Lucy Reynolds *The Donkey Field*

Lucy Reynolds has lectured and published extensively. Her research focuses on questions of the moving image, feminism, political space and collective practice. She edited the anthology *Women Artists, Feminism and the Moving Image*, and co-edits the *Moving Image Review and Art Journal* (MIRAJ). As an artist, her ongoing sound work *A Feminist Chorus* has been heard at the Glasgow International Festival, the Wysing Arts Centre, the Grand Action cinema, Paris and Grand Union galleries, Birmingham.

Sarah Dobai *The Donkey Fields* 2021
video still, 20 mins

In Robert Bresson's 1966 film *Au Hasard Balthazar*, there is a recurring image of a hand resting on a donkey's neck. Always framed in close-up against the coarse texture of its coat, the protagonists remain out of shot, only discernible in the timbre of off-screen voice, and in the details of their changing hands. As the film progresses, the movement from the child-like hands of Marie - the young woman central to the film - to the calloused hands of her father and other male characters, speak eloquently of how the beast itself must 'change hands' as it is passed from one master to the next. It is through the witnessing of these hands stroking, holding and hitting that the viewer perceives the changing treatment which the donkey endures over the trajectory of its life.

During an interview, Robert Bresson explained the central importance of the donkey in his film as a way of exploring how human vice can be visited upon a creature unable to influence its destiny. "*Au Hasard Balthazar* is about our anguish, our passion, in the face of a living creature that is pure humility, pure sanctity: a donkey, Balthazar. It's about pride, avarice, sensuality, the need to make others suffer – in the men who, by chance, are given control of Balthazar, and by whose hands he dies."[1] Balthazar, the donkey in Bresson's bleak film, indeed must passively accept his fate, and a life of cruelty and abasement leavened by brief moments of kindness. Bresson's pared down images, depicting the donkey's silent acquiescence to a touch at times tender but more often cruel, were significant in the formulation of *The Donkey Field*, Sarah Dobai's film based on the experience of the Budapest's Jewish community during Nazi persecution. With a minimalism of form and imagery akin to Bresson's, the donkey at the heart of Dobai's film becomes a way to address the trauma still resonant in the memory of those who suffered the holocaust, with timely allusion to the rise in racial and religious prejudice of recent years.

The close reference to Bresson in *The Donkey Field* is not a homage as such. Rather, Dobai recognised in Bresson's films a shared interest in how circumstantial difficulties affect their protagonists. She speaks of how: "As I got to know Bresson's work better, I recognised that his films show an understanding of the limited agency that individuals often have in situations. This chimed with my own approach, in photographs and films, which are focussed on the situations that the people in the work find themselves in, rather than their character as much"[2]. Neither is *The Donkey Field* the first overt reference to Bresson's films in Dobai's work.

Her 2015 film *Hidden in Plain Sight*, screened with live spoken accompaniment, re-stages the scenes where the act of thieving is performed in Bresson's film *Pickpocket* (1959). Like her later film, it uses a style and aesthetic of low-key staging, in which precisely framed sections of clothing, faces, architecture describe the scene of the crime in sequential close-ups. The performances of the actors are muted, emphasising still posture and appearance over overt gesture. In this regard Dobai's cinematography approaches Bresson's. Celebrated by Jean-Luc Godard and others as the 'cineaste of ellipses', the action in his films occurs elsewhere and out of frame. Sometimes audible rather than visible, action is inferred through the behaviour and expressions of the protagonist.[3] The donkey in Dobai's film is also depicted in parts, as the camera follows its hoofs on the pavement, for example, through a twitching ear, a close-up on its head, eyes, neck, where it is held and stroked by a young girl. Bresson's reference in interview to a striving towards simplification in "the point of view of a photographic shot, a certain force, a certain vigor" in order to avoid falling into "mere sequence"[4] seems in keeping with Dobai's stringent focus and pared back imagery.

Hidden in Plain Sight and *The Donkey Field* both unfold their narratives through an inter-play of text and image, but where the early film is carried by the voice of the thief, as the protagonist recounts the heady experience of his first theft, there is no speech in *The Donkey Field*. The second movement of Schubert's haunting piano concerto no 20 provides just one point of non-diegetic intervention which opens *The Donkey Field* and is picked up as a refrain throughout, itself an echo of Bresson's use on the soundtrack to *Au Hasard Balthazar*. Otherwise, foley sounds of leaves, distant shouting, the donkey's feet, the clang of its chains, locate the viewer without explicitly identifying the place. This is one example of a temporal and spatial ambiguity which suffuses the film. Settings, clothing and hair styles evocative of Bresson's 1950s France also appear alongside more contemporary signifiers of track suits and modern cars, as a result of Dobai's detailed attention to mise-en-scène. Another way to understand this complex operation has already been articulated by Gilles Deleuze when he writes of the "*any-space-whatever*" [*espace quelconque*] which Bresson creates in his cinema. By this Deleuze refers to a representation of space which, through its fragmentation, goes beyond the pictorial to be "…grasped as pure locus of the possible… a richness in potentials or singularities which are, as it were, prior conditions of all actualisation, all determination."[5]

We might identify "*any-space-whatever*" in the layered and ambiguous images which *The Donkey Field* opens up, through which a complex entanglement of unspoken and unspeakable histories emerges, evoking not just the era of Bresson and auteur film-making, but also the echoes of war, occupation and its aftermath which mark *Au Hasard Balthazar*, embodied in the fictional sufferance of Marie and Balthazar, but also framed in Bresson's oblique staging and sensibility. These deeper resonances of trauma are perhaps what Dobai recognised and responded to in Bresson's tale, drawing them to the surface to reflect on her family's own narrative of loss and persecution, and using allegory and ambiguity to acknowledge the difficulty of telling it. The film's rolling intertitles purposely create a connection between image and text which is inferred and suggestive rather than direct. The donkey, who appears in most of its scenes, might be read as a reference to J, the young protagonist who is the object of persecution described in the text, but it could equally embody any powerless recipient of cruelty and denigration. As she observes: "To me this anti-heroic understanding of the subject's agency being limited by their circumstances, acquires special meaning when looking at tumultuous or traumatic passages in history. So for this film, Bresson's approach seemed peculiarly apt."[6]

Given Bresson's Catholic sensibility, connections have been drawn to the biblical references in his use of a donkey, by both critics and the director himself.ii However, others such as James Quandt suggest that this is a simplistic reading of Bresson's films, arguing that Bresson: "never proceeded by strict or simple analogy—he is no C. S. Lewis, no Christian allegorist—and he always resisted such a reductive reading of *Balthazar*."[7] Quandt emphasises instead Bresson's own references to the "lucidity" he sought in his films, choosing not to present redemption and transcendence from suffering in a religious sense, but to reflect the inescapable abjection of the donkey's world, and that of Marie, the only person to show him kindness. Both Bresson and Dobai seem to understand the complex symbolism of the donkey, on the one hand domesticated to become a dumb 'beast of

burden' in thrall to human servitude, yet who continues to possess a non-human nature existing outside language, which is both enigmatic and unknowable. It is this last point I want to dwell on. For the role of speech, or the lack of it, is a thread that runs strongly through *The Donkey Field*. The protagonists give no visible sign of speaking throughout the film, instead the speech is evoked as a cacophony of condemnation and cruelty, name calling and name telling, in the rolling text. The words also allude to the silences which were observed by J and his mother, first as they try to stay safe whilst in hiding and finally in the last resonant line of the text which tells of "a pact of silence that J only breaks many years later." *The Donkey Field* is part of the breaking of that silence, even if the words are audible only as text. It draws attention through its heightened manifestations of sound and silence, and in the mute presence of the donkey, to what is at stake in staying silent and speaking out.

Notes:

1. "The Cinema According to Bresson", *Les Nouvelles Littéraires*, May 26, 1966 in Bresson, Mylène (ed.), *Bresson by Bresson Interviews from 1943 to 1983*, New York: The New York Review of Books, (English Translation), 2016, P160/12.

2. Email from Sarah Dobai to the author, 18.09.2021.

3. Jean Luc Godard, "The Question: An interview with Robert Bresson", *Cahiers du cinéma*, No 178. May 1966 in Bresson, Mylène (ed.), *Bresson by Bresson Interviews from 1943 to 1983*, New York: The New York Review of Books, 2016, p144.

4. Jean Luc Godard, "The Question: An interview with Robert Bresson", *Cahiers du cinéma*, No 178. May 1966 in Bresson, Mylène (ed.), *Bresson by Bresson Interviews from 1943 to 1983*, New York: The New York Review of Books, 2016, p142.

5. Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 1. The Movement-Image*, London: The Athlone Press, 1986, p109.

6. Email from Sarah Dobai to the author, 18.09.2021.

7. See in particular "The Cinema According to Bresson", *Les Nouvelles Littéraires*, May 26, 1966 in Bresson, Mylène (ed.), *Bresson by Bresson Interviews from 1943 to 1983*, New York: The New York Review of Books, 2016.

8. James Quandt, *Au Hasard Balthazar*, Criterion Collection, June 2005, np. Accessed 12.09.2021. https://www.criterion.com/current/posts/370-au-hasard-balthazar.

Cover: **Sarah Dobai** *The Donkey Fields* 2021
video still, 20 mins

Sarah Dobai *The Donkey Field*
2 October - 13 November 2021

DANIELLE ARNAUD
123 Kennington Road
London SE11 6SF
Tel +44 (0) 20 7735 8292
www.daniellearnaud.com