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Robert Bresson's **AU HASARD BALTHAZAR** (1965), from his screenplay, with Anne Wiazemsky, Francis Lafarge, and Philippe Asselin, is alternate cinema in extremis as Bresson, at a stage when he had long abandoned dramatic spectacle altogether, reaches for a lofty pinnacle of realized emotional experience. The Balthazar of the title is a donkey, born, like all beings, to suffer needlessly and die mysteriously. With heightened awareness, we see beyond each of the meager milestones of the donkey's life to the fitful spasms of human vanity and the presumption that lies beyond: pathetic charades of good and evil, choice and necessity, tenderness and cruelty, order and chaos, joy and sorrow. The tale is told with an arbitrary fragmentation of framing as befits a film with *Au Hasard* beginning its title. (Bresson acknowledges the inspiration of the donkey anecdote in Dostoyevski's *The Idiot*.) The "actors" contribute the meaningfully blank faces of one-shot nonprofessionals with no background in histrionic expression. Yet despite all its restrictive bleakness and austerity, *Au Hasard Balthazar* is an extraordinarily sensual film, plucking out a morbid, beautiful flower of cinematic art from the roots of existence. (Cofeature: Bresson's *Diary of a Country Priest*) **Thalia Soho: 4:10, 8:10** ■

Research: Lenge Hong