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Codruța Morari, *The Bressonians: French Cinema and the Culture of Authorship*. New York, Oxford: Berghahn, 2017. viii + 195 pp. Notes, illustrations, bibliography, and index. \$110.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN 978-978-1-78533-571-6; \$29.95 U.S. (eb). ISBN 978-178533-572-3.

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One of the most surprising things about Codruța Morari's *The Bressonians: French Cinema and the Culture of Authorship* are the uncanny parallels between chapter one, "Il faut un auteur!": Robert Bresson and the Making of the Author," and Colin Burnett's recent book, *The Invention of Robert Bresson: The Auteur and his Market*.<sup>[1]</sup> Both books were published within six months of each other in 2017, and neither author seems to have known about the other's study. Both argue that Bresson's special status was a result of his own "strategic self-construction and self-promotion" (Morari, p. 34). Such self-promotional efforts were picked up by subsequent film scholars, who created what both authors refer to as Bresson's cult of hagiography, the Romantic idea of artist as solitary genius.

Although Morari does not explore the events in Bresson's life in nearly the same close detail as Burnett, she arrives at many of the same conclusions. She notes, for example, that Bresson was president of La Société des Réalisateurs de Films (SRF), that he gave the inaugural address in 1968, and that his "comments and declarations confirm that he figured actively and seminally within the debates and conflicts that animated organizations, unions, and other groups between 1943 and 1968" (p. 43). We find much the same interest in Bresson's active engagement with French post-war ciné-culture in Burnett's study, especially chapter two, "The Rise of the Accursed: When Bresson Was Copresident of an Avant-Garde Ciné-Club." For Morari, Bresson's conception of authorship was perfectly adapted to his historical moment, given the transformations of the notion of author in France beginning with the Enlightenment. She adds that Bresson's work should thus be seen as both an individual and a collective effort, since a "vocational" dimension is necessary for any film to get made (p. 47). Burnett is instead focused on contextualizing Bresson's life and art in order to dismantle our current view of Bresson as solitary genius. Taken together, these two works firmly establish the way Bresson constructed and actively promulgated an *auteurism* that, in Morari's view, set the stage for the attitudes of the Nouvelle Vague.

One of the greatest strengths of *The Bressonians* is Morari's close analysis of a distinguished collection of French films from 1967 to 1991. Morari has a good understanding of film culture during the Nouvelle Vague period, and brings important social, cultural and political details to light through her careful analyses, whether of Robert Bresson's *Mouchette* (1967) in chapter two; Jean Eustache's *La Maman et la putain* (*The Mother and the Whore*, 1973) or his *Mes petites amoureuses* (*My Little Loves*, 1974) in chapter three; Maurice Pialat's *Sous le soleil de Satan* (*Under Satan's Sun*, 1987) also in chapter three; Eric Rohmer's *Le genou de Claire* (*Claire's Knee*, 1970) in chapter four; or Maurice Pialat's *Van Gogh* (1991) and Jacques Rivette's *La Belle Noiseuse* (1991) in chapter five.

These individual analyses, however, are not always well integrated into the larger claims of the book.

While Bresson is the focus of chapters one and two, for example, he almost entirely disappears from the rest of the study. In this way, the close analyses tend to work at cross-purposes in terms of proving larger claims about authorship. Chapter one argues that Bresson's singularity is really a collectivity; we have just been viewing his interpretation of *auteur* in a misleading way. However, in chapter two, Morari performs a close analysis of Bresson's film *Mouchette* (1967) that instead seems to illustrate all the ways that Bresson really is unique: through his "direction of models, his cinematographic composition, his singular framing and montage, and his organization of temporality [...]" (p. 76). The focus in chapter one, with the way Bresson rhetorically positions himself as a unique *auteur*, seems to be abandoned in chapter two with a close analysis of all the ways Bresson *really is* singular.

Related to this problem, I wish there was a more developed connection between Bresson's style and that of Jean Eustache. Some connections are offered, especially in relation to Eustache's *The Mother and the Whore* in chapter two, but just as many differences are stressed. If Bresson provides a "fragmented vision" that decomposes the shot through montage, for example, then Eustache uses the long take to emphasize an "inexorable duration" (pp. 89-90). Later in the chapter, Morari claims that "Eustache resuscitates Bresson's work in order to recode it" (p. 94), but I'm not entirely sure what distinguishes a recoding from moving in a new direction that retains only superficial resemblances. Morari recognizes this problem in the second half of chapter three, which provides a comprehensive account of the way Eustache and Bresson differ. Morari herself admits: "The variances between these two filmmakers, who employ different means to similar ends, are perplexing. Does Eustache, in deferring to Bresson's example, seek to defy its rigor? If his act of borrowing suggests a filiation, one is left to wonder whether it fosters a legacy grounded in the rejection of actors' performance in favor of models' iconography and filmic fragmentation" (p. 100). I wish there were a more definitive answer to this question, as well as a clearer sense of whether Eustache is truly a "Bressonian," as the title claims, or whether the notion of filiation should ultimately be abandoned.

The problem of filiation becomes more pronounced with the filmmaker Maurice Pialat, since Bresson's style would seem to share even less with Pialat's style, approach, or vision. While both Bresson and Pialat emphasize "the austerity of the shots, the elliptical construction, and the fragmentation of body parts," the list of differences is more elaborate, and includes the following ways that Pialat departs from Bresson: the lack of any invocation of the mystical; the "virulent disparity in the conception of and approach to bodies," including a focus on moving and suffering bodies; the treatment of actors; and the lack of any simplification or purification (p. 111-12). While it is no doubt the case that Pialat borrows from Bresson, how he does so, and the extent to which his work is instead an effort to move in the opposite direction remains unanswered. I wonder if part of the problem is that Morari draws exclusively from Bresson's canonical black and white films. One could argue that the color films of the '70s and early '80s more directly connect to political and social concerns of the time—including a concern with humans who destroy the planet in *Le diable probablement* (1977), and a critique of repressive bourgeois culture in *L'argent* (1983).<sup>[2]</sup> Spiritual grace is largely abandoned in these films as well, in favor of a much more nihilistic view that would seem, thematically if not stylistically, closer to Eustache and Pialat.

Chapter three is one of the most engaging—and best written—chapters of the book, largely because the close analysis seems more in keeping with the larger argument: a group of marginalized and at times overlooked filmmakers, hidden under the shadow cast by the Nouvelle Vague, drew on proletarian and middle-class attitudes and styles in an effort to eliminate the stridency of the imperious "film-author." Alain Philippon refers to this group as "Renoir's children" (p. 100), and Morari makes a strong case for the way this collection of filmmakers forged a documentary, anti-bourgeois, anti-theatrical, anti-*cinéma d'auteur*, intellectual aesthetic that indicates a "disenchantment with the image" (p. 133). Morari intriguingly suggests that their innovations and creative approach to the visual image were in some ways occluded by the greater visibility and promotional talents of the Nouvelle Vague. While her focus is on Eustache and Pialat, other directors in this group might include Jacques Doillon, Philippe Garrel, André Téchiné, Marguerite Duras, Benoît Jacquot, Jacques Rozier, Paul Vecchiali, and Catherine

Binet.[3] Examining the complex convergences and divergences between the Nouvelle Vague and this group is a fascinating, important topic for French cinema, evident in a just published dossier from *senses of cinema* that resurrects what David Heslin terms a “Second Generation” of filmmakers who produced films that were “stranger, more daring, and somewhat darker than the often joyful experimentation of their [Nouvelle Vague] predecessors.”[4]

After setting out such a compelling argument, it comes as a surprise that Morari then shifts to the filmmaking practices of Eric Rohmer in chapter four. Although Rohmer is described in chapter one as one of the most strident defenders of the *cinéma d'auteur*, in this chapter, he is now placed next to Eustache for the way both filmmakers develop similar strategies to deal with a loss of authorial control. Perhaps Morari is distinguishing between Rohmer as *Cahiers du cinéma* critic, and Rohmer as filmmaker, but I wish that that distinction was more hashed out. Chapter five provides a close analysis of Rohmer's *Claire's Knee* to show the way the film grapples with the decline of all authorial force: “To be sure, in *Claire's Knee* and throughout Rohmer's cinema, viewers are positioned not to trust the inscribed narrators. Rather, they are called upon to solve mysteries on their own [...]” (p. 144). Rohmer's films are, like all French films made in the wake of 1968 and Roland Barthes's conception of the “death of the author,” a commentary on the very lack of authorial control over the storytelling process. Rohmer's aesthetic thus grows out of the conflicting and shifting frames and perspectives presented by various characters and narrators within the story.

A key subsection of Morari's argument is “The Author in Abeyance,” which appears at the end of chapter four (p. 144–45). This subsection does the critical work of unifying some of the previous conceptions of authorship, and of establishing a continuum from the concept of *auteur* as advanced by Robert Bresson, developed by Alexandre Astruc's concept of the *caméra-stylo*, and formalized through writings in *Cahiers du cinéma* on the *politique des auteurs*. We begin to see the “larger and more complex nexus of forces within French intellectual, artistic, and legal history,” as they play out in the field of cinema studies, and the way films after the war reflect this absence of authorial function (p. 49). While only one and a half pages, this subsection provides a necessary link between the various authors and films discussed in the book by looking at film in terms of the way authorial control is framed and controlled.

*The Bressonians* is well written and contains many perceptive insights into seminal French films, expanding our understanding of the complex network of competing artistic schools and influences during the post-war period. The book also offers a fascinating account of the evolution of authorship in French cinema, from Bresson in the 1960s to the obsessions with *auteurism* during the Nouvelle Vague, and that militant defense of the *auteur* that continues even today at the Cannes film festival—but especially in 1991, the focus of chapter five. If Colin Burnett's Bresson study is narrowly focused on the social conditions and “marketplace” in which Bresson worked, then Codruța Morari's study feels much more relaxed in terms of investigating other threads and directions. But her study also at times feels divided into two books: one on Robert Bresson's authorship practices, and another on the iconoclastic, exploratory films of post-Nouvelle Vague filmmakers. Many important ideas emerge from both of these foci, as long as the reader does not become too focused on the connections between them.

## NOTES

[1] Colin Burnett, *The Invention of Robert Bresson: The Auteur and his Market* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2017).

[2] For a discussion of the connections between Bresson's films and political events of his time, see Brian Price, *Neither God Nor Master: Bresson and Radical Politics* (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 2011). I take a similar position in Raymond Watkins, *Late Bresson and the Visual Arts: Cinema, Painting, and Avant-Garde Experiment* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2018).

[3] Nick Pinkerton offers an expanded list of directors, and gives them the name “the Second New Wave,” in “Jean Eustache & the Second New Wave” *Metrograph Edition* (March 2, 2016), accessed October 4, 2018. <http://metrograph.com/edition/article/21/jean-eustache-the-second-new-wave>.

[4] David Heslin, “The Second Generation: French Cinema After the New Wave (Introduction)” *senses of cinema* 88 (October 2018), accessed October 4, 2018. <http://sensesofcinema.com/2018/after-the-french-new-wave/second-generation-french-cinema-new-wave-introduction/>.

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