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Tony Pipolo, *Robert Bresson: a Passion for Film*, Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press 2010. 407 pp. \$29.95 U.S. (pb). ISBN: 978-0-19-531979-8.

Review by Roland-François Lack, University College London.

Auteurs with small *oeuvres* (e.g., Dreyer, Visconti, Tarkovski, and here Bresson) are ideal subjects for an *auteurist* reading, since such a reader can know the *oeuvre* thoroughly and can, in writing about it, account for it fully. This is true of Tony Pipolo's impressive, substantial new book (over 400 pages), from which we emerge as if having sat through a complete Bresson retrospective over a long weekend, so exactly does Pipolo render his readings of the thirteen films that for him constitute the corpus.

Here, a caveat: Pipolo apologizes for not incorporating Bresson's first, lately re-discovered film *Affaires publiques*, on the grounds that though he had seen it twice no copy was available for "extensive study" while writing the book. In my view this is to duck the challenge, which for any thorough *auteurist* is to match the matrix to each output. Keith Reader, for example, in his short but thorough introduction to Bresson, is able to position the film in a group with his following two films as "Bresson before Bresson, but still Bresson" (quoting Roger Leenhardt), and to return to it in comparing the use of long shots in *Affaires publiques* with the long shots in *Mouchette*.

That said, Pipolo matches the monographs by Reader (Manchester University Press, 2000) and Joseph Cunneen (Continuum, 2003) as scholarly introductions to Bresson's work, and complements recent anthologies of essays by James Quandt (Cinematheque Ontario, 1999) -- in which Pipolo's chapter on *Les Anges du péché* appears as a separate essay -- and Burt Cardullo (Anthem Press, 2009). The burgeoning of the bibliography over the last ten years does imply a risk of redundancy for Pipolo's book, a danger surmounted by the intensity of his approach. His full title is *Robert Bresson: A Passion for Film* (echoing Richard Roud's book on Henri Langlois, *A Passion for Films*), but the real passion on display here is not so much Bresson's as Pipolo's, a lifelong passion for the filmmaker's work that communicates itself and persuades, even when one might be inclined towards a cooler detachment.

Pipolo's attachment to Bresson is that of a biographer for his subject, though this is not a biography. Pipolo argues that the films themselves provide "an aesthetic biography of the filmmaker", an attractive figure, especially if an "aesthetic" biography is understood to be concerned with the life of forms. That is true of this book when it discusses "the question of style" (p.9), which it does consistently and effectively, but the impulse to interpret the films in relation to the attitudes, intentions and beliefs of the man who made them is also strong and recurrent. The result can be striking, as in the connection of shot-countershot in *Le Procès de Jeanne d'Arc* to the famous statement in *Notes sur le cinématographe* that "no shot should be self-enclosed" (p. 165), but the result can also be trite. In the Introduction, for example, we are told that Bresson's "unfulfilled project to film the Book of Genesis" attests to an acknowledgment of "the concept of original sin." I would be loath to conclude in similar fashion that his 1966 film of *The Bible* attested to John Huston's belief in original sin. Somewhat trite, also, is Pipolo's further comment that Bresson's acknowledgment of original sin explains the preponderance of virgins among his characters.

Equally unconvincing is the conclusion to his reading of *Lancelot du Lac* (p. 308): "Bresson has given us a comparison of compelling choices, which may well reflect his own fluctuating convictions about how life must be lived in the face of existential doubt." The work as reflection of the artist is a recurring interpretative trope in this book, "a mirror of the life and art of its creator" (p. 279). These comments are often accompanied by confessions of feeling on the author's part ("my feeling is...", "it is hard not to sense that...", "one feels that..."), revealing, in my view, that these connections between life and art are inherently tenuous.

But when Pipolo reads the works as reflections of or connections to each other, the results can be much more persuasive. The sentimental conclusion to the reading of *Lancelot du Lac* includes, as link with the following film, a contrast between Guinevere who “chooses life” and the suicidal Charles of *Le Diable probablement*: “Together they form the poles of what may be the most philosophically inclined positions of Bresson’s late work.” This is a straightforward example, but Pipolo’s book is rich in many such instances, not all centred on characters and their “psychological credibility” (p. 21), where the coherence of the oeuvre is established by patterns of recurrence and contrast. A good example is on page 231: “It is difficult not to see the sequence from the moment Mouchette enters the woods as a replay of the final sequence in *Au hasard Balthazar*.”

Perhaps the richest reading in the whole book is the chapter on *Pickpocket*, a film about which it is difficult to say something new, but which is presented here very effectively through a set of formal contrasts with the preceding film, *Un condamné à mort s’est échappé*, such that they appear as a diptych on the subject of subjectivity. The contrast comes out, for example, through the foregrounding of two key motifs, the ascent or descent of stairs and the protagonist’s moments of pensive immobility. Finely observed, these combine with Pipolo’s precise analyses of the pocket-picking sequences as exemplary illustrations of the need to read detail, the kind of thing that make his book an invaluable tool for film students.

The complementarity of these two films is borne out by the different relation to Dostoevsky, of no great importance in *Un condamné à mort* but, as Pipolo demonstrates beyond question, “the unacknowledged source of *Pickpocket*.” When he goes on to discuss Bresson’s explicit adaptations of that author, *Une femme douce* and *Quatre nuits d’un rêveur*, under the heading “Dostoevsky in Paris”, we have been prepared for the differential coherence given the oeuvre by the return to that source.

Pipolo’s book is organized as a suite of chapters on the individual films, sometimes grouped in pairs under a common heading. The stand-alone quality of the readings is laudable, but, as I have suggested, it is the demonstration of a larger coherence that gives the book its strength. The two often combine, as when he demonstrates that *Four Nights of a Dreamer* “is one of Bresson’s most allusion-conscious films”, and then lists seven points of contact with other films by Bresson.

The author himself itemizes six “ruling assumptions” of his book. The first is that “Bresson’s aim” was the “defining of cinematic narrative”: Pipolo demonstrates that the “seizing of the phenomenologically visible and audible world” does lead to such a new definition, though whether that was Bresson’s aim is irrelevant. The second is that he was “a preeminent moralist of the cinema”: if this is true it is a minor claim, and can appear tendentious when the author reveals his own moralism in comments on “the permissive relativism of contemporary life” (p. 2). The third assumption is that “the rigor of Bresson’s style is directly tied to that moral imperative”: Pipolo’s method is largely to affirm the moral point every time he demonstrates the rigor of Bresson’s style, but this again is tendentious. Fourth is “that this fusion is marked by a unique strand of modernism, in which everything extraneous to the revelatory purpose of form is increasingly excised”: I wholly agree, save for the “unique”, and so long as there is no *parti-pris* as to what might be revealed, or indeed any obligation that anything be revealed at all. Here is where Bresson’s modernism flows into the mainstream of European cinematic modernism, and where he is the peer of, for instance, Buñuel. (Here also is where Pipolo’s failure to engage with David Bordwell on *Pickpocket* is to my mind a serious omission.) Pipolo’s fifth premise is that “psychology plays an important, underrated role” in Bresson’s work: this seems uncontroversial, but the point is a strength when it describes a spectatorial process of engagement with characters (less so when it is the psychology of Bresson that is being engaged with). Lastly comes the argument that the oeuvre constitutes an aesthetic biography “that can be richly illuminated through the diligent application of psychoanalytic investigation.” Pipolo is a practising psychoanalyst, and in this book practises illuminatingly on Bresson’s characters: the combination of psychoanalysis and close reading of Michel, in the chapter on *Pickpocket*, is particularly fruitful.

Robert Bresson: a Passion for Film is an eloquent and often persuasive demonstration of Bresson’s importance as a filmmaker, and is a model of *auteurist* reading, both as analysis and interpretation. That I do not always agree with every premise of Pipolo’s interpretations reflects more my own frustration with Bresson studies in general. I cannot help but think that a moratorium on mentioning “God”, “faith”, “the moral” and “the spiritual” when writing about Bresson would be a good thing. I’d like Pipolo’s excellent book to be the last word on that subject.

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