RIALTO
PICTURES

Robert Bresson’s
MOUCHETTE

PRESSBOOK

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New 35mm Print at Film Forum October 14 - 20

MOUCHETTE, Robert Bresson's portrait of a young girl trying to free herself from the misery of her surroundings, will have a one-week run in a new 35mm print at Film Forum from **Friday, October 14 through Thursday, October 20**. Tied with Buñuel's *Belle de Jour* in a critics' poll as the best French film of its year, *Mouchette* was this year named one of the 100 best films of all time by *Time* magazine.

As eyes watch from the bushes, a hand sets up a simple trap that will strangle a bird. But as another bird is ensnared, another set of hands comes and frees them. Fourteen-year-old Mouchette (Nadine Nortier) doesn't say much — she won't even sing in school, though she does throw clods of dirt at classmates — as she cares for her ailing mother and baby brother, and as her father nightly trucks in smuggled booze to the local bar. But she watches as the gamekeeper and the poacher battle both professionally and personally — they're both sweet on the local barmaid — even as the gamekeeper's wife can't be bothered with a reaction, a reaction that doesn't even seem expected. Not an idyllic existence, but then things can get worse.

Adapted from a novel by Georges Bernanos, author of Bresson's signature work *Diary of a Country Priest*, this is both a sympathetic and a brutally unsentimental portrait, with, in the bumper cars sequence at the fair, the one moment of pure exuberance and delight in all of Bresson's work (curiously, it's his one addition to the novel).

"An extraordinary spiritual meditation." – Tony Rayns, *Time Out* (London)

**"One of the purest Bressons. Its effect as you watch it is beautifully unforgiving;
as you recall it, brutally radiant."** – Richard Corliss, *Time* (2005)

1967 78 minutes In French with English subtitles A Rialto Pictures release

MOUCHETTE

Production Credits

Written and directed by **Robert Bresson**

Adapted from *Nouvelle histoire de Mouchette* by **George Bernanos**

Producer **Anatole Dauman**

Music by **Jean Wiener & Claudio Monteverdi** (Magnificat)

Director of Photography **Ghislain Cloquet**

Editor **Raymond Lamy**

Production Design **Pierre Guffroy**

Costume Design **Odette Le Barbenchon**

Production Managers **Michel Choquet** & **Philippe Dussart**

Assistant Camera **Paul Bonis**

Sound by **Jacques Carrère**

English translation/subtitles (2005) **Lenny Borger**

Produced by **Compagnie Cinematographique de France**

France • 1967 • Black and White • Aspect ratio 1:66:1 • In French with English Subtitles
Running time: 78 minutes

A RIALTO PICTURES RELEASE

CAST

Mouchette
Nadine Nortier

Arsène
Jean-Claude Guilbert

The Mother
Maria Cardinal

The Father
Paul Hebert

Mathieu
Jean Vimenet

Mathieu's wife
Marie Susini

Layer Out of the Dead
Suzanne Huguenin

Luisa
Marine Trichet

Grocer
Raymonde Chabrun

Mouchette by Richard Corliss, *Time*
(“The 100 All-Time Best Movies,” 2005)

Robert Bresson, his detractors would say, has a lot to answer for. In 13 films over 40 years, he developed the whole slim repertoire of exalted minimalism. Blank glances that suggest both sanctity and reproach; pregnant silences that speak libraries of meaning; an hour of mundane injustices that often explode into beatings, murders, suicides galore—these have become the vocabulary, the very clichés, of European and Asian art-house cinema. But just as we needn’t hold Steven Spielberg accountable for every crappy-sappy kids' adventure, we shouldn’t blame Bresson for creating an art form that literally hundreds of imitators reduced to non-movie sterility.

Bresson’s films, however austere and obsessed with each man’s own private Calvary, have a precision of imagery, an understanding of character, that gives them life, makes them a joy to watch. *Mouchette*, one of the purest Bressons, is the story of a teenage outcast (Nadine Nortier) so abused by everyone in her village that death seems like God's caress, and so maladroit that she must try three times before she succeeds in drowning herself. Its effect as you watch it is beautifully unforgiving; as you recall it, brutally radiant.

Joseph Cunneen on *Mouchette*
(from *Robert Bresson: A Spiritual Style in Film* Continuum, 2003)

Shooting on Bresson’s next film, *Mouchette*, based on Georges Bernanos's novella, began only a few months after *Balthasar*; it was released in 1967. Though less ambitious than *Diary of a Country Priest*, *Nouvelle Histoire de Mouchette* is a work of great purity and depth – which closed the writer's novelistic career. Composed in 1936 while he was living in Majorca, its essential source of inspiration was the terror he observed during the Spanish Civil War, which broke out in July. As Bernanos affirmed,

> I began writing *La nouvelle histoire de Mouchette* after watching trucks go by commanded by armed men, holding wretched prisoners with their hands on their knees, their faces covered with dust. They sat up quite straight, their heads raised, with that dignity that the Spanish have even during the most atrocious misery. They were going to be shot the following morning. It was the one thing they were sure of. As regards anything else, they did not understand. If we could imagine their being interrogated, they would have been incapable of defending themselves. Against what? That would have to be explained to them first.
>
> Well, I was struck by how impossible it was for poor people to understand the frightful game in which their lives were involved. I was struck by the horrible

> injustice of the powerful who, in order to condemn these unhappy men, speak to them in a language that is foreign to them. There is an odious deception in this. And later, I would not know how to express the admiration that the courage and dignity with which I saw these men die inspired in me.
>
> Naturally, I did not deliberately decide to make a novel out of all this. I did not say to myself, I am going to transpose what I have seen into the story of a little girl hunted down by misfortune and injustice. But what is true is, that if I had not seen these things, I would not have written *Nouvelle histoire de Mouchette*.

Bresson wasn't thinking of the Spanish Civil War in making *Mouchette*, but was undoubtedly drawn to the book's fourteen-year-old heroine and challenged by the problem of making the story credible without reducing her to just another example of victimhood. Since *Mouchette* was a far less celebrated text than *Diary of a Country Priest*, Bresson did not have to worry so much about "fidelity" to the original. He could dispense with a narrator, there was no need of voice-offs, and there was no problem about changing the locale from the Artois to a small village in the Vaucluse.

Mouchette was a child of poverty, with an alcoholic father and older brother, and a desperately ill mother who has to call on her daughter's help to take care of a baby boy. The girl is passing through adolescence with few resources beyond her stubbornness and a healthy streak of independence. When she gets lost in the woods one evening, she meets Arsène, the village poacher; he confides that he has killed Mathieu the gamekeeper and she proudly promises to keep his secret. They take shelter in his hut, where he has an epileptic fit. After he recovers, he takes advantage of her sympathy and rapes her. She returns home in the morning, but is unable to seek comfort or guidance from her mother, who is dying. Later, she has a disturbing encounter with an old woman who makes it a practice to visit the homes of the bereaved and watch over the dead.

Bresson's changes from the novel highlight images of the village and the surrounding landscape, which substitute for the novelist's long passages of interior meditation and lyrical commentary. In contrast to his source, Bresson spreads the action over several days, filling in a more detailed picture of village life. He also adds an important scene at the village carnival, which becomes the occasion of Mouchette's childlike joy while riding a bumper-car. Her moment of "escape" is all the more touching because it is quickly punctured by her father's anger when she becomes friendly with a boy who was riding another car. A further important addition that Bresson makes is to complicate his heroine's final action, making it partly a game, in which she rolls three times down an incline to the pond. Bernanos, on the other hand, is more successful in communicating the supernatural element in Mouchette's death. After a dreamlike atmosphere has been established by the girl's encounter with the old woman, the novelist shares her inmost reflections:

> And now she was thinking of her own death, with her heart gripped not by fear

> but by the excitement of a great discovery, the feeling that she was about to learn what she had been unable to learn from her brief experience of love. What she thought about death was childish, but what could never have touched her in the past now filled her with poignant tenderness, as sometimes a familiar face we see suddenly with the eyes of love makes us aware that it has been dearer to us than life itself for longer than we have ever realized.

The tragic tone and opaqueness of reality already present in *Au hasard Balthasar* are again evident, though in simpler, more direct form. Mouchette is perhaps the most touching of Bresson's films, and its poetic realism succeeds in giving the girl's "suicide" the overtones of liberation. The film is emotionally accessible to a broad public, except for those who are unable to see anything but bleakness in its ending.

Interviewed at the time of its opening, Bresson said that "the domain of cinematography is the domain of the unsayable." In Mouchette this is achieved largely "by the strangeness of the psychology, especially discernible during the epileptic sequence, at the instant when the girl is finally able to sing, the birth of love having, for a short time, finally reconciled her with herself."[4]

Bresson told Jean-Luc Godard that he wanted to do *Mouchette* as an "*essai*," an exercise. "Instead of a whole group of lives and different characters . . . I want to concentrate, constantly, absolutely, on one face, the face of this little girl, to see her reactions.... And I will choose, yes, the most awkward little girl there is, and try to draw from her everything that she will not suspect I am drawing from her. That is what interests me, and the camera will not leave her."[5] Bresson won his wager: Nadine Nortier was especially affecting as Mouchette and received the prize for best actress at the Festival of Panama.

Before the Credits, there is an image of a woman in a church—it is Mouchette's mother. "Without me, what will become of them?" she moans, and leaves the church. The credits are accompanied by Monteverdi's "Magnificat," from his *Vespers for the Blessed Virgin*.

The opening sequence, which takes place in the woods just outside the village, summarizes the action of the movie and suggests Mouchette's role. Hands are seen placing traps. Observant eyes detect the captured partridges. At the same time, other eyes are watching the poacher, Arsène. There is a close-up of his eyes; then another of Mathieu, the guard, watching the poacher's every gesture. Dogs howl in the distance, the camera returns to Arsène's hands as they move from one snare to the next. Closeups follow of a partridge approaching a snare; suddenly its head is caught. Arsène, aware that he is being watched, gradually withdraws. Another closeup: Mathieu removes the snare from an injured partridge. For a moment his two hands hold the game bird, which then flies away. A rustling of wings leads to a panoramic shot of the partridge flying to the top of the trees.

The camera then follows Mathieu, his gun on his shoulder, walking on the road to the hamlet, passing by the school just as some school girls (from nine to fifteen years old) enter. One of them stops in front of the door and looks across the road. "Mouchette," one of her schoolmates cries.

That night, at the cafe, Arsène brings two partridges to Louisa, the waitress. She tells him to go away—but also to come back. Mathieu arrives and tries to grab Louisa's hand; although she seems disapproving, she serves him a drink. Outside the cafe, a man and his son (Mouchette's father and older brother) wait until a police car moves away before unloading boxes from a small truck. The owner pays them, and they have a drink. By the time father and son drive to their ramshackle home they are already drunk. Mouchette applies a poultice to her mother (the woman seen before the credits) and calms her baby brother before sitting down on a straw mattress and closing her eyes.

The next morning the schoolgirls hurry to class while Mouchette, wearing galoshes that are too big for her, sludges along at her own pace. Her face seems hard and closed as she reaches her place in class. The exasperated teacher lines the girls up in two rows to sing a song about Columbus pleading with his sailors to keep up their hopes for three more days. At first Mouchette only pretends to sing, but the teacher grabs her by the neck, brings her up next to the harmonium and forces her to try. The girl's voice is husky and false; she seems close to tears.

When school is over, Mouchette rests her satchel on the grass and begins to throw balls of mud at her classmates. Most of the girls go off in groups toward the village. Two boys call from a shed to get Mouchette's attention: one of them unbuttons his trousers.

At home the next day, Mouchette takes off her galoshes, kisses her mother's hand, and prepares the coffee. It is Sunday, and she helps out at the cafe. Mathieu arrives in pursuit of Louisa, following her even when she goes down to the cellar to get more wine. He is jealous but she remains evasive; when she becomes too busy with customers, he leaves for church. Mouchette dawdles outside church, getting her shoes and socks wet by stepping in a puddle. Aware of her father's approach, she goes up the steps. He shoves her against the holy water font, where she makes a sign of the cross and moves away.

After church, Mouchette works at the cafe, washing and drying glasses. When the manager pays her, she gives the money to her father who, already tipsy, is sitting at a table outside with his son. To thank her, he hands Mouchette his half-full glass to drink. Hearing the music of an outdoor fair, the girl gets up, passes by the merry-go-round, and leans against the railing of a bumper-car rink as the attendant alerts customers to get into their cars. A young mother with a baby gives Mouchette a ticket for a ride; the girl looks up with surprise, but the woman has disappeared. Mouchette looks delighted as she gets in, spins her vehicle around, shifts into reverse, and avoids a few cars that are trying to hit hers. Jazz fills the air as a young male driver bumps her, and she smiles as she gets into the spirit of the game. At the end of the ride the young man, after looking back at Mouchette, proceeds to a shooting gallery. She follows, eyes lowered, only to have her father grab her by the shoulder, spin her around, and slap her. She does not flinch, but sitting again at her father's table, puts her hand on her cheek.

Arsène and Louisa hurry over to the fair and take their seats side by side in a miniature plane. When Mathieu returns to a table outside the cafe and sits with his wife, a customer suggests that Arsène is making a fool of him. The game warden puts his glass down and goes inside to confront Louisa, but she ignores his threats, insisting that the poacher isn't afraid of him.

The next morning Mouchette kisses her mother, takes her satchel, and goes to class. After school, when it is almost twilight, she hides in a ditch next to a meadow to spy on her classmates. After watching one girl put perfume on two of her companions, Mouchette throws a ball of mud at them, but the girls ride off with boys on motorized bikes. Mouchette runs to the edge of the meadow and into a small woods where she suddenly stops. A fluttering of wings makes her lift up her eyes: a panoramic shot shows a partridge flying to the top of a tree.

Black clouds appear and the wind rises as Mouchette proceeds deeper into the woods. The rain has become heavy and the sky is dark; her skirt is wet and her galoshes become buried in mud. She rushes to the foot of an old oak tree and sits down. Night has fallen; a pale moon is visible. Through the branches of the tree Mouchette sees Mathieu, who has stopped at a stream, and then Arsène, who is laying a trap. The guard tells the poacher to leave Louisa alone and the enmity between the two men turns to blows Arsène knocks Mathieu down, and they roll over on each other. When the top of Arsène's canteen falls out, he rushes to take several gulps of whiskey before passing it on to Mathieu.

After a general shot of a dark sky, the camera closes in on Mouchette, squeezing out her wet skirt. Petrified when Arsène turns his flashlight on her, she explains that she got lost. He tells her she can't go home with only one of her galoshes, and directs her to a little cabin, where he throws a log on the fire, fishes out a bottle of alcohol, and tells her to take a gulp to warm up. After questioning Mouchette closely about her movements since school, Arsène instructs her to say that she saw him leave the bar on the route de Linières. He finds her other galosh, then astonishes her by saying that a cyclone has passed through the area, and finally takes her to a barn where he lights another fire.

Asking her to look him in the face, Arsène tells Mouchette that he thinks he has killed someone. He remembers that he and Mathieu had been drinking, but is unclear how things turned out. Mathieu's nose was in the water, which turned red, he recalls; more recently, however, there were rifle shots which sounded as if they came from the guard's gun. Mouchette isn't clear what Arsène wants her to say as an alibi, but assures him of her willingness: "You can cour.t on me. I hate them. I will stand up to all of them."

Suddenly Arsène has an epileptic attack, and Mouchette cradles his head in her hands. He has difficulty breathing and even slobbers on her; she takes out a handkerchief and wipes his face. As Arsène grows calmer he gradually loses consciousness. Mouchette begins to sing, first hoarsely, then her voice clears and becomes pure. "Keep on hoping for three more days"—it is Columbus's song, the one they tried to teach her in school. When Arsène recovers, he first talks of taking her home to get a drink from her father, but when she tries to leave, he threatens her if she tells a word of what he has told her. "Monsieur Arsène," she pleads, "I'd rather kill myself than injure you." He puts his arms around her and she doesn't move, but when he tightens his grip, she pushes him and hides under a table. Finally, he kicks over the table; in trying to get away, she falls in front of the fireplace, and he gets on top of her. Mouchette groans and raises her arms; then, little by little, her arms encircle his back.... Later, she is seen with her satchel, after running away from Arsène.

As soon as Mouchette opens the door of her home, her mother asks her to warm the baby's bottle. Since the boxes of matches are empty, she holds the bottle against her breast. Held tenderly by his big sister, the baby stops crying and drinks from the bottle, and the mother reminds her daughter that she should put away the washing and not leave it damp. The girl struggles with her tears; she is anxious to talk to her mother, but the baby begins to cry again. The mother is in such pain that she asks Mouchette to bring some gin. After wiping her mother's mouth and chin, the girl makes a last appeal—"I have to tell you something"—but it is too late: the mother is dead. The father and older brother come in; there is a panoramic shot of the two of them kneeling at the mother's bed, then we see Mouchette asleep on a straw mattress next to her baby brother who has become quiet.

In the morning a woman neighbor brings a pot of coffee. Mouchette, ready to go out to get milk for the baby, stares at her father. When he insults her, calling her a boor, she simply answers "*Merde*" and leaves quickly.

Mouchette, carrying her milk can, passes the grocer's and is called in to have a cup of coffee. The woman gives her a croissant, but when the girl accidentally breaks the bowl of coffee, she calls her a slut. Mouchette continues walking through the village as peasant women enter the church. At Mathieu's house she is asked to come in, and the game warden informs her that Arsène has been arrested for dynamiting the river, but claims that he met Mouchette at a different spot. Hoping to help the poacher, Mouchette says that she spent the whole night with Arsène in the cabin. When Mme. Mathieu, realizing that the girl is still reeking of gin, asks her to come back and talk to her, Mouchette bursts out, "Monsieur Arsène is my lover," and leaves.

As she returns through the village, the old woman whose practice is to watch over dead people calls her into her house. She tells Mouchette that the dead are no longer being properly cared for and that she has some clothes for her. "I love the dead," she says, "I understand them very well." When Mouchette tells the woman she is disgusting, the latter replies that the girl is evil but nevertheless hands her a package of clothes.

Mouchette jumps a ditch and starts out across the fields, observing hares that are being killed by hunters. She reaches the edge of a pond, pulls a white muslin dress out of the package, and places it against her body. With the robe held around her, she rolls down the slope to the edge of the water. She gets up and makes a sign to someone driving a tractor, who continues on his way. She rolls down a second time. The third time, we hear the sound of Mouchette falling into the water. After a moment the stream seems smooth again. The film ends with a return to the healing music of Monteverdi's "Magnificat."

If *Mouchette* has a less complex plot structure and fewer missing pieces to puzzle out than the majority of his films, it remains a work of Bresson's maturity, most noticeably in its suggestive use of sound. The extreme sparseness of language leaves the audience free to give full attention to every oral cue. As in his earlier movies, sometimes the sounds announce a scene that is about to begin; at others, one noise blends into another. The locale, an out-of-the-way country area in northern Vaucluse, is constantly filled with the din of trucks passing close to the village; appropriately enough, this sound is far more insistent than that of church bells. The pelting rain the night Mouchette gets lost in the woods, the constant slapping of her galoshes as she walks, the pom-pom of the fairground music, the clinking of the glasses on the counter of the bar, the cries of the baby, the movement of the straw as Mouchette struggles with Arsène—all contribute to the film's overall impact. At the end it is likely that the passing trucks make it impossible for the man driving the tractor to hear Mouchette when she makes what may have been a last appeal for help.

Bresson's choice of another text by Bernanos has a great deal to do with his rejection of the elaborate psychologizing in the previous generation of French films. As he responded in a questionnaire in *L'Avant-scène*,

> The absence of psychology and analysis in his [Bernanos's] books coincides with the absence of psychology and analysis in my films. His perspective in regard to the supernatural is sublime. For my part, I have always considered the supernatural as the natural seen up close.... Agony? I am often astonished to see how tranquil people are.... It is precisely incommunicability that makes union, and ultimately communion, possible.

Mouchette is also another demonstration of Bresson's preference for images over dialogue. With the exception of the conversation between Arsène and Mouchette in the cabin, the reliance on language is minimal. "If there is painting in a novel in place of analysis and psychology, it is still with words," Bresson insisted. "If there is analysis and psychology in my films, it is with images and rather in the manner of portrait-painters."7 In his novella, of course, Bernanos could use authorial reflection to indicate interior changes of feeling; in the film, since there is no narrator, and Mouchette is only partly conscious of what she is going through, Bresson has to find other ways to express her loneliness, stubbornness, independence, and deep need of affection.

Mouchette's lack of parental guidance is obvious her father is an alcoholic who shows no tenderness for her; her mother is ill throughout, and has to pass on a good deal of the responsibility of caring for a baby brother. Just as Mouchette comes back in the morning hoping to be able to tell her mother what had happened during the night, the poor woman expires. The father slaps his daughter just as she is enjoying a moment of escape at the fair; when she hands over the coins she has earned by helping out in the cafe, he simply hands her what is left of his gin. Her isolation from the other girls at school is extreme, and her "revenge" by throwing mud balls is pathetic. Bresson's use of Columbus's song of hope is brilliant under compulsion from her teacher Mouchette seems unable to sing and produces nothing but a hoarse creaking; the clear, pure sounds she utters after comforting Arsène during his epileptic attack create the most touching moment in the film.

The movie's opening sequence with Arsène setting traps and Mathieu spying on him is repeated with a difference when, near the conclusion, Mouchette walks across the fields where men are hunting. The fact that at the beginning one partridge is killed while the other flies into the sky is open to varied interpretations; in any case, Mouchette is clearly linked with the imagery of an animal being tracked down. Of course, it is no accident that Mouchette follows *Au hasard Balthasar*; both movies, shot in country areas, make an important use of animals.

Jean-Claude Gilbert, who had been Arnold in *Balthasar*, is used here again as Arsène, the only such "return" of a Bresson model. Obviously, there is considerable complexity in both characters; despite his attack on Mouchette and his heavy drinking, the poacher is seen with a degree of sympathy. His poaching is looked on with indulgence, and even though he is making use of Mouchette to create an alibi, she is glad of the chance to help: it is the first time someone has treated her like an adult.

Apart from Bresson's prior interest in Bernanos, the director was probably especially drawn to Mouchette as a character between childhood and adolescence, where a certain toughness is worn as a defense. On several occasions, she gives way to tears; she shows her childishness by splashing her feet in little pools of water and throwing balls of mud; and she enjoys pouring the café au lait in bowls placed alongside each other without raising the lid of the pot. At the same time, she is dimly aware that she is growing into a new stage of existence; she accepts her responsibilities at home, is glad to be earning a few coins at the cafe, and cannot help feeling left out when some of her classmates ride off on the back of boys' motorbikes.

The power of the film derives largely from Bresson's mature mastery of montage. "To edit a film," he told Georges Sadoul, "is to link people with glances." As Michel Mortier wrote,

> In fact, we can look at Mouchette as a film that pays attention to nothing except the exchange of glances. First, there are those of Arsène on the lookout for game, and of Mathieu watching Arsène. There are Mouchette's fearful glances at her teacher, her admiring look at the boy when she is riding the bumper-car, the loving and protective glances at Arsène during his epileptic fit, her imploring look at her mother who is already dead, the scorn she directs at the grocer's wife and the old lady who watches over the dead, and the pleading with which she looks at the peasant a few minutes before she drowns herself.

Monteverdi's "Magnificat" is used only at the opening and the close. Though powerful and appropriate, it marks Bresson's last use of background music. The danger is that its accompanying text, Mary's response to the greeting of her cousin Elizabeth, has become such a cliche that we no longer recognize the boldness of its assertions—taken from different books of the Hebrew Bible—or the implications of their association with Mouchette:

> My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord,
> and my spirit exults in God my savior;
> because he has looked upon his lowly handmaid.
> Yes, from this day forward all generations shall call me blessed,
> for the Almighty has done great things for me…
> He has shown the power of his arm,
> he has routed the proud of heart.
> He has pulled down princes from their thrones and exalted the lowly,
> The hungry he has filled with good things, the rich sent empty away…
> (Luke 1:46-52)

Inevitably, commentators have given special attention to Mouchette's "suicide," a few even speculating naively that such an ending indicates a weakening of Bresson's Catholicism. Most critics were able to recognize, however, that her act was carried out under duress, with some reluctance, and while she was still under the influence of the old woman who seemed so familiar with the dead. Michel Estève, an authority on both Bernanos and Bresson, says

> Bresson's poetic realism imposes on us the certitude of (Mouchette's) liberation, but does not let us sense the deep motivation that the supernatural realism of Bernanos would suggest.... The novelist makes us feel a dreamlike and supernatural dimension of events . . . at the very heart of the suffering linked to the deepest misery.... Mouchette's dream also transmits the appeal of eternity. The suicide of Mouchette affirms itself, beyond despair and the temptation of Satan, as a quest for super-terrestrial value that would alone be capable of making one attain another life.

It would be wrong, of course, to use the choice of Monteverdi to flatten out Bresson's ending into explicitly Christian terms, especially since he was increasingly inclined to leave his conclusions open-ended. The imagery is endlessly suggestive, especially the fact that the robe the old lady gives her can easily be seen as a wedding garment, and that Mouchette's gesture to the peasant on the tractor apparently went unnoticed. In any case, it is only fair to claim that Mouchette is accessible to audiences of all backgrounds. To those who see only the film's pain and darkness, Georges Sadoul's response should prove helpful: "For me, this cry of horror, this sublime dance of death, is not a 'song of despair,' but above all a hymn of iresistance to atrocity.' Are not both those who believe in heaven and those who do not able in this case to find themselves in unreserved agreement as brothers in a 'Capital of pain?'" Tilliette's insight is also worth recording: "In the universal connivance with evil and temptation, Mouchette has in some way been spared. Wild, stubborn, tormented, she is a savage who has been softened, a pale light reflected on her face.... Bresson has let himself be guided by the limpid spontaneity of his young interpreter; he who demands so much docility of his models is in turn infinitely attentive to their interior truth."

Mortier is surely right in arguing against those critics who reject the film because they see in it an unhealthy Christian praise of resignation:

> Mouchette is not resigned; she too is in revolt. She could very well not be Christian. Is she? How many sisters does she have in all latitudes and in all religions and "non-religions"? Her revolt is pathetic. If all the Mouchettes of the world disappeared, wouldn't society secrete new ones? But before all those who suffer take efficacious means to eliminate the causes of their suffering, they must understand their situation. And Mouchette can help them.

BRESSON ON “MOUCHETTE”

Excerpt from an interview with Charles Thomas Samuels
(from Samuels’ *Encountering Directors*, G.P. Putnam’s and Sons, 1972)

I want to move from* Au Hasard Balthazar *to* Mouchette*, which is very easy because they resemble each other more than any other two of your films. Indeed, the latter seems a new version of the former. Do you agree?

Perhaps it is because this was the first time that I shot two films in successive years.

Mouchette is like the donkey: stubborn, sordid, long-suffering.

Both are victims.

One difference between Bernanos' novel and your film is that Bernanos explains Mouchette's motives....

All the time! But how can he know what goes on in a little girl's mind!

Oddly enough, though, I understand her suicide more in the film than in the novel.

Because his explanation is wrong, like his description of her suicide; you don't jump in the water the way you put your head on a pillow. When I was reading the novel, I thought at once that she had to die as she does in the film.

So heartbreakingly, for it is a game, the only game she ever plays in the film.

You know death is like a magic trick: In a flash, the person vanishes. That is why I don't show her falling in the water. We see her rolling down the bank, there is a cut, and she is gone; we know she is dead only from the sound and the circles growing in the water.

Obviously, you must show Mouchette's suicide because that is the conclusion of

Bernanos' novel, but as a Christian how do you feel about it? You seem to celebrate suicide—the blast of the Magnificat at her death—but isn't this heretical?

Yes, but I confess that more and more suicide loses its sinfulness to me. Killing oneself can be courageous; not killing oneself, because you wish to lose nothing, even the worst that life has to offer, can also be courageous. Since I live near the Seine, I have seen many people jump into the river in front of my windows. It's remarkable that more don't do it. There are so many reasons for suicide, good and bad. I believe that the church has become less rigorous against it. Sometimes it is inevitable, and not always because of madness. To be aware of a certain emptiness can make life impossible.

On the surface it seems that Mouchette kills herself because life is so terrible, but I think the real reason is that she is so ashamed of herself for what has happened to her. Do you agree?

There are so many motives, which is why this film isn't too bad. I explain nothing, and you can understand it any way you like. Still, you must feel that no single explanation will suffice. One is the wall placed before her by other people after the rape. She can't live in the village; she can't live in the house. Then too, she has been abused by a man whom she started to love.

Not only does she love him, but she forgives him his crime. She blames herself.

You must have noticed that in the film there is not one word about what her experience means.

Why did you include the prologue in which the mother is in church lamenting her tuberculosis?

To introduce this sick woman early so that I can pick her up later without having to make elaborate preparations. Later we see what her illness has done to her faith.

Here and in Balthazar one senses a new fascination with pain.

Yes?

Why?

Perhaps because I feel that pain must be acknowledged no less than happiness.

The opening of Mouchette seems to me the greatest in your films....

When I was young, I hunted small animals in exactly this way. It is not exactly a symbol, but it provides the right atmosphere.

It introduces Mouchette.

But not like a symbol! It shows the sort of world in which she lives. If you like, she is caught, just as the partridges are caught, in a trap.

I love also the amusement park sequence, which is so poignant, since it shows Mouchette having her one moment of pleasure by being hit in bump cars. Even pleasure involves being hit for her. But I was curious why you shot it as you did, with the stationary camera that misses some of the action.

Only a stationary camera permits you to show real movement—there is no other way.

The constricted framing is marvelous; it keeps us from feeling released. It prepares us for that horrible slap with which the father, inevitably, concludes Mouchette's one moment of enjoyment.

Perhaps; at least at the time I had no sense that my shot was mistaken.

Why does that unidentified woman give Mouchette the money to take the ride?

Why not? Life is very often like that. It is the same in *A Man Escaped*, when the man, whom Fontaine doesn't really know, knocks at the door of his cell. Can you imagine if I had to explain: "My little girl, you are so poor, I will let you take this ride"?

Robert Bresson in conversation with Ronald Hayman: The following was first published in the Transatlantic Review No. 46/7, Summer 1973 (London).

At the end of **Mouchette** ***where there are these two playful attempts at what could be suicide before the third one, which is fatal, do you see it as being chance—or something more—that kills her?***

I wanted the ambiguity. What shocked me in the book is that Bernanos made her die by wanting to put her head in the water as if on her pillow in bed. I've never seen anyone committing suicide like that—waiting for death in the water. But the funny thing is that when I read the book I immediately knew how the film should end. The first thing that I knew is that she should die by rolling downhill into the water. It was an intuition, and I didn't hesitate for a second. But I wanted her to make three attempts so that we know what she wants before anything decisive happens. But it's a game. There are many ways of committing suicide and Russian roulette is one. Rolling downhill is a little girl's game which is her equivalent.

It's like what happened when she had the baby in her arms. I didn't ask her to look like a mother or to think she was a mother. She just took the baby and put its hand on her breast. Then the baby takes its milk and her tears begin to fall. They were real, sincere tears. I didn't think you arrive at the truth by means of the truth. As in painting, which is a mechanical process. Writing too—you write with words. One day the painter Degas was trying to write poetry and he meets Mallarmé and says to him, "I was trying to write a poem today, but I didn't have any ideas." Mallarmé said, "But you don't write poems with ideas. You write poems with words." It's the same with the cinema. You don't make a film with the theatre of life but with images put together.

Robert Bresson

The known facts of Robert Bresson's life are as elliptical and mysterious as many of his films. Though his official year of birth was 1907, he was in fact born in 1901, in Bromont-Lamothe, in the Auvergne region. His father was an officer. His first vocation was painting, and occasionally photography.

He entered the film industry in the early 30s, working as a screenwriter and assistant on a handful of films. In view of his later career, Bresson made one of the most surprising of writing-directing debuts in 1934. *Les Affaires publiques* was a medium-length screen farce which featured a famous clown named Béby (the subject of Jean-Pierre Melville's first film short in 1946) and future *Grand Illusion* player Marcel Dalio. Long believed lost, it was rediscovered (in a truncated version) at the Cinémathèque Française in the mid-80s. 50 years later, Bresson remarked: "Seeing it again, I was surprised to more or less find the way I seize on things and put them together, the way in which the shots follow one another."

Bresson had to wait another decade before making his feature film debut. After being a POW, he returned to Occupied Paris to find backers for his film projects. His first two films had distinctive literary pedigrees: *Les Anges du péché* (1943), a spiritual melodrama set in a convent, was scripted by Jean Giraudoux, and *Les Dames du Bois de Boulogne* (1944-45), was adapted from Diderot's *Jacques le Fataliste* by Jean Cocteau. Both were cast with professional actors against whom Bresson would revolt beginning with his next film, *The Diary of a Country Priest* (1951), an adaptation of Georges Bernanos's novel that brought the filmmaker to international attention. The film marked the birth of Bresson's ascetically mature screen style. By the end of the decade Bresson produced two other masterpieces, *A Man Escaped* (1956), an extraordinary blend of prison escape movie suspense and spiritual quest no doubt enriched by his own experiences as a POW in 1940, and *Pickpocket* (1959), the first film for which Bresson wrote an original scenario not adapted from a pre-existing work.

Bresson's next film, *The Trial of Joan of Arc* (1962) is often considered to be Bresson's least successful film, its austerity making Dreyer's version seem lavish by comparison. On the other hand, Bresson reached his critically acclaimed apogee with *Au Hasard Balthazar* and

Mouchette (1967), in which he returned to Bernanos for his material. He next turned to Dostoevsky for the plots of his next two films: *Une femme douce* (1969) was his first in color and introduced French actress Dominique Sanda, and *Four Nights of a Dreamer* (1972).

Lancelot of the Lake (1974) was Bresson's second period recreation (after *Joan of Arc*) and also divided the critics. Nor was *The Devil Probably* (1977) rated among Bresson's finest works. Bresson was 81 when he made his last film, *L'Argent* (1982), based on a Tolstoy novella. Shown at the 1983 Cannes Film Festival, it shared a consolation prize (the Grand Prix du cinema de création) with Andrei Tarkovsky's *Nostalghia*. During the 80s, Bresson tried in vain to mount a production of *Genesis*, a re-telling of the Bible.

Bresson published a volume of observations and aphorisms on the cinema in 1975, *Notes sur le cinématographe* (inaccurately translated as *Notes on the Cinematographer* in its English language edition).

Robert Bresson died on December 18, 1999 at the age of 98.

Ghislain Cloquet
(Director of Photography)

Born in Belgium in 1924, Cloquet trained at the famous IDHEC film school in Paris after World War II. He began his career as lighting cameraman on Alain Resnais' famous short films *Les Statues meurent aussi* (1953), *Night and Fog* (1955) and *Toute la mémoire du monde* (1956). In 1960, he photographed Jacques Becker's final masterpiece, *Le Trou* and Claude Sautet's debut feature, the film noir masterpiece *Classe tous risques* (opening for a 2-week run at Film Forum on November 18; virtually unseen in this country, it will be released nationally by Rialto Pictures).

Working with equal mastery in black & white and color, Cloquet photographed Jacques Demy's *The Young Girls of Rochefort* (1967) and *Donkey Skin* (1970). He lit all the major films of his countryman, André Delvaux, shot Louis Malle's *The Fire Within* (1963), and shot three Bresson masterworks: *Au Hasard Balthazar* (196x), *Mouchette* (1967) and *Une femme douce* (1969). Cloquet also worked with Marguerite Duras, Claude Berri and Nina Companeez.

He worked with Arthur Penn on *Mickey One* (1965) and *Four Friends* (1981), shot Woody Allen's *Love and Death* (1975), and shared an Academy Award with Geoffrey Unsworth for Roman Polanski's *Tess* (1979). Cloquet also worked in television.

RIALTO PICTURES

Described as "the gold standard of reissue distributors" by Los Angeles Times/NPR film critic Kenneth Turan, Rialto Pictures was founded in 1997 by Bruce Goldstein. A year later, Adrienne Halpern joined him as partner. In 2002, Eric Di Bernardo became the company's National Sales Director.

Rialto's past releases have included Renoir's *Grand Illusion*; Carol Reed's *The Third Man*; Fellini's *Nights of Cabiria*; Jules Dassin's *Rififi*; De Sica's *Umberto D*; Godard's *Contempt, Band of Outsiders* and *A Woman is a Woman*; Julien Duvivier's *Pépé le Moko*; Buñuel's *Discreet Charm of the Bourgeoisie, Diary of a Chambermaid*, *The Phantom of Liberty, The Milky Way* and *That Obscure Object of Desire*; John Schlesinger's *Billy Liar*; Clouzot's *Quai des Orfèvres*; Mike Nichols' *The Graduate*; The Maysles' *Grey Gardens*; Mel Brooks' *The Producers;* Jacques Becker's *Touchez Pas Au Grisbi*; Bresson's *Au Hasard Balthazar;* Franju's *Eyes Without A Face;* and Jean-Pierre Melville's *Bob le Flambeur* and *Le Cercle Rouge,* the latter released for the first time in its uncut European version.

In 2002, the company released the critically-acclaimed first-run film *Murderous Maids,* the chilling true story of two homicidal sisters, starring Sylvie Testud.

Rialto's 2004 slate included the original 1954 Japanese version of Ishiro Honda's *Godzilla,* never before released in the U.S.; Peter Davis's Oscar-winning 1974 documentary *Hearts and Minds; and* Gillo Pontecorvo's groundbreaking *The Battle of Algiers,* which became one of last year's top-grossing foreign films.

Currently in release are Godard's *Masculine Feminine*, Claude Berri's *The Two of Us,* and Louis Malle's *Elevator to the Gallows.* Later this year, Rialto will release Bresson's *Mouchette* and Claude Sautet's rarely-seen film noir *Classe Tous Risques,* in its first U.S. theatrical screenings in 45 years. *Classe Tous Risques*, a favorite of Melville and John Woo, stars Jean-Paul Belmondo (in his first film after *Breathless)* and *Army of Shadow's* Lino Ventura.

In 1999 Rialto received a special Heritage Award from the National Society of Film Critics, and in 2000 received a special award from the New York Film Critic's Circle, presented to Goldstein and Halpern by Jeanne Moreau. The two co-presidents have each received the French Order of Chevalier of Arts and Letters.

Rialto is proud to have *Army of Shadows* included in this year's Telluride Film Festival. The company plans to open the film, which has never had a U.S. release, in early 2006.

Pressbook edited and annotated by Bruce Goldstein
Additional material: Lenny Borger
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