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Le Diable Probablement

by **Robert Bresson**

NY Film Festival

Le Diable Probablement (*The Devil Probably*) is a very fine film. Two viewings are not sufficient to place it within Bresson's "oeuvre," but I suspect it may be his most completely realized film since *Au Hazard*, *Balthazar*. The narrative, written by Bresson (one of his only films not based in a literary source) begins with newspaper headlines which announce the death of the protagonist, Charles (extraordinarily embodied by Antoine Monnier), first as a suicide and then as a murder. The film then traces the last six months of his life through his final act of ambiguous volition: incapable of pulling the trigger himself, he hires a junky acquaintance to do it for him.

The film, as all of Bresson's films since *Balthazar*, focuses on youth and it is evident that Bresson is more than sympathetic to his heroes and heroines. He is erotically and emotionally infatuated with their ascetic beauty, with the lines of spare shoulders and thin arms, with wrists grown too long for their jacket sleeves, with the purity and absoluteness of bodies and sensibilities that have not yet and

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perhaps will never have a notion of the comfortableness, of the mellowing (or corruption, depending on how you look at it) of maturity and age.

Le Diable Probablement is an immersion in the psychological state of shame. Its protagonists have been born into an ecological disaster whose acceleration they are powerless to prevent. The most intelligent of them (Charles) rejects the pat answers of Marxist revolution, the New Church, psychoanalysis, and the pseudo-anarchism of the chic "anti-oedipus" cult of the French intellectuals. In an unusually direct manner Bresson presents us (and them) with a catalog of newsreel footage of oil-drenched birds, slaughtered seals, dying forests, nuclear disasters, smoke-covered landscapes. There is an agonizingly painful sound-image montage cross-cut between Charles holding his ears to keep out the sound of the sawing and falling of trees and the images of them falling to the ground one by one.

Since "answers" are transparently false, there is nothing left but to do nothing; but to do nothing in the face of such agony is to plunge into shame and self-hatred at one's impotence. In the two or three films before this one, Bresson's very particular and striking camera, a camera of mimesis, desiring to be as close as possible to the human eye, to the gaze of its protagonist, has seemed somewhat mannered. Here, those shots of feet and waists and floor and doorknobs are clarified. This is a camera of shame, as reluctant and unable to gaze directly at its subjects as they are to gaze into the faces of their comrades and lovers. As Charles covers his ears and bows his head before the fallen trees, Bresson bows his camera. They both are raised only in a sudden barely suppressed rage at the enemy or in

an ironic confrontation with the despair of the void. And as we realize the implication of this gaze, it becomes more and more painful for us to lift our eyes to the screen; we become ashamed of our role as spectator.

The sexual-love relationships of the film are also conditioned by this state. Each of the four protagonists tries to return the love of the one who loves her/him best, but is sexually attracted only to the one who partially rejects her/him. Thus Michel desires Alberte who desires Charles who desires Edwige. But it is Charles who, through the extremity and purity of his position, captures the energy of the other three, who can do no more to prevent his self-destruction than he can to prevent the destruction of the natural world.

I have two minor quarrels with the film. First, the older people, the psychoanalysts, scientists, teachers, etc. are needlessly caricatured in a way which weakens the film's position. Second, I am somewhat sickened by Bresson's repeated idealization of the slave-woman, following, head bowed, two or three paces behind her lover with the composure of masochistic self-abnegation.

Nevertheless, *Le Diable Probablement* is an extraordinary film from a great filmmaker. Now someone just better release it.

(A retrospective of Bresson's films is being held this week, Tuesday through Friday, at the French Institute/Alliance Francaise. See Film Listings for daily programs.)