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***a new masterpiece
by Robert Bresson***



***“‘Une Femme Douce’ belongs
among the greater Bresson’s.
I mean this to be a rave review.”
-Roger Greenspun, N.Y. Times***

***“A very beautiful and
profound film.”
-Le Monde***

Robert Bresson's

une femme douce

***starring Dominique Sanda • Based on a Dostoevski Novella
In color • A New Yorker Films release.***



16 West 61st Street, New York, N.Y. 10023 (212) 247-6110

"UNE FEMME DOUCE"

THE CAST

She.....	DOMINIQUE SANDA
He.....	GUY FRANGIN
Anna.....	JANE LOBRE

CREDITS

Producer	MAG BODARD
Director	ROBERT BRESSON
Screenplay from Dostoievsky's "The Gentle Woman"	ROBERT BRESSON
Director of Photography	GHISLAIN CLOQUET
Art Director	PIERRE CHARBONNIER
Editor	RAYMOND LAMY
Sound Editor	URBAIN LOISEAU
First Assistant Director	JACQUES KEBADIAN
Cameraman	LOUIS STEIN
Assistant Cameraman	PAUL BONIS
Hair Stylist & Make-Up	ALEX MARCUS

Parc Films/Marianne Productions - Eastman Color

Running Time: 87 Minutes. FRENCH WITH ENGLISH SUBTITLES

UNE FEMME DOUCE

The Story

The story is set in the Paris of today. A young woman - she is really hardly more than a child - throws herself from the fifth floor of a building and crashes onto the street.

She is stretched out lifeless on a bed.

Her husband sits by her pillow. He thinks of the past and tries to understand why his wife has taken her life. He remembers the day they met when she was an orphaned schoolgirl of sixteen; how he quickly decided to marry her - and her girlish diffidence.

After they were married she helped him in the shop where he bought and sold anything of value. She had an insatiable curiosity about everything while he thought only of making money, and bitterly opposed her enthusiasms.

Their first quarrels occurred when she began to make her own decisions about the value of the articles which were offered to them. After one particularly violent scene her gentleness turned to defiance and rebellion. She ran away, but came back again.

As he remembers, all his jealousies and fears return.

He thinks again of the evening she left the house. He put a revolver in his pocket and set out to look for her. He took

her back and persuaded himself that all was well. But in the middle of the night she took the revolver while he slept and pointed it at him. But she did not pull the trigger.

Had she really meant to fire? Did she know that he saw her raise the revolver to his temple? A terrible uncertainty beset them. The nerves of his young wife cracked under the strain. She fell gravely ill and he realized for the first time that he never has truly loved her. At that moment he was filled with love for her, but she no longer seems able to bear him near her.

Then one afternoon during her convalescence when she has shut herself away from him, she begins to sing. At first he is furious, but then hope surges through him. He throws himself at the feet of his young wife. The fault is all his, he tells her. She swears to him that she will be a good and faithful wife.

They make plans. They are going to leave Paris. The road stretches bright before them. This is the moment she chooses to end her life.

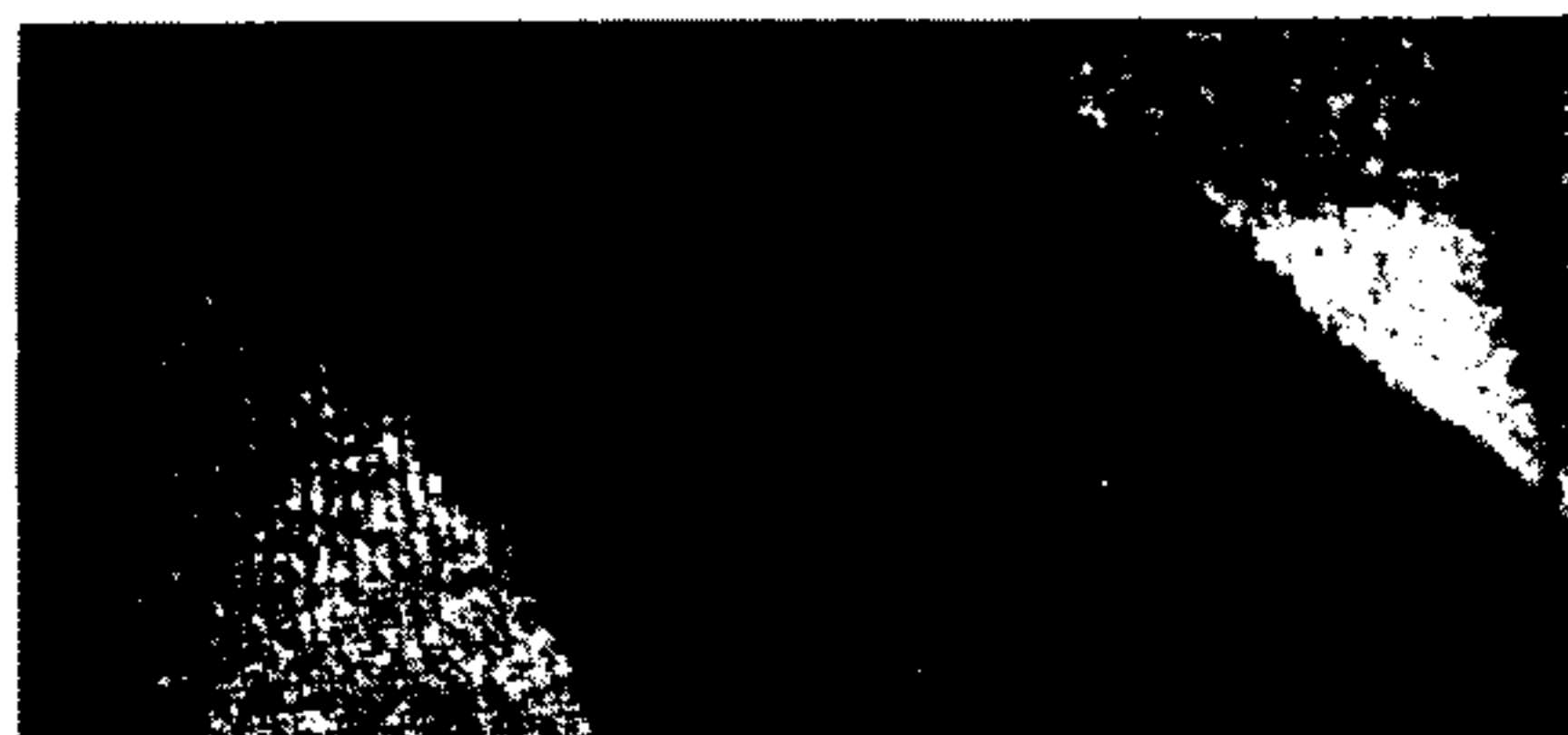
Critique

SUMMARY. *Une Femme Douce*, director Robert Bresson's ninth film (for Bresson's filmography, see *Pickpocket*, FF '69), and his first in color, was initially screened as a Paramount entry in the 1969 New York Film Festival. But after Paramount decided not to release the movie, New Yorker Films acquired the U.S. distribution rights and the picture finally opened in 1971 to considerable critical acclaim. "I'm a Bresson fan," wrote Newsday's Joseph Gelmis. "His *Diary of a Country Priest* and *Pickpocket* and *A Man Escaped* are masterpieces of ascetic, religious intensity. He expresses the inexpressible. His new film is a beautifully restrained, oblique and fragile story of a married couple who never quite understand each other." Declaring that his N.Y. Times' critique was to be taken as "a rave review," Roger Greenspun claimed that the movie was one of Bresson's "greater" films; and because he feared that the director's pictures were "almost totally ignored" by everyone but "film journals," Greenspun went on to explain Bresson's uniqueness — "His movies are austere, relatively static, acted frequently by amateurs whom the director has trained to suppress both facial and vocal expression, and concerned with man's inward life — which they take pains to keep inward." The New Yorker's Penelope Gilliatt also called *Une Femme Douce* one of "Bresson's best films" and one that bore a thematic resemblance to the director's previous work: "The picture is one more in his series of reflections on escape from states of being buried alive." Miss Gilliatt then answered those who have attacked Bresson for his "coldness" by arguing that his style was "frugal" rather than "frigid" and that "he is interested in the postponement of feeling by technical means." Further, Miss Gilliatt contended that Bresson is "an imagist" ("so was Shakespeare") and that he "uses a difficult system that insists on an audience's intelligence." Several critics pointed out that Bresson's films were an acquired taste cultivated so far by only a limited audience: Although Time's critic thought that "*Une Femme Douce* will probably prove to be Bresson's most accessible film," he nevertheless added that the director's "customary stylistic austerity" "may still seem much too calculated for most viewers;" and whereas the Washington Post's Tom Shales personally found that the film's "extreme stylization" achieved a "peculiar and muted truthfulness," "sometimes with a hypnotic effect," he still warned that the majority of moviegoers would respond to the picture with "bewildered boredom." According to the N.Y. Daily News' Wanda Hale, in fact, the film was simply a "dull tale" about characters "who can't communicate with each other . . . so how can they communicate with audiences? — They don't." But most reviewers, including Variety's 'Mosk' (reporting from Paris), were fascinated by the "maverick" director's "spare, rigid style" and, while conceding that Bresson's films were definitely "limited to specialized" audiences, praised *Une Femme Douce* as a welcome addition to "a fine body of work that assures Bresson a place in the

filmic pantheon." Finally, a number of reviewers agreed with Miss Hale that "Dominique Sanda is just possibly the most beautiful movie actress in the world."

Critical Consensus: 7 favorable, 2 mixed, 2 negative.

NEWSWEEK. "We arrive a split second after the awful event. The sunlit Paris balcony is empty. A table falls on its side, dashing a potted plant to the ground. A white shawl floats toward the pavement like a leaf. Cars scream to a sudden stop, and *Une Femme Douce* lies motionless on the street, a trickle of blood from her white forehead the final evidence of her death by suicide. These austere images, each selected with the care of a still-life painter, characterize the work of Robert Bresson, the 64-year-old French director of such masterpieces as *Diary of a Country Priest* and *Pickpocket*, the study of street thieves whose cool tone, nervous energy and stylized simplicity influenced the young French New Wave directors of the 1960s . . . *Une Femme Douce*, a screen translation of a novella by Dostoevski, treats the demonic drives and explosive Slavic passions of the original with a fine French restraint. Bresson transforms his story of a free-spirited young girl and the pawnbroker husband who must possess her into a battle of light and darkness. The young girl with her love of music and art, her desire to live unfettered, struggles against a husband who stalks her soul and body, seeking to add them to his collection of beautiful objects . . . As the husband, Guy Frangin seems more snake than man, a mirthless figure determined to enclose his bride within the perimeter of his iron will. Dominique Sanda, one of the most beautiful women in movies (she played the professor's wife in *The Conformist*) is a study in quiet revolt. Her weapons in this soul-to-soul combat



SANDA

are indifference and silence. She welcomes the attentions of amorous young men, both as an attempt to extend an adolescence abbreviated by a marriage forced on her by poverty and as a ritual of defiance to a husband who has marked her as his captive. In this context, the wife's suicide represents the final gesture of resistance and liberation — the vestal who finally kills herself rather than submit to the tyranny of her conqueror. . . . As with all of Bresson's movies, this one moves in a slow, stately, exacting mode that makes no concessions to the audience's appetite for alleviating humor or accelerated action. Bresson is after the same claustrophobic climate of the original novella and, by keeping us sealed in with his tragic couple, he succeeds. He rewards our forbearance with beauty, intelligence and the high seriousness of a true artist; it is a fair exchange." *Paul D. Zimmerman (6/7/71)*

SAN FRANCISCO CHRONICLE. "If the function of the camera in a motion picture is to tell the story, then *Une Femme Douce* is a movie about doors. Guy Frangin spends more time opening and closing doors, with the camera slavishly following him, than is conscientious. It is probably symbolic of his entrapment of his wife (Dominique Sanda), who commits suicide as her only way out. But it's also very tedious . . . Robert Bresson has taken Dostoyevski's novella *A Gentle Creature* and updated it, but his means of relating the tale is contrived and doesn't ring true. It begins with Miss Sanda's suicide, and then her husband retells the whole story to the housekeeper — ". . . and then she sat there, and then you said, and then I said . . ." dissolves into a flashback . . . Frangin plays a pawnbroker in antiques and *objets d'art*, and a very wooden man. Miss Sanda is a student he persuades to marry him. Both maintain a mask-like countenance throughout the picture. Even when Miss Sanda weeps, she covers her face; when she removes her hands, the mask is back. Again, this may be symbolic: the facial stoniness pointing up, as perhaps nothing else can, the aridity of their lives. Yet this is a negative approach for a visual medium. It is impossible to tell what either character is feeling when you can't see it, especially when the film is short on dialogue, as this one is." *Anitra Earle (11/19/71)*.

CUE. "Robert Bresson is one of the most interesting of the French directors, and he is also one whose style evokes sharply different responses from viewers. This study of a woman and a relationship, based on a story by Dostoevsky, is a beautifully wrought work in the Bresson manner — simple, thoughtful, controlled. He is concerned with a woman who commits suicide, and with the efforts of her husband to understand why. The director's use of flashbacks into the woman's life and into the existence she shared with her husband parallels the man's mental searching. I didn't find the relationship depicted particularly convincing, and this set up a block for me. However, Dominique Sanda is quite lovely as the girl, and this factor in itself gives the movie a special quality. Guy Frangin portrays the husband vividly . . . Anyone seriously interested in the French directorial scene would do well to see this example of Bresson's kind of filmmaking." *William Wolf (5/29/71)*.

VILLAGE VOICE. "Robert Bresson's four latest films, beginning with *The Trial of Joan of Arc*, exhibit a profound change of theme from his earlier ones. The intense inner struggle of his central characters virtually disappears and there emerges an increasingly languid longing for death. The most powerful sequences of the earlier films were the concrete manifestations of the inner struggle . . . There was a sense of spiritual progression, the soul's pilgrimage toward salvation, and a blinding, momentary glimpse of grace. But in *Une Femme Douce* there is no ecstasy, only a barely perceptible relief, in the defenestration which begins and ends the picture, and the most memorable image is not that of escape, but the constant physical presence of the corpse, the luminously pale flesh, the voluptuousness of death itself. By a perverse paradox bordering on necrophilia, *Une Femme Douce* is at once the most frigid and most sensual of all of Bresson's films . . . From the Dostoevsky short story, Bresson has borrowed and transformed the young wife into a creature so mute and private as to render ludicrous all human speech, a child of grace trapped in the despair of a mortal body. Bresson's gentle wife is, by her own admission, incapable of love, and her contempt extends beyond the fatuous self-deceptions of her pawnbroker husband to the whole world . . . Although the picture was shot in color and in contemporary Paris, it is the starkest, most airless, and most unreal of Bresson's films. The environment has been purified of extraneous particles like a scientist's laboratory, [and] the remarkable color — the palpable fabrics and opalescent skin tones — suffuse the senses while excluding the mind and emotions . . . What dialogue there is, and Bresson avoids it whenever he can, has been flattened out into a kind of neutral, monaural effect which is almost risible. The girl lives on a higher spiritual plane than the husband who 'saves' her. He resents her moral superiority and freezes her natural generosity. By mistrusting her and closing off certain outlets, he accelerates her suicide, but he cannot be held responsible. For she exists only to die; not to suffer and die and in some small way to redeem life, but as a reproach to life. The girl, incidentally, played by Dominique Sanda, is the most prepossessing and, to my way of thinking, least beautiful of Bresson's heroines, for beauty, like grace, is a quality of soul which must be earned . . . If *Au Hasard, Balthazar* was for me the fullest revelation of Bresson, a miraculous fusion of the earthly and the mystical, it also contained the seeds of further rarefaction and isolation. Bresson has wound himself tighter and tighter in the language he himself perfected until the language, which was once the perfect expression of his vision, has become, deadpan and deathly, the vision itself. Bresson's rejection of culture and psychology and all the vulgar tongues which film customarily employs, has led to a self-imprisoning Esperanto. Cinema is impure because communication is impure. Distortion is in the air — in the ears of the listener, the eyes of the beholder. Pure cinema, like the absence of communication, is death. It is in the absence of communication between two human beings in *Une Femme Douce* that Bresson, ironically and perversely, seems to take deepest delight." *Molly Haskell (New York Film Festival—10/2/69)*.

'Femme' Arrives

"Une Femme Douce," at the 5th Ave. Cinema, is by Robert Bresson, perhaps the most restrained film-maker now working, taken from a Dostoyevsky story. The combination can only be called extraordinary in its dead-quiet dealing with the suicide of a young wife (Dominique Sanda) and the puzzlement of her husband (Guy Frangin). Thus we have the most sensational — and it's not wholly explained—given an exterior of glacial, death-like calm.

Miss Sanda's performance is marvelously evocative, though the air of mystery is never dispelled. M. Frangin's husband is equally awash in suppressed emotion.

It has, of course, been amply proved that general audiences find these Robert Bresson methods baffling, not to say boring. By the same token, those who bring enough with them find themselves powerfully stimulated by these same controlled measures.

There is absolutely no one who makes a picture like Bresson, all of one piece, like something chiselled out of granite, though obviously incorporated in well-chosen flesh, for this Dominique Sanda is a lovely girl, about

'Une Femme Douce'

A New Yorker Films release. Produced by Mag Bodard. Directed and written by Robert Bresson. Story by Dostoyevsky. Cast: Dominique Sanda, Guy Frangin and Jone Lobre. 87 minutes. MPAA Rating: None.

as un-actress-y as a person could be.

In short, this is a picture to be seen by all who appreciate film artistry of the least usual sort.

* * *

Further marking this program as the city's rarest is a long short, "Tauw" by the Senegalese Ousmane Sembene whose "Mandabi" opened eyes to the beginning of African film-making. Again Sembene looks sharply, critically at his poorest natives, introducing detailed observations that have the attribute of art, being both universal and unique to Africa as it emerges to self-observation. The combinations of beauty, grace, poverty, and personal conflict prove utterly fascinating as Sembene sees them.

ARONER WINSTEN

New Films ^{5/29/71}

U NE FEMME DOUCE—(*New Yorker*)
At the Fifth Avenue Cinema.
In French; English titles. Robert Bresson is one of the most interesting of the French directors, and he is also one whose style evokes sharply different responses from viewers. This study of a woman and a relationship, based on a story by Dostoevsky, is a beautifully wrought work in the Bresson manner—simple, thoughtful, controlled. He is concerned with a woman who commits suicide, and with the efforts of her husband to understand why. The director's use of flashbacks into the woman's life and into the existence she shared with her husband parallels the man's mental searching. I didn't find the relationship depicted particularly convincing, and this set up a block for me. However, Dominique Sanda is quite lovely as the girl, and this factor in itself gives the movie a special quality. Guy Frangin portrays the husband vividly. New York audiences first had exposure to the film when it was shown at the 1969 New York Film Festival. It is only now getting into commercial release. Anyone seriously interested in the French directorial scene would do well to see this example of Bresson's kind of film-making.

—WILLIAM WOLF

THE CURRENT CINEMA

Bresson

A ROCKING chair and a table spill on a balcony, a white shawl floats down through the air, feet run on streets, a girl is dead on the pavement. "She looked eighteen, Anna, remember?" says the voice of her pawnbroker husband to their housekeeper, throwing what we are seeing into the past tense and pulling shock away from us like a rug. Robert Bresson's "Une Femme Douce" begins with the last act; so does the Dostoevski story it is based on. Suspense is smothered from the beginning. It always is in Bresson's films.

We watch the husband, a stingy, self-deceiving man, as he tries to understand what happened to his gentle creature in her revolt. "How dare she leave me!" he shouts in his cramped soul. His notes to us about the past are airy but undecided, as if he were dictating a draft to a stenographer. The film moves backward and forward between the record of his wife alive with him and his upbraiding of the reposeful, rebellious corpse. Her living behavior is ominously both docile and stubborn. She is bent on one of Bresson's characteristic enterprises of privacy. Though only sixteen or eighteen, and though married, she already looks as lonely as anyone on the point of ordinary death. The automatic cry of "Stay with me!" from the other people in the world apparently comes from an unmanageably long way away. In Bresson's films, communication between human beings is a conversation between souls, and it is a sort of talk that she seems long since to have outgrown. Bresson would always show contact welded by a meeting of eyes, and her eyes slide away. She likes books and records. She is deeply caught by a performance of "Hamlet." "What a wounded name, things standing thus unknown, shall live behind me" visibly bites hard. Her stuffy young husband, who happens this time to have free seats to the theatre but generally limits outings to the cinema, looks not much stirred or alert to her, although her response is obviously almost posthumous. "Report me and my cause aright to the unsatisfied": she is Hamlet's kin. She exists already as some sort of rebuke to life. In spite of killing herself, she never seems a victim. It is odd that such a religious director as Bresson could have made such a tale of spiritual victory about such a Catholic sin as suicide.



But maybe the fact is that the picture is really one more in his series of reflections on escape from states of being buried alive. "Le Procès de Jeanne d'Arc," "Le Journal d'un Curé de Campagne," the great "Un Condamné à Mort S'Est Échappé," "Au Hasard, Balthazar"—his stories are about condemned prisoners and hermits and martyrs and overused, gentle animal spirits like the donkey in "Balthazar." He has made films again and again about people walled up in both kinds of cells, criminal and religious. Even in "Pickpocket," the thief hero is a

recluse living in a room the size of a broom cupboard. "Le Journal d'un Curé de Campagne" is the journal of a man trapped in doubt and about to die. The figures who interest Bresson are in states of mind that lead to solitude and that consign them to finding the aura of present reality as dead as the air in a crypt. Then they make their way out. His style is one of extreme frugality, but the effect is mysteriously bountiful. He is concerned with what befalls the self when it knows itself, with the fortunes of intact temperaments pledged to flight. The sumptuously pretty young girl in "Une Femme Douce" feels herself to be as incarcerated as any nun or convict; the cell is her body, which seems to exist for her already in the past. It is as if her bones themselves haunt and repel her by the recollections they call up of the skeletons of beasts long extinct. Like all the main figures in Bresson's best films, she is not in any conventional dramatic conflict. The enemy is not her husband but apathy. The hero of "Un Condamné à Mort S'Est Échappé," imprisoned in Occupied France, is really escaping his own dragging suspicion that there is no escape, and she is doing the same thing. She has a project, and, like the project of the man in "Pickpocket," it makes love something to be refused for the moment. Bresson believes that contact between people is a sort of grace, achieved not through will but through lightness, and the girl and the thief temporarily feel weighted; their project is to lose ballast. The films of Bresson are about ways of staying light, as Susan Sontag has said, and open to the possibility of receiving some other view.

The girl in "Une Femme Douce" is a student without a franc in present-day Paris. She is looking for a job. She

meets her future husband when she pawns her bits and pieces of jewelry. He scorns them, with impregnable self-importance—this is one of the few things that Bresson exactly transcribes from Dostoevski, this comic absence in the man of any sense that he is ludicrous—and impresses her with a quotation from Mephistopheles. He seems to be feeling rather Mephistophelean himself. "I am part of that Power which still doeth good, though scheming ill." He lords it over her. Little does he know how minute the Power is; the girl, whom he patronizes even for the way she words advertisements for jobs, is actually immune to him already. Seeing it as an act of immense manners, he marries her. She makes love gloriously but without any expression whatever. The husband remains closed to signals and grows ratty with her for the mute insolence that he sees creeping into her face. One of his points of congratulation to himself is that he has never compromised where his own happiness is concerned; so has he now betrayed this sacred trust? It perfectly bewilders him that his wife should cause him a pang. It confuses him in all his ideas about wives, and, indeed, about girls altogether. Apart from his real though baffled grief, her suicide induces fury about her having committed an original act when he had always held that women were incapable of originality. Sometimes his natural vanity reasserts itself, in the company of the eerily picketing corpse. You can see the attempts at retort in his face. Is what is lying *there* original? Humph! But sometimes the longing to have her back defeats him. Let her open her eyes once more for a second. Everything was once normal. She was still alive this morning. The film has just shown us the morning's breakfast toaster. "We'll start a new life," Bresson's wooden, ridiculous, tragic man says. "But we ourselves won't be new." There's the flaw. And as he says it, what's more, the suicide that he refuses to take in has already happened, and the girl in the shot is dead. He has tried abusing romantic love, but the truth is that he misses her. "My mistake lies in the ridiculous way men imagine women," he says to the corpse, maintaining severity, and then, "Speak. I'll give you paradise." At the end of the film, he is still pleading with her. The coffin is being closed. But as long as her body is moved from the room everything can still be all right.

The girl, called only "She," was played by a seventeen-year-old model, Dominique Sanda. "He" was played by

Guy Frangin, a painter whom Bresson saw at a gallery opening. Bresson likes using nonprofessionals; he has done the same thing in all but his first two films, "Les Anges du Péché" and "Les Dames du Bois de Boulogne." He rehearses with actors for months to get them to be as expressionless as possible, and the light that glitters through the remaining cracks is blinding. Like Brecht when he was training the Berliner Ensemble company, Bresson wants actors to report, not to represent; with the same unemotional pledge, his photography lets us watch and doesn't comment. He likes to shoot fairly close and from the front, because he wants us to know what's happening in the head of a character. Though his films are put together in a formally planned way, they have the strongest pulse of life. They are not at all like, say, "Last Year at Marienbad." He doesn't take to symbolism. He shows us the physical details of life continuing. When Joan of Arc is about to be burned at the stake, a dog walks around; at historic moments something irrelevant is always happening. He tends to hold still with the camera, so that the movement of a cut in his films begins to have almost the same role as the movement of a camera in other people's. The cuts often happen in startling places. He is an imagist, after all; so was Shakespeare, and Shakespeare also cut at strange moments. Bresson's shots have a very touching sense of the rock-bottom things that his characters are tuned to. In "Le Procès de Jeanne d'Arc" and "Un Condamné à Mort S'Est Échappé" he keeps showing us doors, because the door is the most important thing to someone in prison. In "Une Femme Douce" (photographed by Ghislain Cloquet, and Bresson's first film in color, though one tends to remember it in black-and-white) one sees the girl's

feet and legs again and again as the husband talks—not because Bresson is a foot fetishist, like Buñuel, but because her self has gone, and her self was most nearly in her face. No point in the icon when the meaning has fled.

Bresson is often called a frigid director. It takes a long time for pennies to drop. When he is attacked for coldness, it is as though Brecht and Godard and many of the great poets of our benighted age had done no work. In his own way, but like them, he is exercised to keep us at a distance and to use a difficult system that insists on an audience's intelligence. The Brechtian alienation effect seems to be there in Bresson because he feels that to identify with a character to the extent of imagining oneself someone else would be to commit a sin against the mystery of human temperament and behavior. Freakishly among film directors, form for him lies not in visual composition but in the plan of a narrative. He writes his own scripts now, and anything else has obviously become impossible. He is interested in the postponement of feeling by technical means. Emotion floods in, but later. In "Une Femme Douce," as in a lot of his pictures, he retards things by repeating an action in different time scales. We see an action and then hear the description of it by a figure placed later, or we hear the announcement of a happening and then see it. In "Pickpocket," we watch the hero writing and hear his voice reading his memoirs and then see the event he has already reported. In "Un Condamné à Mort S'Est Échappé," the man in his prison cell comments in recall on small pieces of escape technique that

we have just seen him practicing with a piece of rope and an iron bed. This doubling back is the total method of "Une Femme Douce." There is the untidy, self-satisfied narrative of the husband, who may be smug but isn't thereby protected from puzzling bereftness, and then there is the visible reality of the past, sliced into by what he says. The duplication sets us at a distance that movingly intensifies the charge of what we see.

Bresson endows us with a way of looking at people, like all filmmakers and writers of his rank. His *femme douce*, for instance, who comes to seem a beauty, begins by striking you as immensely plain. So do all of Bresson's big figures. She has been rehearsed and edited so that it is a performance of barest expression. She looks stultified; her life has stalled, and she is trying to move it. She reveals herself in her own time, and then luminously. It is like the transformations in people's faces that strike us after watching Chekhov. When she smiles at herself suddenly in a looking glass—the moment has been so withheld that it seems the only smile in the picture, and as important as some new idea—one begins in a flash, as in life, to find her splendid and reviving. The film has no ready embrace of death, in spite of the sound of the plot. It can't muster the lunging farce of Dostoevski in the voice of the narrator, but it has something all Bresson's in his way of cutting scenes short and then holding shots on empty rooms after the characters have walked out of them. The earth was here long before we were, he says, and it will be here a long time after us. —PENELOPE GILLIATT