The state of the modern soul

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23 July 2005

L'argent [*Money*], directed by Robert Bresson, a DVD released by New Yorker Video

L'argent [*Money*], originally released in 1983, was the final film made by French director Robert Bresson, who died in 1999 at the age of 98. Bresson directed 13 works between 1943 and 1983, among which are a number of the most emotionally compelling of the postwar era (*A Man Escaped*, *Pickpocket*, *Mouchette*, *A Gentle Creature*). The release of *L'argent* on DVD is very welcome. The New Yorker disc also includes a commentary by critic Kent Jones and two brief but fascinating interviews with Bresson conducted by French television in 1983.

L'argent is based on a later (and somewhat lesser) Tolstoy novella, *The Forged Coupon*, which treats the disastrous consequence of a thoughtless act of forgery by two spoiled, privileged schoolboys. The pair use an altered banknote to victimize a shopkeeper's wife, whose husband passes it off to a peasant, Ivan, ultimately driving the latter to crime. Ivan makes a career out of stealing horses until his death at the hands of another peasant, Stepan. The latter, in turn, goes on to carry out a series of killings before a spiritual awakening transforms him into a "holy man." A host of characters, including the tsar, play a role in the events, as the evil spreads inexorably from its initial source. Tolstoy pillories the landowners, the petty bourgeoisie, the clergy and government officialdom, and decries a corrupt society obsessed with financial gain.

Bresson apparently found something congenial in the material. He once told an interviewer, "I think in the whole world things are going very badly. People are becoming more materialist and cruel ... Cruel by laziness, by indifference, egotism, because they only think about themselves and not at all about what is happening around them, so they let everything grow ugly and stupid. They are all interested in money only. Money is becoming their God. God doesn't exist for many. Money is becoming something you must live for."

In Bresson's *L'argent* also two schoolboys set events in motion by passing a counterfeit banknote. A heating oil delivery driver, Yvon, receives the false bill from a shopkeeper (who knows it is counterfeit) and tries to spend it at a local café. This leads to Yvon's arrest. The shopkeeper, his wife and his assistant, Lucien, lie in court, but the judge lets Yvon off with a warning. Meanwhile the mother of one of the schoolboys bribes the shopkeeper's wife to keep her son's name out of it. Yvon, having lost his job, agrees to be the getaway driver in a bank robbery. He is caught and sent away this time. While serving a three-year prison sentence, Yvon's young daughter dies and his wife leaves him.

Lucien, encouraged by his experience in court (he is rewarded by his boss for perjuring himself), sinks into a life of crime, justifying his actions with an anarcho-egotistical philosophy. He winds up in the same prison as Yvon. When they meet, Lucien proposes they break out together, but Yvon replies, "I'd kill you first." When Lucien's attempt at a prison escape fails, Yvon's cellmate tells him, "Someone is fond of you and protects you from afar." Yvon can only pound his fist on the cell door.

Released from prison, with no home and no family, Yvon finds a room in a cheap hotel. He murders the hotel-owner and his wife, stealing their money. In the street one day, while looking in a toy-store window, he sees an older woman and follows her home. She takes him in to her house in the country, where she slaves away for her father and various relatives, including an invalid boy. The woman knows that Yvon has killed people, but she feeds and shelters him. One day he says to her, "You wear yourself out for them. You're waiting for a miracle?" She replies, "I'm not waiting for anything."

When the woman is out, Yvon looks for money in the house. One night he takes the axe he has found in the barn and kills the entire household. Later, in a local café, Yvon orders a drink. Several policemen are standing around; he goes up to them and turns himself in. A crowd in the street gapes as he is led out of the café.

Bresson told interviewer Michel Ciment about *L'argent*, "[M]y film is about today's unconscious indifference when people only think about themselves and their families. But it is not an anti-bourgeois film. It is not about the bourgeoisie, but about specific people. I am a bourgeois myself. I simply happened to have observed people like that. That's what I like about the Tolstoy story. People from other classes can behave in the same way, for the love of their children. They are not intrinsically evil, but their behavior has evil consequences."

The film, in its rigor, economy and intensity, has a kind of brilliance. As always with Bresson, one is in the presence of moral and artistic seriousness of the highest order. Whether one agrees with his choices or not, one knows that the filmmaker has a persuasive reason for each of them.

The filmmaker, a deeply religious individual, although not in any orthodox sense, had very definite views about art and film. He claimed to have been horrified by the artificiality of his actors during the making of his first feature film. Subsequently he used non-professionals almost exclusively. Bresson referred to them not as actors, but as models, whose unconscious 'states of soul' he was seeking to reveal. He asked his 'models' not to act but to speak as though they were speaking to themselves, requiring twenty, thirty, forty or more takes to obtain what he wanted from a particular moment.

He commented: "I want the essence of my films to be not the words my people say or even the gestures they perform, but what these words and gestures provoke in them. What I tell them to do or say must bring to light something they had not realized they contained. The camera catches it; neither they nor I really know it before it happens. The *unknown*." This mystery that Bresson pursued relentlessly no doubt had divine significance to him.

Explaining his approach to directing his models, he remarked: "I tell my actors to speak and move mechanically. For I am using these gestures and words—which they do not interpret—to draw out of them what I want to appear on screen." The actors are raw material, but "precious raw material."

Bresson's films are distinctive and not to everyone's taste. He directs the spectator's attention to what he considers essential at every instant: a hand, a door, moving feet, a bank machine, a cafeteria ladle. He often presents effects before causes, the lower body of a character before his or her face. The filmmaker told an interviewer: "I think this is a good idea because it increases the mystery; to witness events without knowing why they are occurring makes you desire to find out the reason."

On his style: “I want to make things so concentrated and so unified that the spectator feels as if he has seen one single moment. I control all speech and gesture so as to produce an object that is indivisible. Because I believe that one moves an audience only through rhythm, concentration, and unity.”

Bresson made a number of films based on works by Dostoyevsky and the French author Georges Bernanos because both writers were “searching for the soul.” He believed in feelings more than intellect (“Our senses tell us more than our intelligence”) and insisted that he began each film with no preconceptions. In the television interviews that accompany *L’argent* on DVD, Bresson explains that he never knows what he will film on a given day, like a painter, who doesn’t know where his next brush stroke will fall. He says that he carefully plans out each work, then forgets his plan, leaving himself open to spontaneity and chance.

In the same interviews, he argues that the future of cinema lies in “inner artistry, not technology.” And how many contemporary artists would assert, like Bresson, that “I am looking for truth, or the impression of truth” in his or her filmmaking? In his own fashion, Bresson took on some of the most momentous moral problems of his day.

He clearly despised the commercialism and superficiality of the contemporary film industry. In 1970, speaking of the left filmmaker Jean-Luc Godard, Bresson commented, “His films *are* interesting. He upsets the official cinema, which cares only for profits. He taught films how to use disorder.”

In an obituary of Bresson in January 2000 (he died in December 1999), I wrote: “Both in their substance and form the films stand as a protest against the existing state of things. It is because Bresson rebukes everything—money, celebrity, shallowness, insincerity, pusillanimity—that now holds sway in the film and ‘entertainment industry’ that he is largely a ‘dead dog.’ And the social layer that once attended his films is now more likely to keep an eye on share prices. One commentator has pointed out that there have been 30 books written in the last decade in English about the second-rate director X and not one about Bresson, a man who continued making films into the 1980s. There are not many in French either. Most of the studies of his work date from the 1960s.”

Insofar as an artist is honest and serious, and works indefatigably to build up a picture of life and the world, he or she is obliged by the requirements of that task to put aside or contradict openly mystical conceptions, which ultimately attribute the driving force in human and social activity in part or in whole to some external source, or apply them in a way that explains very little. So it was with Bresson. His argument that the imprisoned Resistance fighter Fontaine in *A Man Escaped* helped himself and therefore was helped by God contributes almost nothing to one’s experience of the film, although it tells us something about the outlook and history of its maker. One does not need such an explanation for the actions of the characters in *A Man Escaped* to be deemed psychologically accurate and true.

Equally, whether or not Bresson had his eyes set at every instant on the afterlife, *L’argent* is remarkably perceptive about certain aspects of contemporary existence. Shot in 1982, the film anticipates a great many of the social tendencies of the next decades: the worship of money, the selfishness of the upper middle class, the growing indifference of society to suffering, and as well perhaps, the dangerous desensitization of certain layers of the population under these conditions. That the film’s credits appear over a bank machine (a relatively new phenomenon at the time), whose sliding door also suggests the observation panel of a prison cell, is a tribute to the director’s perspicacity.

Having paid tribute to Bresson’s artistic integrity and seriousness and to *L’argent*’s general sensitivity and perceptiveness, one must point out that the film is not endowed with many or perhaps any of the breathtaking moments one associates with the finest of the director’s works. As I noted in 2000, “One remembers certain things about his films forever: Fontaine’s persistent work on his door, Michel the pickpocket in jail kissing his girlfriend through the bars, Mouchette’s night in the woods, the fluttering curtains and the open window after the ‘gentle creature’ has jumped to her death.”

Such moments are rare or non-existent in *L’argent*. One even feels the director straining slightly for ‘transcendent’ moments and coming up short: Yvon learning of his daughter’s death, his confrontation with the prison guards, the murder of the saintly woman, Yvon’s surrender to the authorities. Nothing quite has the emotional impact it should.

Indeed, in my view, his last four films (*Four Nights of a Dreamer*, *Lancelot of the Lake*, *The Devil, Probably* and *L’argent*) are weaker than his previous seven (*Diary of a Country Priest*, *A Man Escaped*, *Pickpocket*, *Trial of Joan of Arc*, *Au hasard Balthazar*, *Mouchette*, *A Gentle Creature*), less satisfying artistically, less emotionally compelling. Why is this so? The answer, in my view, is complex.

A debate has arisen in recent years as to whether Bresson’s later films (particularly *The Devil, Probably* [1977] and *L’argent*) are more “pessimistic” than his earlier works, manifested, for example, in a reduced possibility for human redemption, or even whether the director’s own skills diminished or declined.

As to the latter, it is difficult to say. Granted the director was by now in his 80s, but he appears extremely energetic and intellectually alert, indeed combative, in the 1983 television interviews.

There is no reason to believe that Bresson underwent a dramatic loss of religious faith, as some have suggested—although such things have occurred. Not unaware of the “narrative/tonal shift in his work,” according to Jonathan Hourigan, a friend and associate, the director apparently preferred the word “lucidity” to “pessimism.” That merely sidesteps the issue. If to view things in a clear-sighted manner is to view them *darkly*, that sounds remarkably like “pessimism.” In any event, Hourigan admits that the shift in Bresson’s work “at least partially reflected his shifting perceptions of the world he experienced.”

It hardly seems debatable that the filmmaker considered the moral and social state of the world to be deteriorating. To what did he attribute this deterioration? Here we come to certain difficulties, which find expression in the weakening of his latest films. I think he had no consistent or compelling answer to that question.

Bresson’s fierce commitment to artistic truth was rooted, in the final analysis, in certain abstract moral considerations shaped by his particular strand of Catholicism (influenced by Pascal and Jansenism) and the political traumas of the twentieth century. He no doubt despised tyranny over the human soul, the tyranny of dictators, the tyranny of money. He fought against dishonesty and corruption, opportunism and cowardice.

To despise and even actively oppose these phenomena and to understand their source (and perhaps resurgence) in social relations are two different things.

The artist, as a Marxist commentator once noted, is not an empty machine for creating form. He or she is a living person, with a crystallized personality, even if not a fully harmonious one, which is the result of definite social and historical conditions.

Because Bresson more or less disdained the socio-historical process, in favor of capturing humanity’s one ‘essential’ and presumably timeless soul, does not mean that the former failed to recognize and include him in its workings.

The director imbibed, even if with his own special devices, much of the general atmosphere of the war and postwar years—created by the rise of fascism and totalitarianism, the Resistance (his one film that points concretely to historical events, *A Man Escaped*, treats a Resistance fighter imprisoned by the Gestapo), the existence of the Soviet Union and large labor movements. The conditions of the poor or the marginalized concerned him, in *Pickpocket*, *Au hasard Balthazar* and *Mouchette* in particular, again, from whatever special angle he might have viewed them.

One does not want to discount that ‘special angle,’ but it does not make him entirely unique in postwar cinema. One thinks of the major figure of Italian filmmaker Roberto Rossellini, for example, a sometime Catholic, as well as the influential French critic, André Bazin, a Christian socialist.

Bresson was not an otherworldly figure, existing outside time or space, despite the claims of his most ardent admirers. He responded to the same earthly events, in his singular manner, as many other intellectuals and artists did. And he had some of the same general reactions.

French society experienced a massive crisis in 1968; a general strike by millions threatened bourgeois rule. Capitalism was saved by the Communist Party Stalinists and their hangers-on in various “left” movements. The problems posed by this historic event—whether one was for or against the social revolution, and, if for, what ideological and political issues had the betrayal in May-June 1968 brought forcefully forward—were momentous and difficult. The French intelligentsia was tested and largely found wanting. Certainly French cinema went into a decline from which it has not yet emerged.

In some, the post-1968 years engendered discouragement and disappointment (which often led to the self-serving conclusion that the defeat in May-June had meant ‘goodbye to all that’ and ‘hello’ to a well-paying career in academia, journalism, the unions or the state apparatus); in others, fear and resentment (the unpleasant realization that one’s petty bourgeois dramas paled in comparison to the life-and-death questions of the day); and incomprehension and political paralysis in still others (understanding and breaking the stranglehold of Stalinism over large sections of the working class proved simply too challenging and demanding).

Bresson, as a ‘non-political’ man and not a denizen of the left milieus, may not have fit into any of these categories. But like everybody else he lived and breathed the air of the France (and the rest of the advanced industrial world) that emerged from the heady, radical days of the 1960s and early 1970s.

In what lay Bresson’s great strength, in the final analysis? In his ability, through his special methods of discovering the unconscious ‘states of souls’ of his non-actors, to reveal something essential and penetrating about the human condition as it expressed itself in the postwar, post-Nazi era. Bresson, so finely attuned to the inner being of his fellow creatures, delved into the terrible combination of human nobility and perfidy—and the varying intermediary states—that the events of the middle of the last century had exposed. He took a reading, in fact, not so much of the timeless, essential soul (although there are timeless, essential features of the human soul), but of a quite specific, historically-conditioned human creature.

Bresson was thus dependent as much or more than any other leading figure in cinema, on the overall state of the human unconscious, its general, underlying moral condition. How could his work not have been affected as the mood of wide layers of the population in France and elsewhere changed so radically from the mid-1970s onward, not only as the result of political defeats, but vast changes in economic life (globalization and related phenomena)? If his ‘models’ were ‘precious raw material’ for his films, then what had to be the impact of the emergence of a new, hedonistic, selfish, money-worshipping climate?

It is striking. The human ‘raw material’ in *The Devil, Probably* and *L’argent* is simply less interesting than in previous works. Superficially, Christian Patey as Yvon and Caroline Lang (the daughter of politician Jack Lang) as Yvon’s wife, resemble “models” from previous films, François Leterrier in *A Man Escaped*, Martin LaSalle and Marika Green in *Pickpocket*, Nadine Nortier in *Mouchette*, even Dominique Sanda in *A Gentle Creature*, but their faces are a little blander, slightly more complacent, less sympathetic. One cares that much less about the fates of these individuals. There is less *there* in these faces and ‘souls.’

Of course the questions this raises are complex and perhaps unanswerable. Is it that the faces and bodies are intrinsically less sympathetic because Bresson, either unconsciously or because of his awareness of the social and atmospheric changes, was selecting different types of human beings? Were there simply different types available? Or was the filmmaker now approaching what was essentially the same human “raw material” less sympathetically because, at one level or another, he was beginning to blame the population itself for society’s degraded moral state?

It hardly matters. The result is the same: a decrease in emotional intensity, a lessening in the sense of urgency of the moral and social matters treated, an overall artistic and dramatic weakening.

The choice of the Tolstoy story was also perhaps not the wisest. Faced with Dostoyevsky, with his “various forms of illness, the epileptic attacks, nightmares, delirious and semidelirious sensations” (Voronsky), Bresson could easily ‘subtract’ in his particular fashion and still be left with a powerful emotional residue. Tolstoy, especially in a story like the *Forged Coupon*, has already removed nearly everything extraneous. He has his own simplicity and clarity, along with a moralizing that is not so attractive. The result, again, is a work that is somewhat flattened, less appealing.

These matters are relative, of course. A lesser work by Bresson provokes more thought and emotion than a dozen films by any of the ‘leading lights’ of contemporary cinema. His films need to be viewed, evaluated critically and absorbed. These are modern classics.

For a lengthy 1970 interview with Bresson, from which a number of this article’s comments are taken, see: http://www.mastersofcinema.org/bresson/Words/CTSamuels.html