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Brian Price, *Neither God Nor Master: Robert Bresson and Radical Politics*. Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2011. 223 pp. Notes and Index. \$67.50 U.S. (cl). ISBN 0816654611; \$22.50 U.S. (pb). ISBN 081665462X.

Review by Alan Williams, Rutgers University.

This is an important book, not only for the study of the enigmatic director Robert Bresson, but for director studies in general. It is not a perfect book, but it is deeply thought out and provocative. It might even succeed in producing some useful movement in both areas: Bresson studies, and the vexing--though not everyone seems to realize how very vexing--issue of how to study *any* director.

Robert Bresson, as Price points out in his introduction, has been widely reduced to a convenient sector of what Roland Barthes once tellingly called the *doxa*--orthodox opinion, whatever its source. A thoroughly conventional, largely unchanging interpretation of the director's "world view" has been erected (indeed, it has been in place, with relatively little modification, for decades) and has been maintained (as all sectors of social reality have to be maintained) with little challenge. In much of the film studies community, writers may quibble about issues of style and form in Bresson's work, or particular points of interpretation, but most do not challenge the basic themes of the dominant interpretation, which were largely set in place by French Catholic critics such as Amédée Affre, and which Price has found conveniently condensed and summarized by the American scholar Mirella Jona Affron: "[I]n Christian terms, the curious paths of Agnès, of Anne-Marie, of the country priest, of Joan, Balthazar, Mouchette, of the gentle creature (it can be argued), all of which end in death all end happily. For each the "*drôle de chemin*" is the unfathomable way of grace; it culminates in redemption. The *dénouement* cannot be tragic for the saved" (p. 4).

Now, none of this is exactly *wrong*, though one should note that "it can be argued" in relation to *Une Femme douce*--it's not at all clear to many viewers that this particular character finds grace at the end of her life. In fact, the question of the main characters' fates--salvation or damnation?--may be seen as dominating almost all of Bresson's work (the big exception is *Quatre nuits d'un rêveur*, and this may be one of the reasons that this splendid, somberly lyrical film has been so neglected since its release). But it hardly goes without saying that all, or even most, of his main characters are "saved." At the beginning of his career, it's fairly clear that his main characters find salvation, but in his last works it seems equally clear that they are damned (whether in this life or in some next life is unclear, and probably beside the point). And in between, beginning with *Mouchette* and perhaps ending with *Lancelot du lac*, the question is posed but not clearly answered. Perhaps *Mouchette* does find salvation, even though she commits suicide (and the differences between the original novel and Bresson's adaptation argue in favor of this at least as a possibility), but the matter is anything but obvious. The big problem, it seems to me, is that the dominant reading of Bresson was elaborated during the early part of his career, based on his films up through *Au hasard Balthazar*. And the prejudices of *auteur* criticism make it difficult to see a director as capable of *changing his mind* about the issues most important to him.

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Now, although the standard interpretation of Bresson as a “transcendental” filmmaker interested in individual questions of salvation has arguably been the dominant interpretative grid for study of the director since the 1960s, it has not been the *only* interpretative grid. A number of politically Leftist critics and historians have pursued another reading of Bresson, a historically contextualized, materialist reading--of which Brian Price’s book is the major achievement so far. But up until Price’s work, Leftist critics have been, to some extent, talking about a (literally) different Bresson, a different set of films. For the traditionalist critics take as their basic corpus the director’s works before 1968, and read his post-68 works in that context, whereas the Left minority view is much more focused on the post-1968 works. It is Brian Price’s great merit that he returns the favor to the traditionalists: he tries, with varying degrees of success, to read *their* favorite films from the vantage point of the post-68 works, and in a dramatically more varied and subtle way than they deal, from their side of the historical divide, with the same problem.

For it *is* a problem: one might almost think that we were dealing with two different directors, or--horrors!--with one director who *changed his mind* about some very important things. And this possibility, given the current state of director studies, is highly problematic. Most director studies are steeped in the so-called *auteur* theory, implicitly positing an essential, all-but-unchanging mind behind the works of their idols. Now, it is certain that the work of many filmmakers benefits from this approach: figures as diverse as Max Ophuls, Jean Cocteau, or Henri-Georges Clouzot come to mind. These artists more or less stuck with their first visions of how the world works, and how they could tell stories about it on film. They are perhaps the majority of significant directors, but there is a highly important, and problematic minority: those whose work underwent significant change, because of external influences and/or because of personal evolution. A list of such figures would include, for example, Jean Renoir, Jean-Luc Godard, and Robert Bresson. We should note that literary critics and historians are unperturbed by the fact, to take one potentially relevant example, that in his early works Voltaire sincerely believed Leibniz’ theory that God, being God, must have made this the best of all possible worlds--but that he later rejected this notion completely. Voltaire seems to me to be one of several apt points of comparison with Bresson, for the writer began his literary career as an optimist and ended as a pessimist. True, one might reply; however, Voltaire lived through a remarkable series of severe historical events. Yes, indeed, but so did Bresson.

One reason that many critics may have found it difficult to come to grips with the director’s evolution is that--and here I merely agree, wholeheartedly, with Price--the events of May 1968 seem to have come as some kind of *shock* to Bresson, causing a partial re-evaluation of his world view and, perhaps, of his cinematic methods. What is potentially hard to accept about this idea is the fact that the director would have been in late middle age at that point, and the events of May are widely considered as most profoundly affecting the young. Price has no problem here. His basic thesis is that Bresson must have always been deeply interested in radical (Left-wing) thinking--whether he agreed with it or not. In this he resembled the writer Dostoevsky, who is a major point of reference not only for Price but for all serious students of Bresson. Like the great Russian writer, the French director appears to have been fascinated by young people, and by the existence of revolutionary impulses in his time. (And, also like Dostoevsky, Bresson coupled this interest with an interest in theology.) Price implicitly assumes that the shock of the failed revolution of 1968 caused Bresson to become profoundly engaged with history, reflecting (for example) the election of a Socialist government in his last film, *L’Argent*. By contrast, Price treats the pre-1968 films as largely disengaged with history.

As a result, *Neither God nor Master*, like Bresson’s career in Price’s view, falls into two rather different parts. The earlier films, before *Une Femme douce*, are grouped and analyzed quasi-thematically, in three long chapters. The subjects, brutally simplified for the purposes of this review, are “crime as a form of

liberation”(p. 15 and more broadly, chapter one: *Un Condamné à mort s’est échappé, Pickpocket*); the struggles of the spirit in a world where God may or may not be present (chapter two: *Procès de Jeanne d’Arc, Le Journal d’un curé de campagne, Les Anges du péché*); and the relation between “people” and “animals,” between dominators and dominated (chapter three: *Au hasard Balthazar, Mouchette*, with a brief consideration of *Les Dames du Bois de Boulogne*). The post-1968 films, on the other hand, are treated individually, in chronological order, with great attention to their specific historical contexts. In these later chapters, Price’s methodology is relatively constant, a mixture—with shifting emphases—of historical contextualization, formal analysis, concepts from the literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin (in particular the notion of a “dialogical text”), and studies of the films’ literary sources. In the earlier chapters, on the other hand, each thematic cluster is treated with a relatively distinct methodology. These analyses are complicated, at times densely theoretical (particularly chapter two), and often contentious. I would suggest that the reader who is either not terribly fond of Theory with a capital “T,” or is a follower of the orthodox (“transcendental”) reading of Bresson read the book in the following order: chapter one, chapters four through seven (on the later films), chapters two and three (the densest theoretical material), and finally the introduction which, as in almost all good books, is best read last.

But is Price right to assume—as he seems to—that the early films are best treated as less intimately involved with their historical contexts than are the later ones? It is highly commendable that he gives extended attention to the director’s first feature film, *Les Anges du péché*, and what he says is indeed thought-provoking, but he gives very little emphasis to the fact that it was made during the German Occupation, and that it can be read (and quite possibly was read, at the time) as a fairly direct response to/commentary about that period. Similarly, he pays a great deal of attention to Charles de Gaulle and his political heritage, for the films from *Une femme douce* on, but he neglects to consider how *Un Condamné à mort s’est échappé* is a near perfect iteration of one of the founding myths of Gaullism—the supposed solidarity of patriotic French people under the Occupation. Price is quite possibly right to assume (implicitly) that May 1968 was as huge an event for Bresson as it was for the youthful would-be revolutionaries, but he neglects the equally likely thought that the other great, foundational event in the director’s world experience was the Occupation. On the other hand, it’s hard to imagine how Price could have explored the historical resonances of the early films and still done his theoretical work without producing a work so big that no publisher would accept it. So probably we should be grateful for what he has given us, and write the missing parts ourselves, if only in the margins of his book. (Few books in my library are as extensively annotated as this one—I found his discussion of *Les Anges du péché* so stimulating that I had to insert an additional piece of paper for my revisions, expansions and quibbles.)

There are some problems, of course—there always are. Price sometimes makes far too much, at least to my way of thinking, of relatively minor formal aspects of the films. For example, he builds a major part of his reading of *Une femme douce* on the use of color in a pile of school books that appears only a few times in the film. And some readers will not like his particular use of various sorts of Big Theory in his chapters on the pre-1968 works. There is, however, something for almost everyone. Each chapter uses a different mix: the first one mainly references Surrealism, with a bit of Michel Foucault thrown in on the side. The chapter that deals with the overtly “religious” films mixes Derrida and classical semiotics with some radical theology (Ernesto Laclau and Carl Schmitt). And the third chapter, on domination and dominators, is itself dominated by Nietzsche. To my mind, this relative theoretical diversity is a huge plus for the book, but it does raise some questions. One wonders, for example, what Price would have arrived at if he had studied *Pickpocket* with reference to Nietzsche. (The one thing I don’t wonder about is what Price’s use of Derrida would have resulted in, if generalized; this is the part of the book that I find least satisfying—though other readers will doubtless have other opinions.)

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Still, I greatly admire his tactic of using different intellectual tools on different films, and I think that the variety of his theoretical and philosophical reference points is in large measure what gives Price's book its intellectual liveliness. Why *should* books on a body of films strive to apply exactly the same methodology to each work? When the author arrives at *Une Femme douce* and settles down to a more consistent set of concerns, I feel both a sense of relief, but also something approaching a sense of loss. The book becomes more disciplined, and arguably more useful for the general reader, but it also becomes less fiery and less intellectually adventurous. It's almost like getting two books in one—which is one and one-half more books than I have come to expect in most one-author director studies. I have rarely read a more stimulating, occasionally aggravating, but definitely original book about a filmmaker. *Neither God Nor Master* should be in any serious collection of books about French cinema.

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