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THE DEVIL PROBABLY

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The *Devil Probably*, Robert Bresson's 1977 feature (it's never played in Boston before), begins with a nighttime shot of a boat prowling down the Seine, its outline barely visible in the penumbra of its glaring headlights, which look like demonic teeth and eyes. It's an apt opening image for this profoundly pessimistic film, which is the closest Bresson has ever come to an expression of utter hopelessness. During a conversation among strangers about the awful state of the world, someone asks who's presiding over this mess, and another man answers, "The devil probably."

The film examines, in one large flashback, the suicide/murder of a young student dropout, Charles (Antoine Monnier), a habitué of the Left Bank. During the last six months of his life, Charles slips deeper and

deeper into a horrified rejection of a world where, on the one hand, God's natural treasures — wildlife, forests, rivers — are brutally destroyed and, on the other, the prevailing orthodoxies — "liberal" Catholicism, politics, psychoanalysis — can no longer infuse life with the optimism (or grace, really) that might help a believer fight this desecration. The world's profanity poisons even Charles's attempts at romance, as he bounces between the patient Alberte (Tina Iriscari), an ecology activist, and Edwige (Laetitia Caranco), a rich girl who belongs to a destructive group of political radicals. Charles's violent end, inevitable though we know it to be, is still shocking, in part because the sublimity he hopes for in death eludes him. The film's final image — in a cemetery — is literally a void, a darkness that sucks up everything human.

But it's only in the opening and closing moments that Bresson achieves his usual eloquence. For one thing, this elder font of spirituality doesn't seem to have the faintest idea of how denizens of the student underworld might carry on. Although most at home in rural villages, Bresson has given us convincing portraits of prison (*A Man Escaped*), the Parisian underworld (*Pickpocket*), the urban petite bourgeoisie (*Une femme douce*), and, once before, student bohemia (*Four Nights of a Dreamer*). Here, the bogusness of the milieu undermines the credibility of the characters' spiritual crises; an obviously unreal figure can't undergo a convincing damnation. Bresson also reverts to moments of caricature that just don't work, as when a psychiatrist is revealed to keep a drawer full of money and uncashed checks. In the end, Charles's decline seems schematic and arbitrary.

The Bresson film before *The Devil Probably*, *Lancelot du Lac*, had charted the decline of the world's precious religiosity, so perhaps his quandary as a director has come to this: how many films can you make about an empty world? His most recent movie, *L'argent*, draws its power from the redemptive possibilities he finds even in the most degraded situations (the hero becomes a violent criminal). There is a hint of similar possibilities in *The Devil Probably*, with its group of saintly ecology advocates — their efforts to preserve the world are seen as wholly laudable (or, as Bresson might prefer, laudably holy). Still, the bright-eyed idealism is sloughed onto supporting characters. It's Charles, speaking for Bresson perhaps, who asks the unanswered question: "What can you do about it now?" *Playing Friday and Saturday, March 7 and 8, at the Carpenter Center.*

— Henry Sheehan