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Femme Douce, Une (A Gentle Creature)

France, 1969

Director: Robert Bresson

Cert. AA. *dist.* Academy. *p.c.*: Parc Film/Marianne Productions. *p.*: Mag Bodard. *p. manager*: Philippe Dussart. *assistant d.*: Jacques Kébedian. *scr.*: Robert Bresson. Based on the story *A Gentle Soul* by Fyodor Dostoyevsky. *ph.*: Ghislain Cloquet. *col.*: Eastman Colour. *ed.*: Raymond Lamy. *a.d.*: Pierre Charbonnier. *m.*: Jean Wiener. *sd. ed.*: Urbain Loiseau. *sd. rec.*: Jacques Maumont. *l.p.*: Dominique Sanda (*The Wife*), Guy Frangin (*The Husband*), Jane Lobre (*Anna*). 7,960 ft. 83 mins. *Subtitles*.

A man stands by the body of his wife, who has just committed suicide by jumping from the balcony of their apartment, and recalls their life to Anna, their maid. He remembers the first meeting when she came to his pawnshop and immediately left when he was sarcastic; the second meeting when he gave her more than the object was worth; the third, when she refused extra money. He describes his pursuit of her; how he persuaded her to marry; her early, lively, moments of happiness, the moment when, after she had rejected another man's advances, he was first certain that she loved him. He details the collapse of the marriage: quarrels over her generosity to the pawnshop clients, her increasing absences from the shop, his discovery of her in a car with another man, though she had not been unfaithful. He describes how, after the discovery, she pointed his gun at him but did not shoot; how, as punishment, he bought her a separate bed. He describes her illness, her long convalescence, his decision that they would start a new life together elsewhere. He recalls how, only that morning, she had promised to be a good wife, and regrets not having remained in the apartment. Shortly after he left, she committed suicide.

Bresson's first film in colour, *Une Femme Douce* is on a formal level an essay in counterpoint. The film's structure is dictated by the husband's memories, and the verbal interpretation of the wife's actions is his. But the camera is objective, so that we see for ourselves the gap between his interpretation and reality. The film is fundamentally a study of *accidie*

—spiritual dryness—in the person of the husband. The wife is an independent spirit; the husband is enclosed and embittered. Some explanation is given for this: he says that he resigned his post as a bank manager in consequence of an error he did not commit; but as in, say, *Balthazar* or the Franju/Mauriac *Thérèse Desqueyroux*, bourgeois obsessionism is a metaphor for a spiritual state, not a moral quantity in itself. The husband attempts to control and cage his wife within his own barred vision, even in his moments of generosity. He represents a denial of her spiritual freedom and committing suicide is the only way she can become a 'good wife', annihilating her personality, and simultaneously liberate herself from him. As always, Bresson's film is technically a virtuoso performance. The distinction between the present—the husband talking to Anna—and the past—his memories—is eroded visually as they draw together chronologically. The transitions become less definite, differences in composition diminish, time is gradually unified. This precise control is maintained throughout the film, the linking between shot and shot combining formal consistency and emotional profundity. For example, the sequence where the husband is searching for his wife on the Boulevard Lanne. The first shot is the name-plate of the street, fastened to a grey wall, but the left half of the frame is open to reveal trees in the background. The next shot shows the street, half sunlight, half shadow; the husband walks across into the sun. The next is a bench, shot from a high angle, so that the edge of the bench takes up the motif of the line. The metaphysical implications of light and dark and the dividing line between them are present in these shots, and indeed in the succeeding ones, while not interfering with the measured narrative progression. This subtle articulation of meaning is a logical consequence of Bresson's method of extreme refinement. The real is purified to such an extent that there is no longer a separation between it and the symbolic. The scene where the girl pawns a crucifix with a gold cross is a case in point. They are framed alternately by the scales in which the husband weighs the cross—a beautiful evocation of materialism—and the balance takes on an allusive function, describing the relationship between the couple and hinting at emotional disparity. Bresson rarely lapses into the more strident notes of overt symbolism. Perhaps it is over-critical to say that the use of slow-motion for the falling scarf at the end, representing the continuing life of the soul, is a little heavy, but Bresson's tonal elevation arouses an exceptionally purist response. Bresson's austere camera and his exquisite sense of meaningful repetition have greatly influenced Godard's later films and the debt seems to be repaid here in the emphasis on writing, on signs, and the sequences in the cinema (*Benjamin*, also photographed by Ghislain Cloquet), the theatre (*Hamlet*), and the Musée de l'Art Moderne (a kinetic sculpture) where the reactions of the couple are contrasted, his mechanical, hers spiritual. Yet as in *Balthazar*, the iconography of the modern world is used selectively, and objects exist only in so far as they relate to the world of the spirit.

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