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| Bresson, Robert (b. 25 September 1901, Bromont-Lamothe, France; d. - 18 December 1999, Paris, France) |
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| Robert Bresson was a film director and one of the most important representatives of French cinema. His stark, austere style and focus on moral and theological themes has often been compared to Dostoyevsky’s. His films have been a major influence on the work of Andrei Tarkovsky, Paul Schrader and Michael Haneke.  Bresson’s filmography is relatively small (13 films), despite spanning over 50 years. Although his first two films - Les anges du péché [The Angels of Sin] (1943) and Les dames du Bois de Boulogne [The Ladies of Bois de Boulogne] (1945) - are more conventional in style and plotting, by his third feature, Journal d'un curé de campagne [Diary of a Country Priest] (1951), Bresson adopted a distinctive style marked by an extreme visual sparseness, meticulous composition, the use of natural sound occasionally interspersed with classical music (usually Bach) and a type of realism so repetitive and fragmented as to border on abstraction. For instance, simple objects like a coil of rope or items of clothing are carefully and closely scrutinized, while gestures like washing, climbing stairs or pickpocketing turn into a nearly monastic routine. This sense of abstraction is further reinforced by his preference for close-ups and abrupt cuts, techniques which, as David Bordwell notes, strongly resemble those of the Soviet avant-garde. |
| Robert Bresson was a film director and one of the most important representatives of French cinema. His stark, austere style and focus on moral and theological themes has often been compared to Dostoyevsky’s. His films have been a major influence on the work of Andrei Tarkovsky, Paul Schrader and Michael Haneke.  Bresson’s filmography is relatively small (13 films), despite spanning over 50 years. Although his first two films - Les anges du péché [The Angels of Sin] (1943) and Les dames du Bois de Boulogne [The Ladies of Bois de Boulogne] (1945) - are more conventional in style and plotting, by his third feature, Journal d'un curé de campagne [Diary of a Country Priest] (1951), Bresson adopted a distinctive style marked by an extreme visual sparseness, meticulous composition, the use of natural sound occasionally interspersed with classical music (usually Bach) and a type of realism so repetitive and fragmented as to border on abstraction. For instance, simple objects like a coil of rope or items of clothing are carefully and closely scrutinized, while gestures like washing, climbing stairs or pickpocketing turn into a nearly monastic routine. This sense of abstraction is further reinforced by his preference for close-ups and abrupt cuts, techniques which, as David Bordwell notes, strongly resemble those of the Soviet avant-garde.  Bresson disapproved of sets and professional actors and he dispensed with both after his second feature, shooting entirely on location and working with non-professional casts (often chosen for their androgynous, hieratic features), to whom he used to refer as “models” and instructed to be deliberately expressionless and neutral.  But at heart, Bresson was also a transcendentalist, even if he was often a somber, almost cruel one; the minimalistic, frequently severe world of his films hides a constant search for grace and redemption. Bresson was strongly influenced by Catholic theology, particularly by Pascal’s Jansenism.. His films are tragic and harsh but never pitiless, and his protagonists inevitably suffer greatly or inflict suffering themselves: the young priest from Diary of a Country Priest martyrs himself through an ascetic way of life and diet, and is eventually killed by cancer (his final words are “all is grace”). Michel, the protagonist of Pickpocket (1959) steals out of a Raskolnikovian superiority complex, but later suffers in prison. In Un condamné à mort s'est échappé ou Le vent souffle où il veut [A Man Escaped] (1956), French Resistance member Fontaine lives with the constant threat of execution, but must also determine whether he should kill his young cellmate whom he suspects of being a spy. In Au hasard Balthazar [Balthazar] (1966) the life of a French village is depicted through the eyes of a humble donkey, whose suffering from birth to death is all the more moving for its patience. One cay say, Balthazar is Bresson’s most remarkable character - a being of complete opacity whose expressions are purely physical, yet whom we are asked to understand and to empathize with on a transcendent level. Finally, Yvon, the protagonist of Bresson’s last, darkest film, L'argent [Money] (1983) is framed for counterfeiting and ends up robbing and killing several people. Nonetheless, at the end of each film, grace emerges, but only after the characters have stoically internalized and accepted the cruelty of the world.  Selected Filmography:  *Les affaires publiques* [*Public Affairs*] (1934)  *Les anges du péché* [*The Angels of Sin*] (1943)  *Les dames du Bois de Boulogne* [*The Ladies of Bois de Boulogne*] (1945)  *Journal d'un curé de campagne* [*Diary of a Country Priest*] (1951)  *Un condamné à mort s'est échappé ou Le vent souffle où il veut* [*A Man Escaped*] (1956)  *Procès de Jeanne d'Arc* [*The Trial of Joan of Arc*] (1962)  *Au hasard Balthazar* [*Balthazar*] (1966)  *Le diable probablement* [*The Devil, Probably*] (1977)  *L'argent* [*Money*] (1983) |
| Further reading:  (Affron)  (Bresson)  (Quandt)  (Schrader)  (Sontag) |