier and the Dogme group), damned if Bresson didn't make it work.

For a while, Bresson's 50's style, seen at its peak in "A Man Escaped," is spare but fluid — graceful in every sense. Although the scenes are short and laconic, they're often linked by gorgeously precise dissolves and fades, which give the narrative, unadorned though it is, a subtle momentum, a kind of subterranean urgency. Even when nothing appears to be happening, at least in conventional dramatic terms, and the camera is immobile, the film doesn't feel static: it retains a sense of movement toward an end — in other words, it conveys a sort of faith. But in "Lancelot of the Lake" that faith seems gone for good, and Bresson by this time has renounced even the small pleasures of dissolves and fades: he now uses only straight cuts, as blunt and brutal as someone walking away in the middle of a conversation.

In a way, the whole movie is about an interrupted conversation, the abrupt termination of dialogue between God and man. "Lancelot" takes place at a time when the quest for the Holy Grail has obviously failed and the surviving knights are returning, one by one, to a decimated court. Arthur wonders: "Have we provoked God? Is this silent, empty castle a sign that he has forsaken us?" It sure looks that way. The knights, like the film itself, move only with the greatest difficulty, encased in armor that seems harder to break out of than the prison in "A Man Escaped." They're trapped in themselves, in the despair of having been abandoned, and all Bresson can do is stare fixedly at them until they die in their armor, prisoners to the end. He gazes at them in

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stunned disbelief, an old man looking at the ruin of his face in the mirror.

"Lancelot of the Lake" is the most brilliant of Bresson's later films, but only because it's the work that most powerfully embodies the awful transformation his spirit seems to have undergone in his declining years: once obsessed with the presence of grace, he became obsessed with its absence. His austerity hardened into severity, the bitterness of a scourge. What can you say about a filmmaker who in the last two decades of his working life (Bresson died in 1999, at the age of 98) made three pictures about young people committing suicide? ("[Mouchette](#)," 1967; "[Une Femme Douce](#)," 1969; "[The Devil, Probably](#)," 1977). His last movie, "[L'Argent](#)" (1983), builds, with his customary implacability, to an arbitrary, unmotivated murder spree.

What happened? Robert Bresson was a scrupulously private man, so we'll probably never know. All you can say, I suppose, is that the loss of faith is no less mysterious than faith itself, and that, in a way, Bresson's story is a sort of cautionary tale for spiritual pilgrims — especially those who, like him, try to unify the spiritual and the aesthetic. Paul Schrader, in his fervent 1972 study "Transcendental Style in Film," wrote: "In the context of his theological and aesthetic culture, Bresson's personality has little value. Like the country priest's it is vain, neurotic, morbid. It only has value to the extent that it can transcend itself."

You see Bresson transcending himself in "A Man Escaped," and in "Lancelot of the Lake" you see, God help him, his personality. And watching these two very different movies you understand that austerity is not a simple thing: it can be liberating or it can be grimly confining. When Robert Bresson believed in the possibility of grace, he was a luminous artist, a visionary. When his faith deserted him, he was just himself: all dressed down with no place to go.

Terrence Rafferty is the author of "The Thing Happens: Ten Years of Writing About the Movies."

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