



***Une femme douce* by Robert Bresson: Hamlet or Anti-Cinematography**

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Why does a director choose to include the performance of a play in a film? The obvious answer is because he/she has a particular fondness for the play or its author, or because it throws light on the story that he/she is telling. Who could imagine that a director would use precious time to shoot a play in order to criticize it or the way it is acted? Yet that is precisely what Robert Bresson does in *Une femme douce*¹ (1969), his ninth feature film, the first he shot in colour.

Just after the opening credits, the film starts with the suicide of a young woman who jumps from a balcony. Bresson pursues the narrative from her husband's point of view. Standing next to her corpse, in the company of their maid, he reminisces about their first meetings and short-lived marriage, trying to make sense of her act. Bresson chooses to show the couple at the theatre, watching the end of a performance of *Hamlet*, just as the first tensions have appeared between them, the husband suspecting his wife of being unfaithful.

Even if the excerpt from *Hamlet* is restricted to five minutes towards the middle of *Une femme douce*, the play, I would suggest, irradiates the film, since it is impossible not to notice some similarities between both works, especially between the characters of Ophelia and the “gentle woman”². After exploring those thematic connexions, I shall discuss how Bresson's idiosyncratic, aesthetic concept of “cinematography” underlies

1. The film is diversely referred to as *A Gentle Woman* or *A Gentle Creature* in the English-speaking world (see the Internet Movie Database). It has long been unavailable on video and has never been released in DVD format. Hence I have chosen to retain the original title in the present article.
2. The characters of the husband and the wife are unnamed in Dostoevsky's novella and in Bresson's film. Echoing the title, I shall refer to the wife as “the gentle woman”, though, in the film, she is not really gentle or tame (unlike in the novella), and Bresson

the choice of Shakespeare's play. The excerpt from *Hamlet* has a didactic purpose for Bresson: it functions as a lesson of cinematography and as a condemnation both of cinema as it was practiced by other filmmakers and theatre when it is poorly directed.

Different kinds of echoes are to be found in *Une femme douce*, visual, diegetic, textual or in terms of characterization. Bresson adapts a novella by Dostoevsky, "A Gentle Creature" (1876), into the Paris of the 1960s. In Dostoevsky's work, a forty-one-year-old man, who is a pawnbroker by trade, marries a sixteen-year-old girl he has met in his shop. Soon after the wedding, he tells her they will only go to the theatre once a month because it is expensive. Dostoevsky mentions Offenbach's *Songbirds* (Russian title of *La Périchole*) but never refers to *Hamlet*. In the film, the age gap between the two characters is less marked. Dominique Sanda plays an impoverished student, an orphan who lives with relatives of hers who have her scrub their floors. The young woman looks seventeen, the husband tells us, implying that she is slightly older. Guy Frangin, who plays the pawnbroker, seems to be about thirty. The husband tells his wife that they will go to the cinema when she wants, but rarely to the theatre because it is too expensive.

In the film, the *Hamlet* performance has the status of "retro-prospective" embedded narrative, to adopt Lucien Dällenbach's terminology, which means that it "reflects the story by revealing events both before and after its point of insertion in the narrative"³. Except for the embedded narrative, a number of similarities with *Hamlet* are visual ones. Bresson may have added them intentionally or not, influenced by performances of the play or by representations of the characters in other arts. Among the visual echoes, Dominique Sanda's youth, blonde hair and ivory skin take pride of place. Jean-Michel Frodon writes that "her moving beauty changes nothing to the impression of infinite sadness that emanates from her as soon as she appears: the paleness of a dead woman, the evanescence of a drowned body floating on water (she evokes Ophelia long before we attend a performance of *Hamlet*)"⁴. The whiteness of her skin (see Plate 1) recalls a dead body as much as it does an ivory statue or a nude in a painting,

stated that the title is ironic. See Charles Thomas Samuels, *Encountering Directors*, New York, G. P. Putnam & Sons, 1972 (retrieved on 14 November 2010 from <www.mastersofcinema.org/bresson/Words/CTSamuels.html>).

3. Lucien Dällenbach, *The Mirror in the Text*, trans. Jeremy Whiteley and Emma Hughes, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1989, p. 60.

4. "[L]a beauté émouvante ne change rien à l'effet de tristesse infinie qui émane d'elle dès la première apparition : une pâleur de morte, une évanescence de noyée au fil de l'eau (elle évoque Ophélie bien avant qu'on assiste à une représentation d'*Hamlet*)", Jean-Michel Frodon, *Robert Bresson*, Paris, Le Monde/Cahiers du Cinéma ("Grands Cinéastes"), 2007, p. 66. Translations are mine, unless otherwise stated.

which is quite significant of the way her husband sees her as an object of pleasure: “je ne cherchais que la possession de son corps”—“I only sought the possession of her body”.



Plate 1: The paleness of a dead woman in *Une femme douce* (dir. Robert Bresson, 1969)

Flowers are forever associated with Ophelia in the play as in collective imagination, mainly owing to the famous painting by John Everett Millais. The gentle woman holds a splendid bunch of daisies that she eventually discards and abandons on the side of the road.

As for characterization, a parallel has been drawn between the pawnbroker and Claudius. In a recent article, Guillaume Lafleur notes that, during the performance of *Hamlet*, the husband moves his lips at the moment when the king talks about the poison that he is slipping into Hamlet’s cup and pronounces Hamlet’s name⁵. The parallel between the pawnbroker and Claudius seems well-founded: both of them are the cause of the misfortunes that befall people around them; both control the finances and wield authority. The fact that he moves his lips at that precise moment may well be a matter of chance: indeed, he does so several times, like someone who is trivially moistening his lips, and there is no synchrony with any significant line. Lafleur’s interpretation is nonetheless very attractive.

In the diegesis of the film, the gentle woman’s health worsens as Ophelia’s mental health does. In the play and the film, the exact reason for that decline remains uncertain: for Ophelia, is it her father’s murder by the man she loves? Is it the fact that Hamlet brutally rejects her? Or is it

5. Guillaume Lafleur, “Contre le théâtre (tout contre). Le cadre et la scène dans *Une femme douce* de Robert Bresson”, *French Forum* 35.1, 2010, p. 82.

both? In Bresson's work, the gentle woman feels more and more stifled by the tedious life she lives with her narrow-minded husband. They seem to have little in common: they have opposed points of view, especially on the importance of money. She married him without love, possibly to escape the Cinderella-like enslavement in which her relatives kept her. Yet the marriage seems to have started off rather happily: in the wedding night scene, she laughs and jumps on the bed, but in the voice-off commentary, her austere new husband states that he "threw cold water on this elation" ("j'ai jeté de l'eau froide sur cet enivrement"). He then devises a savings plan which is of no interest to her since, unlike him, she despises money. Far from the materialism of the pawnbroker, she is curious about all forms of art as well as natural history. Dissension slowly settles in, until the husband suspects his wife of being unfaithful (the spectator will never know if she was). Out of provocation, he leaves a gun on a table in their bedroom, lies down and feigns sleep. She seizes the gun, walks up to him and points the weapon at him, unsure whether to fire it or not. He opens and closes his eyes for a fraction of a second, so that he does not know if she has seen him watching her with a gun in her hand. But then she cannot doubt that he saw her so close to murdering him when he obliges her to sleep in a separate bed. It is after that episode that the young woman falls ill, probably suffering from depression. Is guilt gnawing at her? Is it the prospect of living her entire life with him? Or despondency brought on by no longer sharing moments of intimacy with her husband, the only aspect of their marital life that seemed to be satisfactory?

A common motif with *Hamlet* appears: singing. "With convalescence she begins to sing in a fashion resembling the demented Ophelia in *Hamlet*"⁶, Lee Atwell notes in *Film Quarterly*. The parallel could not escape an English-speaking critic (who also sees an echo of "the tomb scene from *Romeo and Juliet*" in the way the corpse is "stretched out on a bed"⁷). The gentle woman starts singing to herself in the absence of her husband, much to his dismay when he discovers it. Is this really an allusion to *Hamlet*? Nothing is less certain, since her humming is already present in Dostoevsky's novella.

Later on, she seems to get better and tells Anna, the maid, that she is reconciled with her husband. Yet when the pawnbroker promises her eternal love and devotion and plans a change of life he deems salutary, his wife leaps to her death from the balcony of their marital bedroom. The most obvious common point with the Shakespearean heroine is suicide. The play allows for two interpretations of Ophelia's death: according to

6. Lee Atwell, "Une Femme Douce", *Film Quarterly* 23.4, 1970, p. 55.

7. *Ibid.*

Gertrude, she drowned accidentally (4.7.134-156), while according to the clowns and the priest, she threw herself in the river (“her death was doubtful”, 5.1.209). The deliberate act seems to be the one finding the greatest echo. The gentle woman is linked to water when we see her in her bath, her leg erotically draped on the edge of the bathtub.

Of course she does not drown in her bath, but several other Bressonian characters are dangerously attracted to water. Mouchette, the eponymous heroine of Bresson’s previous film, best exemplifies this⁸. She too commits suicide, or maybe more to the point, she lets death take her. Playing roly-poly on a riverside bank, Mouchette rolls down the grassy slope three times. The last time, she falls in the water like a stone and does not attempt to get out: the river settles very quickly. A long white dress she had just been given and had wrapped around her body gets caught in vegetation: this impromptu shroud is all that remains of Mouchette after the river has swallowed her (see Plate 2). If one were to play *Mouchette* and *Une femme douce* one after the other, the two suicides would only be separated by the opening credits of *Une femme douce*.



Plate 2: The last image of Mouchette (dir. Robert Bresson, 1967)

In the same way, after the opening credits of Bresson’s next film, *Quatre nuits d’un rêveur* (*Four Nights of A Dreamer*, 1971), the heroine is about to throw herself in the Seine from the Pont-Neuf. And in Bresson’s penultimate work, *Le Diable probablement* (*The Devil Probably*, 1977), the teenage hero, Charles, commits suicide, or rather, he has someone kill him, like “the ancient Romans” who “entrusted a servant or friend with the task”, as the character of the psychoanalyst says when Charles wonders

8. *Mouchette* (1967) is Bresson’s last black and white film, and the last to be set in rural France. It is the adaptation of a short novel by Georges Bernanos, *Nouvelle Histoire de Mouchette* (1937).

if he will ever be able to do the deed. Earlier, Charles had tried to drown himself in his bathtub—to no avail, of course.

Thus there is a morbid attraction for destructive water that seems to pervade film after film in the same period as *Une femme douce*, and seems to affect several of Bresson's characters, but not our "gentle Ophelia". This can simply be explained by the fact that Bresson followed Dostoevsky's narrative in which the young wife jumps out of the window and that a suicide in a bath is not very plausible⁹. This suicide acquires all its significance only if it is understood to have helped the gentle woman immediately escape from the prison that the marital home had become—hence it would have been awkward to have her walk through the streets of Paris before she could commit suicide by throwing herself in the Seine, for instance.

Finally, a textual echo of *Hamlet* is heard towards the end of the film when the exhausted-looking husband touches his forehead and calls for sleep, saying "Dormir! Dormir!", which recalls the famous lines "To die, to sleep./ To sleep, perchance to dream" (3.1.66-67). This is of course such a tiny link—a single word—that it may seem far-fetched. Yet what is remarkable is that Bresson makes the pawnbroker feel and say the contrary of what Dostoevsky's character expresses: "I don't feel any inclination to sleep: in grief, overwhelming grief, after the first intense outbursts, one always feels like sleep"¹⁰. Bresson, when adapting the dialogues of a literary work, always tended to shorten, to compact the original sentences. This may be what he did with that passage, but Hamlet's monologue may also have sprung to his mind.

To move on to aesthetic considerations, another similarity between Shakespeare's play and Bresson's film is that Hamlet, the gentle woman and, through her, Robert Bresson, become drama teachers.

Just after the performance of *Hamlet*, as soon as the couple gets home, Dominique Sanda's character seizes a French translation of the play in a bookcase and reads Hamlet's advice to the players at the beginning of 3.2:

I knew it. To be able to bellow during the whole play, they omitted the passage. Hamlet to the players. It's the advice to the players. "Speak the speech, I pray you, as I pronounced it to you—trippingly on the tongue; but if you

9. Robert Bresson underlined the strangeness of Mouchette's death in the river: "What shocked me in the book is that Bernanos made her die by wanting to put her head in the water as if on her pillow in bed. I've never seen anyone committing suicide like that—waiting for death in the water" (Bresson interviewed by Ronald Haymann, London, *Transatlantic Review* 46/7, 1973, retrieved on 14 November 2010 from <www.mastersofcinema.org/bresson/Words/TransAtlanticReview.html>). This is why, in his filmic adaptation, he gave Mouchette's fall into the river the appearance of an accident.

10. Fyodor Dostoevsky, *A Gentle Creature and Other Stories*, trans. Alan Myers, Oxford, Oxford University Press ("Oxford World's Classics"), 2009 [1995], p. 86.



mouth it, as many of your players do, I had as lief the town-crier had spoke my lines. Nor do not saw the air too much with your hand, thus, but use all gently; for in the very torrent, tempest, and as I may say the whirlwind of your passion, you must acquire and beget a temperance that may give it smoothness", etc., etc.¹¹

This quote shows us the gentle woman acting as a drama teacher, and, through her, Bresson proposing a lesson in the art of the cinema or, rather, "cinematography" ("le cinématographe" in French). The word "cinematography" carries specific meaning for Bresson, who expressed his poetics of film-making in a short book of aphorisms, *Notes on Cinematography*, which was published in 1975, as he was reaching the end of his road as a director (he only made two feature films after that). Jonathan Griffin, the translator of the *Notes*, explains that "'cinematography' for Bresson has the special meaning of creative filmmaking which thoroughly exploits the nature of film as such. It should not be confused with the work of a cameraman"¹². The concept started to emerge with Bresson's third film, *Journal d'un curé de campagne* (*Diary of a Country Priest*, 1951). Bresson recurrently opposes his art, "cinematography", to that of all other filmmakers, "cinema". For him, the works of the others are nothing but photographed theatre, for which he feels a knee-jerk repulsion:

The photographed theater or CINEMA requires a *metteur-en-scène* or director to make some actors perform a play and to photograph these actors performing the play; afterwards he lines up the images. Bastard theater lacking what makes theater: material presence of living actors, direct action of audience on the actors¹³.

That is why, from his third film on, he never resorted to professional actors again, after the difficulties he had to make them act according to his

11. "J'en étais sûr. Pour pouvoir crier pendant toute la pièce, ils ont supprimé le passage. Hamlet aux comédiens. C'est le conseil aux comédiens. 'Dites vos répliques du bout des lèvres, comme je les ai prononcées moi-même. Si vous les hurlez comme beaucoup de nos acteurs font, j'aimerais mieux donner mon texte au crieur public. Ne sciez pas l'air de votre main, car dans le torrent, la tempête, l'ouragan de la passion, il faut toujours user de mesure, et acquérir même une certaine douceur', etc., etc."
12. Robert Bresson, *Notes on Cinematography*, trans. Jonathan Griffin, New York, Urizen Books, 1977, p. 2.
13. Bresson, *Notes on Cinematography*, p. 3; translation of "Le théâtre photographié ou cinéma veut qu'un metteur en scène ou *director* fasse jouer la comédie à des acteurs et photographie ces acteurs jouant la comédie; ensuite qu'il aligne les images. Théâtre bâtard auquel manque ce qui fait le théâtre: présence matérielle d'acteurs vivants, action directe du public sur les acteurs", Bresson, *Notes sur le cinématographe*, Paris, Gallimard ("Folio"), 1975, p. 19-20.

principles¹⁴. Henceforth, he chose what he called “models” (“modèles”), that is to say malleable people who had never taken any drama classes. Dominique Sanda was a fashion model when he hired her, and she is one of the rare Bressonian models who went on to become a professional actress. His models often came from the Parisian intellectual bourgeoisie and/or from the artistic milieu. Guy Frangin, for instance, was a painter.

To avoid the diction of theatre, as it has tended to be taught in French drama schools, and which sounds wrong on the big screen, Bresson demanded a monotonous delivery: “Model. Thrown into the physical action, his voice, starting from even syllables, takes on automatically the inflections and modulations proper to his true nature”¹⁵. This approach to acting renders the choice of filming Shakespeare’s play crystal clear, since it enabled Bresson to include Hamlet’s advice to the players which was in perfect harmony with his own precepts¹⁶.

Hamlet actually works as a diptych with another embedded narrative, an excerpt from Michel Deville’s 1968 romantic comedy, *Benjamin ou les mémoires d’un puceau*¹⁷. Not long after the wedding night, Bresson films the couple at a cinema on the Champs-Élysées, watching a scene of flirting and banter between Benjamin and several women. The light-hearted scene from *Benjamin* mirrors the rather harmonious and sensual start to the couple’s marriage. During the show, the gentle woman shuns the advances of a stranger sitting next to her, who tries to touch her thigh, and she decides to exchange seats with her husband to avoid the advances. The stranger’s gesture marks a progress in the diegesis and in the couple’s relationship, in that it is the first time that the pawnbroker is shown to feel jealousy. By way of contrast, during the performance of *Hamlet*, nothing special happens to the protagonists of *Une femme douce*, and one might consider that this passage is unnecessary, even if the tragic atmosphere

14. His confrontation with the tragedian Maria Casarès on the set of *Les Dames du Bois de Boulogne* (1945), his second feature film, remained famous because of a television programme in which she complained of his methods, calling him a “sweet tyrant”. See Joseph Cunneen, *Robert Bresson: A Spiritual Style in Film*, London and New York, Continuum, 2003, p. 41. For Bresson’s account of his work with Casarès, read the interview with Charles Thomas Samuels.

15. Bresson, *Notes on Cinematography*, p. 16 ; translation of “Modèle. Jeté dans l’action physique, sa voix, en partant de syllabes égales, prend automatiquement les inflexions et les modulations propres à sa vraie nature”, Bresson, *Notes sur le cinématographe*, p. 41-42.

16. Keith Reader sees the reading of the advice to the players as a denunciation of the acting style but also of “the self-centred hollowness of the husband’s rhetoric”, Keith Reader, *Robert Bresson*, Manchester, Manchester University Press (“French Film Directors”), 2000, p. 102.

17. Known as *Benjamin: The Diary of an Innocent Young Boy* in the English-speaking world (see The Internet Movie Database).



could be understood to show the decline of the couple's relationship and forebode the ending of their wedding.

Philippe Arnaud writes that "some of [Bresson's] films bear the mark of a disconcerting phobia: sequences which, by their length, their treatment, escape all the rest: the demonstrative return of a loathing, that of 'photographed theatre'"¹⁸ and that those sequences conjure up "bad objects" in an untimely manner. Arnaud, who is referring to the two excerpts under discussion here, finds that the *Hamlet* scene "seems above all to introduce the sentence read [...] by Dominique Sanda. [...] The discrepancy between the length of the sequence and its eventual 'use value' is staggering"¹⁹. Philippe Arnaud is not the only one to judge the length of the *Hamlet* excerpt incongruous. Charles Thomas Samuels, in an interview during which Bresson answered in English, dared voice his doubts:

SAMUELS: This is the first of your films containing allusions to other works: *Faust*, *Hamlet*, etc.

BRESSON: *Hamlet* I included because I hate such theatrical shouting. I have myself seen it performed by a French company that omitted Hamlet's advice to the players because it contradicted their style.

SAMUELS: But I think there is a mistake here. When she goes back to the apartment and reads Hamlet's speech...

BRESSON: I included this to show that she is utterly unconcerned with her husband's feelings and only wishes to annoy him.

SAMUELS: But doesn't the whole business about *Hamlet* stop your film to provide an essay about your theory of acting?

BRESSON: No, I don't think so. Perhaps it is too long, but I simply couldn't cut it.

SAMUELS: It's not that it's boring, but I begin to be puzzled about its function.

BRESSON: It prepares the following scene, as I told you²⁰.

This interview confirms our initial impression: the function of Shakespeare's play is less to provide a *mise-en-abyme* for the story of *Une femme douce* than to illustrate the aesthetic positions of the film author. With *Hamlet*, then, Robert Bresson found an excellent way to apply and demonstrate his aesthetic precepts, which are relevant both to the theatre and to cinema. As far as the aesthetics of theatre is concerned, the perform-

18. "[C]ertains de ses films portent la marque d'une déconcertante phobie : séquences qui échappent, par leur durée, leur traitement, à tout le reste : retour démonstratif d'une aversion, celle du 'théâtre photographié'", Philippe Arnaud, *Robert Bresson*, Paris, Cahiers du Cinéma, 1988, p. 88.

19. "[P]araît surtout introduire la phrase que lit [...] Dominique Sanda. [...] La disproportion de 'rendement' sidère", Philippe Arnaud, *Robert Bresson*, p. 88.

20. Charles Thomas Samuels, *Encountering Directors*, <www.mastersofcinema.org/bresson/Words/CTSamuels.html>.

ance of *Hamlet* was directed by Bresson himself especially for the film²¹. At the end of the sequence, all the spectators who are visible on the screen applaud except the gentle woman (see Plate 3). Lee Atwell interprets this as the sign of intense emotion²².



Plate 3: The pawnbroker and his wife at the end of the performance of *Hamlet* in *Une femme douce* (dir. Robert Bresson, 1969)

Another interpretation, which is more logical given the reading scene that immediately follows, is that she does not applaud because she did not appreciate the show. The look she directs towards the stage is not one of satisfaction. The staging of the *Hamlet* scene is not original, the setting is minimal and the costumes are unremarkably Elizabethan. The scene seems overacted, even if anything would appear overacted in the middle of a film by Bresson, and even if many of us have probably heard worse yelling in a theatre house. The sword is conscientiously planted between the side and the arm of the actor, and deaths are as theatrical as possible: Hamlet takes an extremely unnatural plunge (see Plate 4). In short, from the point of view of theatre, it is not very subtle. That is probably the reason why, although he wanted the scene to be acted that way, Robert Bresson did not include the names of the *Hamlet* actors in the credits: he most likely did not want to make them look ridiculous. Although the names of the actors have not been listed in any of the French monographs available, it appears that the actress playing Gertrude (see Plate 5) was Madeleine Marion, who later became a member of the prestigious state theatre

21. See René Prédal, "Robert Bresson. L'aventure intérieure", *L'Avant-scène cinéma* 408-409, 1992, p. 96.

22. "[F]or Bresson's heroine, the tragedy of *Hamlet* is a deeply moving event", Atwell, p. 56.

Comédie-Française²³. This leads us to think that, in keeping with his views on acting, Bresson hired professionals to be able to demonstrate how bad they sounded on the big screen.



Plate 4: Hamlet plunging to his death in Horatio's arms (left) Claudius and Gertrude (middle) and Laertes (right) during the performance of Hamlet in *Une femme douce* (dir. Robert Bresson, 1969)



Plate 5: Horatio, Gertrude and Claudius in the performance of Hamlet in *Une femme douce* (dir. Robert Bresson, 1969)

23. As no list of the *Hamlet* actors could be found anywhere, a labyrinthine search on the Internet directed me to various tributes to Madeleine Marion (1929-2010) and to her Wikipedia entry in which her participation in *Une femme douce* was documented, without specifying which role she held. The physical resemblance convinced me that she was indeed Bresson's Gertrude. She had played the same role on the stage of the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées in 1960 with Gamil Ratib as Claudius—Bresson's Claudius too? This production may have been the overacted performance Bresson mentioned in the interview with Charles Thomas Samuels. It is referenced in Alice Griffin, "Current Theatre Notes 1959-1960", *Shakespeare Quarterly* 12.1, 1961, p. 77.

From the point of view of cinematography, the *Hamlet* scene is a far cry from Bresson's usual way of filming, which is an aesthetics of fragmentation, relying much on inserts and close-ups. It only presents two types of shots: full and medium. Once the performance is over, we go back to a more Bressonian way of filming: medium shot on the gentle woman, then insert shot on the book (close-up, see Plate 6), return to the gentle woman, then insert shot on the page (extreme close-up), showing Hamlet's advice to the players, and finally return to the gentle woman.

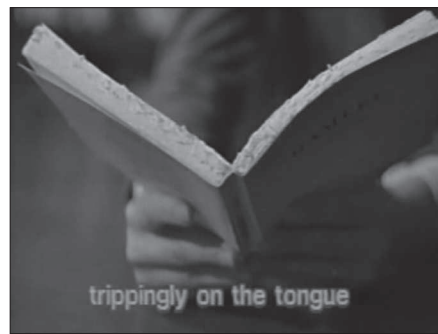


Plate 6: *The book held by Dominique Sanda in Une femme douce (dir. Robert Bresson, 1969)*

The extreme close-up on the book allows the spectator to see that Dominique Sanda is reading André Gide's translation, which was published by the Paris-based house Gallimard in 1946. It is the same translation that features in the prestigious "Pléiade" collection and that is indeed played by the actors in the previous scene. The close-up seems to testify to a relationship of trust with books: it is the filmic equivalent of a quotation between inverted commas, showing that the authentic text is the one which is printed on the page. However, Bresson is no stickler for text. He slightly modifies Gide's translation which he uses for the filmed performance, by cutting out a few lines and making the text sound more modern. He was a booklover: his works are peppered with such close-ups on all kinds of volumes²⁴. In *Une femme douce*, he shoots an art book, a natural history book and a volume on birds. "For Bresson, everything that is summoned before the camera is given the same status: it is equally important to film a face, a hand, a donkey, a tree or an object"²⁵. The book on birds made

24. Apart from the close-ups, his love for books is also conveyed by the fact that almost all his screenplays are literary adaptations. See "Bresson et les livres" ("Bresson and books") in Frodon, *Robert Bresson*, p. 28.

25. "Pour Bresson, toute chose convoquée devant la caméra accède au même statut : il est aussi important de filmer un visage, une main, un âne, un arbre, un objet", Philippe Arnaud, *Robert Bresson*, p. 77.



me realize that, when Dominique Sanda is reading Hamlet's advice to the players, the way the open book is filmed makes it look like the outline of a bird (see Plate 6). This might be another sign that the gentle woman is a bird in a cage: she wears a dressing gown adorned with birds, and she reads the book about birds aloud just before the scene where she leaps out of the balcony—in a way, she dies by trying to fly away...



Plate 7: The suicide scene in Une femme douce (dir. Robert Bresson, 1969): first shot



Plate 8: The suicide scene in Une femme douce (dir. Robert Bresson, 1969): second shot



Plate 9: The suicide scene in *Une femme douce* (dir. Robert Bresson, 1969): third and last shot

The sequence of the young woman's suicide is composed of three shots: the table falling and the rocking chair vacillating on the balcony from which she has just jumped (see Plate 7), the white stole floating in the air and slowly falling (see Plate 8), and at ground level, cars stopping, legs rushing towards the body and the red blood stain, probably the only splash of bright colour in the whole film (see Plate 9). With its slow and gracious movements, the white stole floats in the air much as Ophelia's clothes float in the water. It also recalls Mouchette's long white dress when she fell into the river. Against the light blue sky, the white stole symbolises the body that we do not see, as well as the flight of the soul²⁶.

This leads to a key point in the aesthetics of Bresson's cinematography: how to film death. In *Une femme douce*, death is shown in two opposed manners: in the filmed theatre, agony and death are plain for all to see, whereas in Bresson's cinematography, the moment when life leaves the character's body is never visible, with the notable exception of his 1974 film *Lancelot du Lac* (*Lancelot of the Lake*)²⁷. "Bresson's writing is characterized by ellipsis and hiding"²⁸, Gérard Lenne writes. Gertrude, Claudius, Laertes, Hamlet, all of them perish on stage before the greedy eye of the

26. René Prédal emphasizes the parallel between the white scarf, the bird flights in *Mouchette* and the two white doves fluttering away from Joan's stake in Robert Bresson's *Procès de Jeanne d'Arc* (*The Trial of Joan of Arc*, 1962), René Prédal, "Robert Bresson. L'aventure intérieure", p. 19.

27. Bresson does the exact opposite of what he did before and would do again with death: he plunges the spectator in gory horror with a beheading in the first seconds of *Lancelot*.

28. "L'écriture de Bresson se caractérise par l'ellipse et la cache", Gérard Lenne, *La Mort à voir*, Paris, Éditions du Cerf ("7^e Art"), 1977, p. 96.

spectator. And it is only natural, since piling up bodies is part and parcel of the tragedy genre. But Bresson refuses to indulge the scopic drive of the audience, refuses to represent the irrepresentable. When asked, by writer François Weyergans, what he thought of death in cinema, Bresson answered: “I think it must not be shown. One must show its consequences, that is to say, stillness [...]. But one must not show a person dying because it is impossible to do so”²⁹. Not only is death irrepresentable but also, when it is thus eluded, it produces a greater impact on the spectator. As Jean-Louis Provoyeur writes, “the ellipsis and the off-camera suicide, the non preparation of the event, its unpredictability [...] give the irruption of violence and death the power of a monstrous and archaic riddle”³⁰. The priest in *Diary of a Country Priest*, Joan in *The Trial of Joan of Arc*, Mouchette, the gentle woman, Charles in *The Devil Probably*, the woman murdered at the end of *L’Argent* (*Money*, 1983), even the donkey, hero of *Au hasard Balthazar* (1966): every time, Bresson allows us to see the living body, sometimes the dead body; we are never allowed to witness the mysterious passage from one state to the other.

Even if Bresson was a well-read admirer of great texts, his aim in staging the ending of *Hamlet* was not to highlight the beauty of Shakespeare’s text. In an iconoclastic manner, he chose to paint Shakespeare’s theatre under a bad light: that of a poorly acted and filmed performance, which obliterates the energy of immediacy and of the electrifying presence of the actor throwing himself to the spectators. Let us be clear, “far from despising scenic arts, [Bresson] appreciates theatre very much. ‘Filmed theatre’ is what he hates”, a 91-year-old Bresson vigorously stated in 1992³¹. After *Une femme douce*, he played the cinematography teacher again in *Four Nights of a Dreamer* (1971) where the heroine unwillingly finds herself in a cinema, watching a gangster movie displaying the agony of its protagonist, who finally expires in a pool of blood.

29. “Je pense qu’il ne faut pas la montrer. Il faut montrer ses conséquences, c’est-à-dire l’immobilité [...]. Mais il ne faut pas montrer une personne qui meurt parce que ce n’est pas faisable”. The then-unknown François Weyergans directed an episode of the television documentary series “Cinéastes de notre temps” (“Film-makers of Our Time”), *Robert Bresson : Ni vu ni connu*, in 1965. Quoted in Jean-Louis Provoyeur, *Le Cinéma de Robert Bresson : de l’effet de réel à l’effet de sublime*, Paris, L’Harmattan, 2003, p. 310.

30. “[L]’ellipse et le hors-champ, la non-préparation de l’événement, son imprévisibilité [...] donnent à l’irruption de la violence et de la mort la puissance d’une énigme monstrueuse et archaïque”, Jean-Louis Provoyeur, *Le Cinéma de Robert Bresson*, p. 310.

31. “[L]oin de mépriser les arts de la scène, [Bresson] apprécie beaucoup le théâtre. C’est le ‘théâtre filmé’ qu’il déteste”, René Prédal, *Robert Bresson*, p. 137. Bresson proofread R. Prédal’s manuscript and corrected his assertion that he hated theatre.

Bresson's didactic use of a Shakespeare play seems to be unique, at least among appropriations of a Shakespeare play in French cinema. Are the other echoes voluntary on his part? He never explained. For audiences (English-language or not) familiar with Shakespeare, the irradiation undoubtedly produces its effect.

The ultimate link between Hamlet and the gentle woman is their essential questioning: what is being human, living, dying? While Hamlet ponders the question "To be or not to be?" and confronts Yorick's skull in the graveyard, the gentle woman is absorbed in her natural history book, only to realize that all beings are made up of "the same raw material" ("la même matière première"). Hamlet and *Une femme douce* illustrate Bresson's thoughts, since a similar essential search, spelt out in the *Notes on Cinematography* with the same words as in *Une femme douce*, is at the core of his work as a filmmaker: "Not to shoot a film in order to illustrate a thesis, or to display men and women confined to their external aspect, but to discover the matter [matière] they are made of. To attain that 'heart of the heart' which does not let itself be caught either by poetry, or by philosophy or by drama"³².



Plate 10: The couple at the Paris National Museum of Natural History in *Une femme douce* (dir. Robert Bresson, 1969)

The gentle woman confirms her realization when she wanders between rows of animal skeletons at the Paris National Museum of Natural History

32. Bresson, *Notes on Cinematography*, p. 20. "Ne pas tourner pour illustrer une thèse, ou pour montrer des hommes et des femmes arrêtés à leur aspect extérieur, mais pour découvrir la matière dont ils sont faits. Atteindre ce 'cœur du cœur', qui ne se laisse prendre ni par la poésie, ni par la philosophie, ni par la dramaturgie", Bresson, *Notes sur le cinématographe*, p. 48.



(see Plate 10). She discovers that, as Hamlet says, man is nothing more than “the paragon of animals” (2.2.297). If, as Jean Sémolué writes, “from start to finish, *Une femme douce* remains the film of doubt, of unanswered questions”³³, the gentle woman seems to have found *her* answer to the question “To be or not to be?”.



33. “*Une femme douce* reste du début à la fin le film du doute, des questions sans réponse”, Jean Sémolué, *Bresson ou l'acte pur des métamorphoses*, Paris, Flammarion, 1993, p. 182.



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