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Raymond Watkins, *Late Bresson and the Visual Arts: Cinema, Painting and Avant-Garde Experiment*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2018. 270 pp. Notes, illustrations, bibliography, and index. €99.00 (hb). ISBN 978-9-4629-8364-9. €98.99 (eb). ISBN 978-9-0485-3399-2.

Review by Marco Grosoli, Habib University.

The first generation of scholarship on Robert Bresson often portrayed him as some kind of ascetic, secluded monk, not too different from the stylite of *Simón del desierto* (*Simon of the Desert*, 1965)—one of the late works of a director (Luis Buñuel) who, like Bresson, debuted in the historical avant-gardes before realizing that he could be more faithful to their spirit by abandoning them. A bit like the devil (probably) in Buñuel's film, a number of recent studies on the French master have thankfully started to get him off his pillar, so to speak, and demonstrate his profound involvement with various contemporary and very earthly concerns besides his amply celebrated religious themes.

In *Simon of the Desert*, the devil's most decisive weapon is *anachronism*: in the end, Simon abandons not only his pillar, but also the seemingly timeless past his tale is set in, and joins the frantic, noisy *movida* of a 1960s nightclub. Anachronism is also one of the main guiding principles in Raymond Watkins's *Late Bresson and the Visual Arts*, a remarkable effort to "investigate [...] Bresson's work from a fine-art perspective" (p. 9). Focusing almost exclusively on his last color films between 1969 and 1983, Watkins, on the one hand, shows how densely they have engaged in dialogue with early (e.g. Surrealism) as well as late (e.g. American Minimalism) twentieth-century artistic movements; on the other hand, he grounds this historicization in a strictly non-linear conception of art history *qua* bundle of linkages across artworks, styles, tropes etc. that can even be far removed in time from one another. Indeed, *Lancelot du Lac* (*Lancelot of the Lake*, 1974) marries pictorial references to Paolo Uccello and Piet Mondrian's *De Stijl*; *Une Femme douce* (*A Gentle Woman*, 1969) features three canvasses by lyrical abstractionist Alfred Manessier as well as female nudes à la Watteau nestled in a filmic space no less segmented than the one in Cézanne's proto-cubist experiments. Thus, whereas Colin Burnett^[1] drew methodologically from Michael Baxandall to historicize Bresson and reveal him as an über-conscious player in the cultural market of his time, Watkins explicitly relies on Georges Didi-Huberman's exercises in anachronism in order to rid his overview of any suspicion of determinism—which makes sense, since the nature of causality is, after all, not the least of the director's theoretical and theological preoccupations.

Bresson here is examined not in terms of the legacy he left behind as a transdiscursive *auteur* in the Foucauldian sense, as in Codruța Morari's *The Bressonians*^[2], but rather as a cinematic

painter who is considerably receptive and attuned to the problems faced by the art world of his day. Or, more precisely put, and even at the risk of contravening Watkins's lack of interest in this kind of broad periodization (fully justified by his anachronism-grounded approach), it can be said that he comes across as a visual artist listening to the sirens of postmodernism's hybridity without ever really giving in to its careless shallowness, firmly strapped as he is to the mast of modernism instead. True, his late oeuvre tends to privilege a purely formal play with colors, light and shapes over substance; for instance, *Quatre nuits d'un rêveur* (*Four Nights of a Dreamer*, 1971) indulges somewhat in the evocation of mood through, say, the reflections of the moon and of the *bateaux-mouches* lights on the actors, in a way not without recalling the nocturnal scenes of painters like James Abbott McNeill Whistler. Nevertheless, surfaces are not everything: Bresson shares with key avant-gardists such as Wassily Kandinsky and Kazimir Malevich "an underlying belief in a hidden, spiritual existence that the artist or the protagonist can see but others cannot" (p. 187), thus remaining this side of postmodernism. On the other hand, "Bresson is not nearly as utopian as Malevich in terms of a radical transformation of the world; in fact, the late films are quite cynical about the possibility of any spiritual transcendence" (p. 187). Brian Price's 2011 monograph^[3], which Watkins refers to quite a few times, has tackled precisely the relationship between Bresson's spiritual cinema and revolutionary politics in an age when, particularly after 1968, the latter was declining in most places, including France. How did Bresson hold on to modernism in an age when modernism was vanishing? This appears to be the question both Price and Watkins respond to, their differences notwithstanding: the former primarily from the angle of modernism *qua* radical political change, the latter of modernism in painting and visual arts more broadly—for instance, when he finds in Bresson's relationship with modernity "the same contradiction present in Minimalist art: an embrace of automatism and the machine, but an equally strong anxiety about the destructive aspects of a technological society run amok" (p. 31), as evident among others in the least scrutinized film in the corpus at issue, *Le Diable, probablement* (*The Devil Probably*, 1977).

By and large, however, Watkins is uninterested in providing theoretical answers to that question, and for an excellent reason: late in his career, Bresson himself was less interested in ideas than in delving into the kind of visual experimentation that color had enabled. Accordingly, besides reconstructing the thick intertextual connections with several artworks and artists to which these films readily lend themselves, the book is first and foremost a very valid and competent exploration of the pictorial fabric (in terms of lighting, composition etc.) of a limited number of exemplary images, carefully selected from the filmmaker's late works. Ideally linking an impulse toward the secret genealogies of avant-gardes coming from Annette Michelson with one toward a thorough identification of the multi-faceted presence of painting in cinema coming from Angela Dalle Vacche (both influences having been openly acknowledged by the author), and concentrating mostly on single shots, Watkins's approach refreshingly expands the scope of Bressonian scholarship, hitherto typically (and of course correctly) fixated on montage in most cases. And so squarely and consistently does the writer focus on visual texture that he very rightly feels no need to draw final conclusions: to frame his work theoretically and methodologically, the limpid twenty-two-page introduction is more than enough. If there ever is a point in Bresson's filmography, it had crystallized already in its first literary part in black and white, which Jacques Rancière^[4] has already definitively shown as culminating in *Mouchette* (1967), and from which Watkins takes the cue in his first chapter to lay out the basics of the director's debt to painting; what matters, when it comes to late Bresson, is to identify how these relatively overlooked color films, with their distinctly different visual style, partake in this poetics and enrich it. Therefore, it would have been redundant to spell out what, at the end of the day

(and of the volume), cannot but strike the reader as obvious (also thanks to a series of well-placed recapping remarks on the side): that Bresson's late pictorial formalism is yet another way of denigration-cum-reconfiguration of the human body, after the more blatantly spiritual ones of the earlier black and white phase.

In this regard, the parts on abstract expressionism in chapter two are among the most telltale and revealing. After spotting fairly unmistakable references to that trend in *Au Hasard Balthazar* (*Balthazar*, 1966) already, Watkins illustrates the convergences between its French "branch" *L'Art Informel* (painter Jean Fautrier in particular) and *A Gentle Woman*, or between the way blacks and blues are combined in *Four Nights of a Dreamer* and *informel* painter Pierre Soulages. Yet these linkages could not be farther from a mere display of intertextuality for the sake of it. What is at stake, there as well as in visual arrangements skillfully combining actors, chunks of their environment dominated by bright quasi-pop-art monochromes and diegetic canvasses/artworks (e.g. Nicolas Schöffer's kinetic light installation *Lux 1* featured in the museum scene of *A Gentle Woman*), is Bresson's reaction vis-à-vis the latest developments of visual arts. Whilst painting, approaching the end of its modernist phase, had abandoned sight in favor of tactility, line in favor of chromatic sensation, the figuration of objects in favor of the expression of the subject (Jackson Pollock) and/or the body of painting itself (Fautrier) and so on and so forth, Bresson, on the one hand, plays along by reducing cinema as much as possible, in a quasi-Antonioni-esque fashion, to the abstract fundamentals of painting (color, shape, light etc.), but, on the other hand, rejects the rejection of the object, keeps clinging to referentiality and re-centers everything around the human body. Clearly pushing his earlier poetics to its extreme, the filmmaker elevates the human body as the ultimate work of art, but only insofar as his so-called models are completely emptied out, and stripped of any expressiveness whatsoever. In other words, he seems to imply, paradoxically, that neither Yves Klein's "splotches of blue paint on ... nude women" serving as "living brushes" (p. 99) nor any other kind of abstract art (despite their strong presence in his late films) could ever quite accomplish the subversion of the subject/object representational divide (which abstract art is by definition supposed to subvert) as fully as human bodies once they cinematically turn into statues, machines, animals--or even corpses (*A Gentle Woman*).

Indeed, the mechanization of the human and the creation of a grey area between animate and inanimate underlie the secret affinity between Surrealism and Constructivism aptly pointed out by Watkins, whilst frequently overlooked even by many art historians. *L'argent* (1983) is very much a case in point, as all its characters "are defined by their relationships to the objects they handle" (p. 216), and is, as such, extensively analyzed with an eye on Vsevolod Meyerhold's biomechanical theatre and the other on Yvonne Rainer's choreographies. This goes a long way toward accounting for the organization of the book's part two, describing the influences of Surrealism (chapter three) and Constructivism (chapter four) before dealing with the postwar attempts to continue the legacy of interwar avant-gardes (chapter five). Such a structure formalizes a zigzagging movement between what Fredric Jameson would call "high modernism" and "late modernism" (heavily present in part one already, particularly in chapter two) in compliance with the author's anachronism-grounded approach, and actually informing most of the volume in general--for instance, when the first generation of Surrealism is treated along with a later member of "dissident surrealism" (p. 143) such as Pierre Klossowski.

The only detectable flaws are really just on the editorial side: typos abound (e.g. Abbas Kiarostami misspelled in two different ways on the same page), and color stills are probably not as many as such a painting-heavy project would have required.

In conclusion, *Late Bresson and the Visual Arts* sheds light on a part of the filmmaker's career that has often been unjustly neglected, by way of commendable, high-level visual and intertextual analysis. A former painter, Bresson is shown navigating the radical mutations his craft underwent in the twentieth century, and finding in them a new way to be faithful to, and, by the same token, enrich, his allegedly spiritualist and ascetic poetics. For we should never forget that in the word "stylite" is contained "style."

NOTES

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

[2] Codruța Morari, *The Bressonians: French Cinema and the Culture of Authorship* (New York and Oxford: Berghahn, 2017).

[3] Brian Price, *Neither God Nor Master: Robert Bresson & Radical Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011).

[4] Jacques Rancière, "Mouchette and the Paradoxes of the Language of Images," in *The Intervals of Cinema*, trans. by John Howe (New York and London: Verso, 2014), pp. 41-69.

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