'Le Journal d'un Curé de Campagne'

Burel & Bresson

Interview by Rui Nogueira, translation and introduction by Tom Milne

Starting out as an apprentice photographer after studying at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts, Léonce-Henry Burel, the Cameraman with the White Gloves—a trademark initially adopted as a protection against a slight haemophilic condition—entered the cinema in 1912. Rapidly graduating out of the darkroom, he made (as director/cameraman) a number of pseudo-scientific documentaries distributed under the auspices of the celebrated Dr. Comandon, simultaneously learning how to direct actors on a series of comedies featuring a character called Zizi.

In 1915 Burel was invited to join the prestigious Film d'Art company as a cameraman, and the first director he was assigned to was Abel Gance. Although Burel no longer remembers the title of the film (and denies having worked on *La Folie du Docteur Tube*, usually cited as the beginning), their association was long and fruitful, continuing through Gance's most creative period (*Les Gaz Mortels*, *La Zone de la Mort*, *Mater Dolorosa*, *La Dixième Symphonie*, *J'Accuse*, *La Roue*, *Napoléon*) and ending with the final flourish of *La Vénus Aveugle* in 1941.

In between times Burel spent four years with Jacques Feyder (*Crainquebille*, *Visages d'Enfants*, *L'Image*, etc.). And by the end of the silent era the list of directors with whom he had been associated begins to sound like a roll call of the most interesting talents working in France: Maurice Tourneur, Léonce Perret, L'Herbier, Tourjansky, Volkoff, Rex Ingram. The sound period, however, tells a rather different story. Scrabbling hopefully through a long catalogue of forgotten men and hack directors, the best one can up with for twenty years is Duvivier, Delannoy, Decoin, Gréville.

Burel, born in 1892 ('Hélas!'), and by conviction an old-school anarchist (cf. his opinion of *Pickpocket*), would probably go along with this division of his career into two uneven parts: 'Time was when the cameraman really was the director's alter ego. They were inseparable, dependent on each other, trusting each other completely. Crews were small, and although the director was the boss you made the film together, really just the two of you, discussing everything, seeing what you could and what you couldn't do. And the cameraman was in total charge of his camera.'

'Things began to change even before sound came in. I remember asking Gance for an assistant, on *La Zone de la Mort* I think, because the equipment was too heavy for me to carry; and this assistant took over some of my other duties as well, loading, doing stills, and so on. But it was with sound and then colour that the changes really came. Crews grew ever larger, with all sorts of electricians and technicians and assistants to assistants. The cameraman became . . . not exactly secondary, but merely one element among many; and the operator was now closer to the director than he was.'

'I really loved my profession because you had everything to do, everything to discover. Nowadays everything has to be safe. They don't take risks any more. They never fail. But a great cameraman, to my mind, has the right to be wrong. And a great director is one who lets you try for things. Feyder was like that; for me he was the greatest. Gance

was like that as well (although he had a little too much violin and double-bass in his range of effects for my taste). And Bresson . . . he was the last of the species.'

For in 1950, in fact, aged fifty-eight, Burel again took up the voyage of discovery interrupted twenty years previously, and pursued it through four consecutive Bresson films. After his disappointment with *Procès de Jeanne d'Arc* ('I would have liked to finish on a note of beauty'), Burel did in fact go back to filming: *Chair de Poule* (Duvivier, 1963), *Un Drôle de Paroissien* (Mocky, 1963), *Le Dernier Tiercé* (Pottier, 1964), *Les Compagnons de la Marguerite* (Mocky, 1966).

L. H. BUREL: One day while I was at my villa in Cap Ferrat, I received a telephone call from a producer at U.G.C., a very nice man with whom I'd worked several times, asking if I'd come to Paris to test for a film. 'Test?' I said, 'An old dog like me with a hundred films behind him? You can't be serious.' But he explained what a predicament he was in, with a director who was going to make an extraordinary film and who wanted something extraordinary but couldn't explain exactly what. 'I've suggested all your most distinguished colleagues, and none of them is what he wants. So please come, as a personal favour to me. I'll pay your expenses, and if nothing comes of it I'll pay you anything you like. Just come, so that I can say I've done my best.'

In the circumstances I said yes and caught the first train to Paris. The director was Robert Bresson, who was preparing *Le Journal d'un Curé de Campagne* for U.G.C. and had apparently been making tests with everybody: Matras, Lefèvre, Thirard. Not the usual tests of a hundred feet or so, but real Bresson tests, a thousand feet long. And each time he said, 'No, no, that's not how I see it.' So it really was as a last resource that the producer had telephoned me. I met Bresson the night I arrived in Paris, and he said, 'I'm going to show you something, my dear Burel. It isn't what I want, but it is something like it. Or at least, it may give you some idea . . .' and so on and so forth. Then he took me to see Carol Reed's *The Third Man*. I thought it was awful—I don't like that kind of photography—and I said to Bresson, 'Listen, if that's the kind of photography you want, then I'm not the man to give it to you. I don't like that high contrast style, with no half-tones and no detail. Perhaps I could do it for you, but it would give me no pleasure and I wouldn't do it well.'

I rather regretted turning it down, because I had just decided to reduce my activities to one film a year, preferably an interesting one, and this was interesting from every point of view. Even at that time working with Bresson was quite something, U.G.C. was a good company to work for, and since I was arriving on the scene as a saviour, I could dictate conditions. The film also had a generous budget and a lengthy schedule (as a matter of fact it turned out to be the only Bresson film that *did* have a long schedule). Nevertheless I did turn it down. Bresson, however, said that since I was there we might as well do some tests.

I read the script that night. The next day, when Bresson asked me what kind of lens I was going to use, I said I was thinking of 50 mm. It doesn't give you much depth, which he evidently didn't want anyway, and it concentrates the action. I also told him I would use relatively powerful diffusers in order to get the extreme contrasts he liked. Now, I had brought along my own diffusers which were made specially for me and which were in effect cylindrical additional lenses. We shot various tests using 50 and 75 mm lenses. But the man who was acting as my assistant wasn't used to these diffusers and he must have changed them while changing lenses, getting them on back to front. When I saw the rushes I was appalled; it wasn't diffused, it was out of focus. At which point Bresson came rushing up excitedly, saying, 'That's it! You've got it, my dear Burel. That's exactly what I want for my film.' So much for *The Third Man* and the high contrast stuff!

He immediately wanted to have me signed up, but I wasn't having any. I like diffused effects and I don't like high definition, but I wasn't going to make a film that was to be entirely out of focus. However, we lunched, we talked, we looked at those rushes over and over again. Finally he said that perhaps we could compromise, meet each other halfway over what he wanted and what I refused to do. I agreed, provided I was given the freedom to do what I liked. I always have done what I liked, even when I hadn't a penny, and now that I didn't *have* to earn my living I didn't see why I should do something I would hate. 'I'll let you do what you like and I won't say a word,' he said, 'only do give me something like those rushes . . .'

So I shot the whole film with a 50 mm lens, and in addition to the diffuser, used a very light gauze. But since Bresson was making demands on me, I also made demands on him. I told him I saw the film entirely without luminous contrasts, as something rather insubstantial or immaterial which I wanted to handle without any suggestion of shadows. All right, he said, but how? Since he had the budget to do it, and since there usually isn't much sun in the north anyway (the film was shot on location in the Pas-de-Calais), I suggested that we should shoot without the sun, doing the exact opposite of what everybody usually does and shooting indoors whenever the sun did come out. That way I thought we could give the film a texture, a style, an entirely new feel.

So off we went and spent nearly two months getting up before dawn—agony for me as I have always been a night person—to do up to thirty retakes of the priest setting off to join his flock and so forth. All the scenes inside the church were done in the local church at Hesdin. It was still consecrated, with Mass being said there every Sunday, and every time the crew passed in front of the altar while setting up a scene they would bare their heads. Some of them even genuflected, and the work just wasn't getting done quickly enough until I spoke to the abbé who had been assigned as adviser to ensure that Bresson didn't commit any blunders or heresies. He saw my point that it had to be either a church or a studio, and promptly settled the matter by removing the Holy Sacrament from the altar. After that the crew came, went and swore as usual.

I must say that Bresson was marvellous about my idea of shooting without sun. Despite all the money that had been spent on tests—you can imagine the costs in raw stock and laboratory charges when tests are counted not in feet but in miles, when every take that might be possible must be printed up, and when he is so demanding about finding exactly what he wants—we simply set off and shot for a week without seeing any rushes whatsoever (chiefly because the local cinema had no facilities for double-headed projection, and Bresson wanted to hear the soundtrack as well as see the images). It didn't bother me, because after doing those tests I knew exactly how much diffusion I needed. But when we finally did see the first week's rushes—not much definition, but it was bearable—there was Bresson on one side of me saying, 'Yes, my dear Burel, but it isn't . . . you know . . . it's very fine and I'm very pleased, but . . . it isn't at all what we agreed on.' And on the other there was the production company saying, 'But my dear Burel, what on earth are we going to do with that? We couldn't possibly show that in a cinema.'

U.G.C. were so worried that they sent down a technical adviser—a cameraman who had made something of a name with UFA but hadn't been in work much recently . . . need I say more?—who echoed the predictions of catastrophe and ruin. Finally I said that I was going to do the film the way I wanted or I wasn't going to do it at all. And since I hadn't signed a contract—I've never signed a contract in my life—and U.G.C. were tearing their hair with visions of starting again from scratch, they gave in. So the film was completed in those conditions, with nobody agreeing about anything and even the laboratory people getting into the act and trying to correct the contrast in developing. It was awful. The result? The film was awarded the Grand Prix for photography at the Venice Festival. After that I was a god for U.G.C. Only Bresson still had reservations. A few. But he was very proud because he got a Grand Prix as well.

If you watch the film carefully, by the way, you will notice three or four occasions where the camera is outside, moving in to a closed window which opens. It looks simple enough to do but it isn't, because the camera and crew (not to mention any light you have to use) get reflected in the glass. I fiddled and experimented endlessly to get the effect. I had to, because that was what Bresson wanted. Every time he asked me to do something difficult he would simply say sweetly, 'But my dear Burel, if you can't do it then I can't make the film.' How I sweated!

For me, *Un Condamné à Mort s'est Echappé* (1956) is by far the best thing Bresson has done. It's a masterpiece and it proved that he was one of the really great French directors, on a par—although all three are very different—with Feyder and Gance. And coming from me that's no small praise, believe me. Furthermore the film is a challenge, it throws down the gauntlet. To start by saying this man had escaped and I am going to tell you how, and then to do so entirely without artifice or dramatic effects, in absolute simplicity . . . well, that is mastery.

The filming caused me a lot of headaches for a very simple reason. Which was that many scenes had to be shot in studio sets, and these same scenes would begin or end in the real setting of the prison at Lyon. My problem was to ensure that the spectator could never say this bit was shot in a studio

set, and that bit in the Montluc prison. But that's my job, and I did it by studying the lighting in the cells at Montluc, then repeating the light exactly in the studio. The scenes done at Montluc were the ones in which the prisoner came out of his cell into the gallery; there had to be a correlation between the cell and the much more brightly illuminated corridor, and the cell itself had to be lit to match exactly the one I had lit in the studio.

I had to be extremely careful, too, because photographically speaking, I was living dangerously by filming almost without light. When you are working within a comfortable range, a little more or a little less doesn't really matter; but when you're stuck at one end of the scale, then the slightest error can mean catastrophe. For the scenes with Fontaine and Jost in their cell, which is illuminated only by a fanlight, it would have been ridiculous to show them with shadows, especially as the fanlight is right above them. As you don't actually see it until later, I wanted to suggest that the whole cell was illuminated by this fanlight you hadn't seen but which you would know was there. So I think I was one of the first cameramen to use reflected instead of direct light. I threw the light on to a sort of large white shield, so that instead of falling directly on the actors it was reflected on to them. It became an ambience, an atmosphere, and though directed, came not from a particular point but from an extensive surface. It was easy enough really because Bresson works so much in close-up and because there were never more than three actors in shot. With a big set or a wider field, I could never have done it.

When Fontaine comes out into the corridor, on the other hand, I used directional light to suggest illumination from much larger windows. Nothing was left to chance. The escape scenes were shot at Montluc at the dead of night and I used an absolute minimum of light. Sometimes there's a bit of light and you can just barely see the two of them; but since there was almost nothing else on the screen, you knew they were there.

With *Pickpocket* (1959) the problem was different. Bresson wanted to film in the streets, as far as possible without anybody noticing. Whole sequences of the film, not just a few scenes. It would be easier now, but I had an idea I'm quite proud of. The first high-power lamps, which could be overrun to 2,800-3,000 watts, had just become available in France. In order to be able to use them, I hid car batteries to make up the 110 volts on a little camouflaged cart. After Bresson had rehearsed ten, fifteen, twenty times, my operator came along during the final rehearsal with his camera—we were using a hand camera, an Arriflex—to check his focus and get a good look at the location and action. Then, as the take started, I switched on the lights I had previously hidden in trees or places like that where people wouldn't notice them. So, using the fastest available Gevaert stock, we were able to film almost candid camera style, because people didn't have time to realise what was going on. That way we got scenes around the Madeleine and the Opéra, the café in the Place Pigalle (part interior and part exterior, which was a problem), and the one at the corner of the Boulevard Saint Michel.

For the Gare de Lyon sequence, which

'Pickpocket': Martin Lassalle, Marika Green

was rather more complex, I was able to light practically a whole street by running off the circuits in the local bars and cafés; I would signal with a torch and the lights would all be switched on at once. This was the sequence that was a sort of documentary of ways of picking pockets, and the 'technical adviser' had been a professional pickpocket, fantastically clever with his hands. As the filming was rather more complicated than usual, we had been given four or five gendarmes to help. At the technical adviser's invitation, these cops went to a bar to have a drink with him after we had finished—and there he gave them back the keys, wallets and watches he had lifted from them while they were going about their business during filming! Afterwards, being too well known to resume his profession, he went on the halls with a marvellous act.

Including rehearsals which went on for hours and hours, *Pickpocket* was shot in barely seven weeks. I wasn't at all in agreement with Bresson about the film because I didn't care for the way he turned his hero into a lousy little swine (even if he did love his mother). The character is basically a rebel, after all, something of an anarchist, and yet Bresson has him steal only from ordinary people, with never a hint of elegance or altruism to offset the ugliness. I didn't understand what he was trying to say. As a matter of fact, I don't think anybody ever has understood, really. Who is this 'pickpocket', why does he steal, and so on?

'Procès de Jeanne d'Arc': Florence Carrel. 'Bresson would never let her look up . . .'

What Bresson did was his business and I didn't interfere, but we used to have long discussions about the film before starting and I made this point over and over again. But unlike Feyder when we had a disagreement about ideas or camera angles (sometimes he would give way and sometimes I would), Bresson wouldn't listen and it never made any difference. He just goes ahead with what he has in mind.

I don't really want to talk about *Procès de Jeanne d'Arc* (1961) because I think it's an entirely botched film. I'd rather forget it. And I think Bresson might prefer to forget it too . . .

My wife, who died a few years later, was already gravely ill and I had really decided not to make any more films. But Bresson wrote to me, very flattering letters, and in the end I agreed. My reasoning was as follows: Bresson, after all, is a very religious man, a sincere believer; he doesn't say so in so many words, but I know he is because we have discussed these things. I'm not a believer myself but I respect sincere beliefs; and as he really wants to make this film, it is going to be marvellous. Joan of Arc as seen by a very talented, very intelligent man who sincerely believes: we can make a great film together, *Un Condamné à Mort* all over again but seen from a different angle.

Bresson's art director, Charbonnier, had found a wonderful natural setting for the film under the observatory at Meudon. Charbonnier, incidentally, is a very nice man and a very talented painter even though I don't understand his talent. We get on well, but we don't talk the same language. It's like Picasso: I just don't understand, and it's neither his fault nor mine. Anyway, these vaults he had found, huge and full of nooks and angles, were absolutely perfect as a medieval décor. I rubbed my hands, thinking what a joy it was going to be. We tested about a dozen girls, all of them very pretty, and Bresson chose one with great possibilities. Charming, absolutely right for the Maid, and with eyes that were extraordinarily intelligent, limpid and pure.

Then we started. And he didn't use the setting at all. He stuck me in front of a wall covered with cloth hangings to represent the tribunal where most of the action takes place. And bang up against the hangings—and on a little dais to boot—were the judges. You'd have thought it was a church pageant or something. I said to him, 'Robert, why haven't you left me anything behind so I can convey the feeling that we're in an enormous room? What do you expect me to do with this?' 'Ah,' he said, 'But you see I want it to be simple and spare. I don't want anything to distract the eye.' That was our first disagreement.

Next we simply turned everything round, still with that wretched dais, and shot the girl. You never saw Joan and her judges together, not once. No interrelation. For me this is Bresson's kippered herring; you get a nice clean set of bones but nothing to eat around them. I saw it very differently, and quite honestly I think I could have done something with it. Second disagreement.

Our third disagreement had me curled up into a ball and showing my prickles, because it concerned me professionally. Here we had this sweet, simple, charming girl with the most marvellous, beautiful eyes,

Bresson filming in 1966

and Bresson would never let her look up at the camera. Never. She always had to look down, even when she was answering her judges. I told Bresson that if I believed in God, which I don't, I would look up when I thought of Him. If I believed, He wouldn't be beneath me but above me. Yet here Bresson was making Joan behave like a shifty hypocrite. And it wasn't even a sign of humility in her, because Joan was not humble or humbled. She was a mystic, a visionary . . . you have to be to lead soldiers into battle without even knowing how to use a sword. I was so furious I really let myself go, and Bresson didn't like it. He didn't want to have Joan look up because Dreyer had done that.

Anyway, that was our great quarrel, and since Bresson will never admit his mistakes —as he is perfectly entitled not to—he held it against me. I had humiliated him, so he wanted to humiliate me. That, however, isn't easy to do. In fact it is probably impossible. I'm an arrogant man; not vain but arrogant, terribly arrogant. That's the way I was born, that's the way I'll probably die, and there's nothing to be done about it. On two or three occasions he found fault with the way I was lighting things. The first time I thought, well, maybe he's right; it was an arguable point. The second time I said, 'But it won't match with what we've already done.' And the third time I told him he had a week to find a replacement for me. 'But why, my dear Burel?'

'Because you're making a mess of your film. Because I expected so much more of you. Because working on it no longer gives me any pleasure. It's the last film I'll ever work on, and I would have liked to finish on a note of beauty. I'll never forgive you for not letting me have that girl's eyes. I could have given you a face of ecstasy, a face that audiences would treasure in their memories.'

Men with writs coming to the set, endless special delivery letters from Bresson and from the producer Agnès Delahaye, pointing out that although as usual I had not signed a contract, I had made a verbal agreement. So I stayed and finished the film after writing a letter to 'Dear M. Bresson' (no more Robert) explaining that I didn't want to run the film or the company into any more trouble, and that I would complete it on two conditions. One, that no scene was to be shot until his formal approval had been recorded on the clapperboard. Two, that I would attend screenings of rushes only in working hours. And that was how we finished the film. I left him alone and he left me alone. ■

Bressonisms

Bresson's book *Notes sur le Cinématographe* was published in Paris in 1975. A series of aphoristic paragraphs, with that characteristic quality of seeming at once definitive and tentative, it distinguishes between *cinématographe* (the real thing) and *cinéma* (films still linked to the stage, the actor). In January 1977 Urizen Press, New York, is bringing out an English edition, to be distributed in Britain by Pluto Press. We are grateful to the publishers and to Robert Bresson for permission to print these extracts.

***Metteur-en-scène*, director. The point is not to direct someone, but to direct oneself.**

□

An image must be transformed by contact with other images, as is a colour by contact with other colours. A blue is not the same blue beside a green, a yellow, a red. No art without transformation.

□

If an image, looked at by itself, expresses something sharply, if it involves an interpretation, it will not be transformed on contact with other images. The other images will have no power over it, and it will have no power over the other images. Neither action, nor reaction. It is definitive and unusable in the cinematographer's system. (A system does not regulate everything. It is a bait for something.)

□

The mixture of true and false yields falsity (photographed theatre or CINEMA). The false when it is homogeneous can yield truth (theatre).

□

In a mixture of true and false, the true brings out the false, the false hinders belief in the true. An actor simulating fear of shipwreck on the deck of a real ship battered by a real storm—we believe neither in the actor, nor in the ship, nor in the storm.

□

To set up a film is to bind persons to each other and to objects by looks.

□

Shooting. Put oneself into a state of intense ignorance and curiosity, and yet see things *in advance.*

□

Be sure of having used to the full all that is communicated by immobility and silence.

□

One forgets too easily the difference between a man and his image, and that there is none between the sound of his voice on the screen and in real life.

□

A sound must never come to the help of an image, nor an image to the help of a sound.

□

Actors. The nearer they approach (on the screen) with their *expressiveness*, the further away they get. Houses, trees come nearer; the actors go away. Models. No ostentation. Faculty of gathering into himself, of keeping, of not letting anything get out. A certain inward configuration common to them all. Eyes.

□

Avoid paroxysms (anger, terror, etc.) which one is obliged to simulate, and in which everybody is alike.

□

Flatten my images (as if ironing them) *without attenuating them.*

□

How hide from oneself the fact that it all winds up on a rectangle of white fabric hung on a wall? (See your film as a surface to cover.)

□

Hide the ideas, but so that people find them. The most important will be the most hidden.

□

IN THE LANGUAGE OF IMAGES, ONE MUST LOSE COMPLETELY THE NOTION OF IMAGE. THE IMAGES MUST EXCLUDE THE IDEA OF IMAGE.

□

The eye (in general) superficial, the ear profound and inventive. A locomotive's whistle imprints on us a whole railroad station.

□

Your camera passes through faces, provided no mimicry (intentional or not intentional) gets in between. Cinematographic films made of inner movements *which are seen.*

□

Obvious *travelling* or *panning* shots do not correspond to the movements of the eye. This is to separate the eye from the body. (One should not use the camera as if it were a broom.)

□

Shooting. No part of the unexpected which is not secretly expected by you.

□

Films whose slownesses and silences are indistinguishable from the slownesses and silences of the audience are ruled out.

□

Accustom the public to divining the whole of which they are given only a part. Make people diviners. Make them desire it.

□

The things we bring off by chance—what power they have!