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## Bresson's Gentleness

CHARLES THOMAS SAMUELS

To be profitable, even "art" films must be entertaining; and although art and entertainment may coincide, the former is often starved because the latter is too narrowly defined. In literature, readers can enjoy Nabokov, whose difficulty is lightened by rococo language and sex, as well as Beckett, who is recondite even when funny. But in film, even cultivated spectators expect pleasure to require no personal exertion (you have to turn pages to read a book) and austerity is regarded almost as an affront.

Often, great directors reach their audience through sensational but artistically inferior efforts. Because it is a fine film one doesn't deplore the success of *Blow-Up*, although one wishes more attention were paid to *L'Avventura*; but a preference for *La Dolce Vita* over Fellini's early comedies, or for *The Seventh Seal* over *The Naked Night*, is deplorable. When a good film doesn't bathe the eye or gratify the emotions, it often sinks quickly into oblivion (I think, in recent years, of Henning Carlsen's *Hunger*, Alain Jessua's *Life Upside Down*, or Vittorio De Seta's *Bandits of Orgosolo*). Some directors are dismissed *in toto*—like the excellent Ermanno Olmi. When his film *The Job* was renamed *The Sound of Trumpets*, filmgoers still weren't blasted out of their houses, and even free tickets couldn't get them to the theater

when *The Fiancée* played in New York City.

As we move up the scale from Olmi to Robert Bresson, the carnival mentality of most filmgoers does even greater damage to the cause of art. Except for Antonioni and Bergman, no other Western director possesses so original a style, although Bresson wouldn't welcome the comparison. He dismisses Antonioni as a mere photographer and Bergman as someone wrongly dependent on rhetoric. Accordingly, Bresson himself is linguistically concentrated and visually unadorned—so spare, in fact, that even admirers of the other directors (artists who are distinctly not crowd-pleasing) find Bresson too rarefied. This helps to explain why Bresson has been able to direct only nine films in thirty years. Nevertheless, he has become more and more appealing to producers without compromising his stubborn austerity. During his first decade, when he was forced to direct professional actors (although he hates their artificiality), he was able to find backing for only two films; during his latest, most Bressonian decade, he has found backing for five. This is especially remarkable because only one of his efforts (*A Man Escaped*) has been a hit—and this principally in France—and because his recent works have been pretty much restricted to film clubs and art cinemas and, in America, to one-night-stands at festivals.

By now, Bresson is slighted neither by producers nor by film scholars; audiences are what he requires. That his newest effort, *Une Femme Douce*, might provide them is evident from the admiring review it earned in *Time* (no proponent of the

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avant-garde) when it was shown at the 1969 Lincoln Center Film Festival. Perhaps sensing that Bresson's hour had come—since the new film is in lovely color, features a beautiful leading lady (the then nonprofessional Dominique Sanda) and treats a favored subject (unhappy marriage)—Paramount Pictures toyed with the idea of underwriting commercial distribution. Eventually, however, Paramount's courage receded, leaving the possibility of import to the more adventurous but less wealthy New Yorker Theater. Daniel Talbot, who manages that crucial showcase for neglected art, has every intention of bringing *Une Femme Douce* to this country; but, as he says, "I've discovered that young peoples' taste, . . . and they would be 95 percent of the audience for a film like *Une Femme Douce*, is hopelessly conservative." Therefore, in a time of economic jitters, Mr. Talbot may not be able to risk dependence on an audience—for all the cant about a "film generation"—whose taste remains uninstructed. Should this film not reach America, we will perhaps have missed our easiest entrance into Bresson's art; but, since at sixty-three the director shows no sign of slowing down, the loss will be entirely ours.

Unlike Bergman but like Antonioni, Bresson is even more distinguished for his method than for individual films (although, like Antonioni, he has produced, with *A Man Escaped*, at least one cinematic landmark). His method is a relentless pursuit of inner truth. Because Bresson disdains acting, rhetoric and spectacle, he considers himself a realist, but viewers rightly contend that life is not so spare as it appears in his films. Bresson's "realism" is to be understood as a definition of intention, not as a description of style. In fact, he is the most rigid stylist in the history of cinema, and no one but Bresson himself would think to call his work "natural."

His realism produces a surface only in order to uncover its depths, as is revealed by the first crucial aspect of his technique. Alone among his peers, Bresson habitually films preexisting texts. Although he remains strictly faithful to them—retaining most of the action and dialogue and rarely

adding or inventing anything—he arranges the details so as to release an insight that was only latent. For example, the Madame de la Pommeraye episode from Diderot's *Jacques le Fataliste*, which Bresson used in *Les Dames du Bois de Boulogne*, is only a clever anecdote, illustrating feminine wiles, about an aristocrat who avenges herself on a faithless lover by tricking him into marriage with a courtesan. Comically, her plot misfires: when the lover upbraids his wife for her cooperation in duping him, she is so contrite that she wins him over. By updating the story, Bresson diverts attention from specific social attitudes, which are prominent in the original, to uncover a deeper moral meaning. Filming Diderot's plot and dialogue in the emotionally compacted style of Racine, he shows how vengeance is emasculated by its own character. Locked in unforgiving rage, the mistress cannot even imagine the merciful love that makes her jealousy self-defeating.

Dostoevski's novella, "A Gentle Spirit," Bresson's source for *Une Femme Douce*, is, to begin with, richer in possibility than the Diderot episode. While his young wife lies on her bier, the narrator of Dostoevski's tale reviews his marriage in order to comprehend the girl's motive for suicide. He recalls how his infernal pride made him alienate her affection to test it. Because she had been poor, he flaunted the financial favor conferred on her by marriage. Because she was naturally loving, he responded coldly. It is not surprising that all this drove her to hatred and almost to adultery, but when the husband rented a room to spy on her, he had the triumph of hearing her repulse the other man. Nonetheless, his humiliation of his wife caused her to attempt murder. With her gun at his temple, he momentarily awakened and kept himself from flinching to impress on her his largeness of soul. Thus he did so effectively that the girl was crushed by guilt and, spiritual creature that she was, made atonement by leaping to her death while clutching an icon. Concluding his baleful story, the husband curses his own perversity and avers that all men live in unbreachable solitude.



This story required less alteration than Diderot's to make it suitable to Bresson's sensibility. Nonetheless, he made one major change that greatly enriches his source. Whereas in Dostoevski the wife is mainly an item in her husband's reminiscence, in Bresson she is a living presence. This is accomplished through the second important feature of Bresson's technique.

In half of his films, Bresson uses narrated commentary; a device, widely condemned as anticinematic, that is instead the director's most important formal contribution. Narration is obviously efficient because it elides time; in place of functional but undramatic scenes it permits speedy summation ("For six weeks she was feverish," *et cetera*). More important, it allows Bresson to present both objective and subjective views of the action.

Asynchronous relation of dialogue to image has long been standard cinematic technique, as in the classic example of a man murmuring love-words to a woman on whom he advances while the camera holds on a knife in his hands. But although this technique is normally put to such melodramatic uses, in Bresson it is employed to reveal the soul. Thus, in *Diary of a Country Priest*, the titular narrator frequently tells us through his commentary that he is doing exactly what we see him doing on the screen. Such duplication, so apparently wasteful, becomes functional through deviations, as rhyme becomes more than mere adornment when occasionally it goes "off." At one moment, for example, the priest tells us that he is feeling better and can even eat bread and wine (he is dying from cancer of the stomach), while the image tells us with what difficulty he eats and how sick he really is. By comparing his total accuracy when reporting priestly activities with his failure to register the state of his health, we comprehend his humility: he reports what he is doing but neglects to acknowledge the personal odds against doing it.

In *Une Femme Douce* this technique is even more essential to Bresson's meaning. Dostoevski's narrator fully understands his experience; Bresson's does not. As only cinema can, this film solves the long-standing

literary problem of how to present a story through an unreliable narrator without confusing the audience about the plot or the character. Thus the film's dramatic sequences are not flashbacks; they are illustrations of past events accompanied by a commentary that exposes the husband's inability to cope with them.

Unlike Dostoevski, Bresson shows the wife independent of her husband's viewpoint, and this increases both our participation in the failure of their marriage and our comprehension of the complexity of its cause. Two minor alterations in detail point toward the latter intention. In Dostoevski, the husband hears his wife spurn her would-be lover through a door; in Bresson, he comes upon the couple by accident as they are sitting in an automobile. All we see is the wife moving away from the man; we do not hear, as the husband tells us he heard, her refusal. As a result, we are free to suspect his attribution to his wife of perfect innocence, a suspicion strengthened by the other change. Bresson's heroine does not die clutching an icon. Before her jump, she fingers but rejects an ivory Christ, leaving behind her only a shawl that floats to earth with ironic grace and is the only visible sign of her suicide. Because of these and many other indications in the film, both husband and wife become ambiguous figures. She is not merely the gentle victim of his egotism; he is not simply a monster trying her soul. The moral distinction between them is made rather clearly in Dostoevski, but Bresson constantly reminds us that responsibility for the failure of a relationship can never be simple.

Avoiding discursive dialogue, so essential in Bergman, or visual symbolism, as in Antonioni, Bresson makes things doubly difficult for his audience; but the power of the film depends on our awareness of mystery. Although he was referring to another artist, John Updike has nicely formulated what is also the essence of Bresson's appeal. We are held, Updike says, either by stories that offer basic "circumstantial suspense" or, more significantly, by those whose suspense is "gnostic." In the former we want to "know the outcome of an unresolved situa-

tion"; in the latter we read on "in the expectation that at any moment an illumination will occur." Most directors even more than most writers cater to the former interest: Bresson is preeminent among those who court the latter. For that reason, he always begins his films by telling us what will happen. The heroine of *Les Dames du Bois de Boulogne* says she will be avenged and immediately we see the medium of her vengeance; in *Diary of a Country Priest* the face of the priest tells us instantly that he will die; the very title gives the plot away in *A Man Escaped*. Just so, in *Une Femme Douce*, the film commences with the suicide. What draws us on, like the husband, is the desire to know why. But to know why in Bresson (as is not the case in Dostoevski), we have to watch intently everything that happens because nothing is explained and even the explainer is an item to be fathomed. Many viewers find Bresson cold and remote, but this coldness may be only a reflection of their own passivity. If you can be excited by the search for understanding, you can be excited by Bresson.

So Bresson forces total concentration. Actors are not permitted to act lest we be diverted by their excellence as performers from what they incarnate. Framing is constricted lest our eye wander to an irrelevant detail. Scenes are enacted and assembled without differing degrees of emphasis lest we strain forward for one and relax in another. Dialogue is held to a minimum lest we settle for abstractions in place of facts. Only at the very end of each film does Bresson release us from our hush of contemplation with a shock that sums up what we've seen, as when bubbles emerge from the river in which the heroine of *Mouchette* has drowned herself and a blast of the *Magnificat* admits that death alone is victory for such a life.

The last scene of *Une Femme Douce* is equally conclusive. Throughout the film, the husband has been pacing around the corpse of his wife, seeking but failing to breach this final barrier. Now he can only raise her bloodless face from its final repose and murmur hopelessly: "Oh. Open your eyes. A second—only for a second." Then

her head is lowered, the screen momentarily darkens as his back passes in front of the camera, and we hold for several seconds while a coffin screw is fastened; the sound of its turning indicates the finality of his defeat.

Figuratively, the screw had always been turning on a separateness no more irrevocable in death than it was in life. Recalling their first real conversation on one of the girl's trips to his pawnshop, he comments that she was pleased to find him more educated than she might have expected, but we see on her face little more than sullen regard. Thus begins the husband's attempt to understand things only insofar as they can support his repeated desire for "a solid happiness."

"How voluptuous when one no longer doubts," he tells the impassive maid who must listen to his monologue. But, whereas he dotes on intellectual certainty, his wife is certain only that life is mean. Paleontology, she tells him, dictates that even men are structured like mice. When he buys her flowers as a sign of love, she wryly mocks the act's distinctiveness. Seeing a nearby woman receive an identical bouquet, she rids herself of hers, remarking, "We, too, form a couple, all based on the same model." But obscurely she searches for some higher satisfaction, although she cannot even specify the object of her search. In Dostoevski, the wife is an orphan, exploited by her relatives, who marries to better her position. In Bresson, her motives are deliberately enshrouded. All she reveals is, that she comes from a sinister house, and she succumbs to the pawnbroker's entreaties for no apparent reason. When he tells her that she will help him by marrying him, she asks whether it would not be possible to do so without marriage. Then, when she finds herself tied to him, committed as she is to her obscure ideal, she tortures his bourgeois certitude.

He tells her that they must be frugal so as to improve their lot, and to mock him she offers prodigal sums to his customers. He asserts that marriage is a state desired by most women, but she expresses her contempt for this ideal through apparent in-



fidelities. Because he is devoted to certainty, the infidelities torment him, the more so because his devotion to his wife makes it unthinkable that so gentle a creature should be heartless.

Is she gentle? The husband keeps saying so, but the action undermines his contention. He admires her passion for books and records, but we see her listening to jazz (the sound-cuts to it are always accomplished with deafening volume) while munching fancy pastries, or leafing through books, only to extract the lesson that man is no more august than a mouse. Do these actions express intellectual passion or emptiness of spirit? Does her esteem for books accord with the careless way in which she tosses them about, as we recall the disarray of her dresser and the provocative lingerie found on her bed? When they go to a museum she disagrees with her husband that there is a gap between classic and modern art, but does she deny the gap out of catholicity of taste or because nothing means very much to her? Moreover, doesn't she express her denial simply to mock him? "Young birds are drawn to the same chant as their parents," she tells her husband, "and all birds sing the same way." Is her whole life a doomed attempt to break away from her "sinister" upbringing, her aspiration a baffled yearning toward what her imagination cannot conceive?

Yet the husband persists in regarding her as gentle, finer than he is, more intelligent, more compassionate, and, above all, faithful, that is to say, secure. When they go to a movie and a man next to her tries to make a pass, the husband forces her to change seats; and when they exit from the theater and she throws her arms about her husband, he comments that she obviously wants to love him. What he will not face is the possibility that she is incapable of this. He blames himself for accepting possession merely of her body, but that is all she offers him. Even in the midst of their alienation she turns toward his flesh.

In the dramatized sequences, the wife seems lost, perhaps more ferocious than

gentle, but at least she is honest whereas the husband is sentimental, and, unlike him, she is not so stupid as to think that cash and marriage insure happiness. Desiring to educate her to his parochial values, the husband drives her to adultery. Desiring to free herself from his stifling conventionality, the wife awakens in him a terrible perturbation of spirit.

But worse lies ahead, ironically. During their first conversation (as in Dostoevski), the husband quotes Mephistopheles in Goethe's *Faust*, who proclaims himself one of those wishing to do evil who inadvertently does good. Although the line is here pronounced to impress the wife with the husband's learning, it should be recalled during the latter half of the film, where, out of their mutual enmity, a bizarre mutual improvement springs.

After the wife is driven to attempt murder, the husband makes use of her action to gain control. Refusing to admit what he saw, he nonetheless punishes her by banishing her from his bed. She, in turn, driven wild by her uncertainty about his motive and, as we later learn, by her fear that he will abandon her, falls into a fever from which she emerges transformed. Whereas all her energy had gone into combating her husband, now she seems to turn her criticism inward, at last attaining that gentleness in which her husband took such solace. Jazz is replaced on her phonograph by Bach and Purcell, she begins to serve her husband dutifully, and she promises to be a faithful wife. Watching all this, he feels torn between pity for her abasement and exultation at her new docility, but the change gives him hope for their future. She has indeed become more nearly the tender creature he has always sought and, out of gratitude, he confesses how badly he has sinned against her spirit and proceeds to show that he too can change. Committing acts of ostentatious kindness to his customers, he also literally abases himself to his wife in love.

Why, then, does his wife burst into sobs when he tells her how deeply she is adored? Because the new spirituality that he has released in her makes her intolerably guilty.



But he cannot moderate his passion because the act of murder to which he nearly drove her has awakened in him an equal measure of guilt. They are as terribly isolated in their mutual regret as they were in their former enmity. The evil that they did to each other ironically produced good, freeing her from desolate negation and him from self-protective acquisitiveness. Now this good produces evil.

Lost between the self she was and the self she has promised to become, the wife cannot summon sufficient faith to believe in the permanency of her new dispensation. The husband wishes to sell the shop, move away, and devote his life simply to adoring her, but the more he affirms this plan the more unbearable becomes her sense that she is unfit for adoration. Before their marriage she had come to him to pawn a gold crucifix with an ivory Christ attached and had not wanted the Christ which he had offered to return. Now, in her perplexity, she fingers it in the drawer where it has lain, but when the maid comes in to inquire after her, she quickly hides what she is doing. Then, donning a shawl, she steps on a little iron table and leaps from her balcony into the traffic that has been resounding throughout the film.

The wife is not what her husband thinks her to be, yet when she almost embodies his erroneous image, her integrity is shattered and she can only die. The husband is brutal, not so much when he seeks to possess his hard-eyed wife as when he seeks to make amends for having sought possession. Watching their marriage progress, we feel a growing terror, because opposites merge and solutions turn out to be worse than the problems they solve. The husband's story, in its ironic complexity, ridicules his very effort to understand it. He never comes closer to the mystery of his ineluctable misalliance than when he confesses that he cannot understand the impulse that made him leave his wife at their highest moment of intimacy, thus unintentionally facilitating her suicide.

The film's clear point is that tragedy can be comprehended as a process, while still

evading our need to fathom motives and fix blame. Therefore, Bresson uses his cinematic means—framing, editing, dialogue, acting—to achieve an even emphasis that precludes abstract summation. Whatever inspires these people can only be inferred from their laconic utterances and meager gestures. But this very meagerness—which we are made to experience—comes as close as anything can to being the source of their solitude. Both Dostoevski's story and Bresson's film light up the distance between two human souls (although Bresson magnifies the distance by giving us a fuller portrayal of the wife). Dostoevski, however, attributes the distance to a fundamental human perversity; Bresson links it to a world without spiritual force.

Throughout the film we hear more traffic noises and footsteps than dialogue; we see more doors and empty stairways than people. Usually a frame is filled with objects; fragmentation even turns characters into things. In Nathanael West's novel *Miss Lonelyhearts* the Christ-hungry protagonist sees the world as "dead . . . a world of doorknobs"; this is also the world in which Bresson's tragedy transpires. The wife yearns obscurely beyond a universe in which all is matter; the husband tries to turn matter into might. "Why did we adopt silence from the beginning?" the husband laments, and as the couple are shown to us we are tempted to give an answer. Neither husband nor wife can rise above the world of things; as a result they can reach toward each other, even gaze into each other's eyes, but they can communicate nothing of their souls. In the midst of his agony the husband wishes he could pray but knows that he can only think. The wife can finger her Christ, but the tentative movement seems almost to shame her. The maid's silence makes her simulate the role of confessor, but when she pronounces her first line, late in the film, we learn how distant she has been from the husband's ordeal ("After the burial, I will leave for eight days, if you will let me.").

*Une Femme Douce* is distinguished from Bresson's other films by the absence of some principle of redemption. The courtesan



san in *Les Dames du Bois du Bologne* receives forgiveness; the hero of *A Man Escaped* is granted liberty. Even in those films where Bresson's heroes die, some promise of transfiguration is made; all the victims resemble that most Bressonian of characters, Joan of Arc, who loses the earth but achieves Heaven. *Une Femme Douce* is, however, the darkest of three recent films in which Bresson contemplates the modern world. Successively, in *Au Hasard*, *Balthazar* and *Mouchette* and this work, he portrays a spiritual wasteland, characterized by brutality and a self-punishing pursuit of pleasure. But even Balthazar dies amid a field of peacefully grazing sheep and Mouchette drowns to the *Magnificat*; the wife in *Une Femme Douce* falls to the cacaphony of screeching brakes.

It is this bleakness that will, I think, make the film seem more tenable to the uninitiated than the profound Christian certitude of Bresson's other works. But although the mood here is untypical, the technique is not. In *A Man Escaped* the mystery of human courage and of divine aid are illustrated through the most mundane details. A spoon is needed in Fontaine's escape; by chance he finds it, and we marvel at the concentration with which it is used. The contrasting spiritual aridity of *Une Femme Douce* is shown through the same close-in depiction of the ordinary.

The wedding sequence can serve as an example. In the scene immediately preceding, the husband begs the girl to say "yes," but although she looks at him before entering her apartment, she makes no answer. Rather we witness her assent in an immediate cut to the signing of the marriage register, an act itself quickly replaced by hands exchanging rings over a restaurant table. We then see reverse shots of the two gazing at each other and cut to an almost excessively detailed staging of their entrance into their new home. Again, there is no dialogue, only the sound of a key turning in the lock, of a door opening and closing, of footsteps and traffic. They embrace but we see her staring quizzically over his shoulder. They hesitate, but she finally pulls him forward. In quick cuts,

we see her walk to the bathroom, throw a nightgown on the bed, while he watches television. She comes to him, laughingly unbuttons his shirt, turns off the television (in the action dislodging a towel and giving us a glittering view of her lovely body), and then jumps into bed. They pull the covers over them, we hear the sound of laughter, and then only silence. Car noises come up on the sound track, followed by his voice commenting that he had to "throw water" on the "marvelous drunkenness" of his joy.

Each detail measures the paucity of their hopes. The marriage is not assented to but only performed, and then not as a sacrament but as the signing of a register. Even the real marriage, at the restaurant, is only a series of movements and looks, and the consummation, initiated by the wife and excited by the mechanical noise of auto racing on the television set, is meager in its unseen joy. Yet the husband persists in regarding this uncommunicative, wholly material coming-together as something marvelous in its intoxication.

Many artists would depict a desolation of spirit so profound through more striking dramatization, but Bresson would think this a mistake; he includes in *Une Femme Douce* a scene that illustrates his aesthetic. When the couple see *Hamlet* at the theater, the husband is impressed but the wife doesn't join in his applause. Returning home, she explains why, by running to a volume of Shakespeare to read lines that had been eliminated in the performance only so that the actors could get away with shouting and gesticulation. The lines come from Hamlet's advice to the players (in a French translation) and among them is the veritable motto of Bresson's art:

in the torrent, the tempest, the whirlwind one must always be moderate and acquire even a certain gentleness.

Like the wife herself, Bresson shows that gentleness of manner does not deny inner ferocity. For the spectator who can match the film's concentration with his own, Bresson, by rigorously controlling passion, inspires it.