Lucy Reynolds  The Donkey Field

In Robert Bresson’s 1966 film *Au Hasard Balthazar*, a donkey is the subject of a recurring image, through its fragmentation, going 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.”

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 filmmaking, but also the echoes of war, occupation and its aftermath which mark *Au Hasard Balthazar*, embodied in the fictional suffering 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 tie this anti-heroic understanding of the subject’s agency being limited by their circumstances, acquires special meaning 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.

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. The donkey in Dobai’s film is also depicted in parts, as the camera follows its hoofs on the pavement, for example, through a twiching 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 rigor” in order to avoid falling into “mere sequence” seems in keeping with Dobai’s stringent focus and pared back imagery.

Hidden in Plain Sight and *The Donkey Field* both utilise the presence of a 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 and persecution, and the echoes of war, occupation and its aftermath which mark *Au Hasard Balthazar*, embodied in the fictional suffering 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 tie 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 peculiar apt.”

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. 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.” 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 objectification 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:
2. Email from Sarah Dobai to the author, 18.09.2021.

The exhibition is supported by Arts Council England. Thanks to The Elephant Trust.

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

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Sarah Dobai The Donkey Field
2 October - 13 November 2021