



**OF SIN AND SALVATION:
THE CINEMA OF ROBERT BRESSON**

The Devil, Probably (Le Diable probablement)

SPOILER WARNING The following notes give away some of the plot.

Contemporary reviews

Having made his decision to trust his cellmate, the condemned man puts his escape plan into practice and drops barefoot over the prison wall: as the man padded to freedom, the long silence of the preceding sequence was broken by a few bars of Mozart's C Minor Mass. Twenty years on, Bresson's view of grace and salvation has grown less and less optimistic; now, as Charles and Valentin make their last, virtually silent journey across Paris to Père-Lachaise a journey no less taut and redolently atmospheric than the final sequence in *Un condamné à mort s'est échappé*, the former prepares to leave the world to which the condemned man so ardently strove to return.

Having left the metro and taken his condemned man's last glass of cognac, Charles walks along a dark street and pauses before a half-open shutter to look in at a television: we hear a snatch of Mozart and in that brief moment the beauty of the world which Bresson believes so irrevocably lost is conjured before us. Charles goes to his death with the serenity – though their circumstances are different – of all Bresson's noble suicides; and yet, because of the density, abstraction and circumscription of the world in which we find him, this slouched, long-haired young man is perhaps the most difficult of all the director's protagonists for us to love and understand.

This disenchanted, occasionally devious ex-student, solemnly played by the long-faced Antoine Monnier, has when we meet him already begun the spiritual decline which his earnest friends cannot, try as they may, prevent. Bresson lays before us a matrix of visual reference-points – lifts, stairwells, gadgets, groups of chairs, the repeated motif of the Seine – which serves to define Charles' world with an astonishingly economic sense of its spiritual aridity. A cathedral is a lifeless edifice requiring most fittingly the attentions of a vacuum cleaner; to feed ourselves we must raid refrigerators; we embrace beside noxious roadsides; our protests seem pointless – indulging in childish blasphemy, ranting in darkened cellars; we must even, Bresson suggests in a scene at the beginning of the film in which Charles lectures a man on the wear-and-tear of shoes, re-learn how to walk. It is a remarkable event when a live fish is caught in the Seine in a stretch of the river where the police are required to chase away bathers. A clubbed baby seal; what seems like a whole forest of tall trees felled for profit; a victim of Minamata; the seas awash with the effluent of tankers: everywhere a loss of faith.

This vision of the modern world is not, however, entirely given over to despair: a group of young people still contrive to show a touching and all-consuming concern for each other, and particularly for the lost and rudderless Charles; and he, too, in one of those scenes of simple human compassion of which Bresson is master, is capable of helping someone less fortunate than himself-Valentin, whom he takes home, feeds, puts to bed and then supplies with

more drugs. It is a characteristic Bressonian irony: the act of compassion is important and not necessarily the substance of that act.

Filmed in lowering colours with a predominance of faded greens and shades of brown, *Le Diable probablement* presents us with a painterly, enervated vision of a society in which man has submitted to science and lost his will even, it seems, to fight for his own survival. There is no solution. Bresson's God, like Bergman's, is a silent god: and one goes to meet him because there is no alternative but with no firm surety of salvation. One goes, perhaps, in defiance of, and at the same time bearing witness to, the corruption amid which those who are left behind must continue to live.

John Pym, *Monthly Film Bulletin*, February 1978

Robert Bresson's film starts on a nocturnal riverbank in Paris. At first one can distinguish virtually nothing in the darkness. A few distant lights, maybe, their faint reflections suggesting the presence of water. Then suddenly, gliding slow and stately out from behind the unsuspected bridge that makes the night so peculiarly impenetrable, a *bateau-mouche* appears and traverses the screen, silent and mysterious, only to vanish again as the opposing arch swallows it from view.

For a moment, only the faint lapping of water is heard; and in that moment of absolute, tranquil desolation, one can hardly believe that the sun will ever rise or the city ever wake again. It is as though the ghostly boat, floating serenely through the Stygian night like Charon's bark and removing the last vestiges of life from the face of the earth, heralded a return to the chaos that reigned before the Creation: 'And the earth was without form, and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep.' Immediately following this overture, a newspaper headline about a young man found 'suicided' in the Père Lachaise cemetery; a title, 'Six Months Earlier'; and as the first step in solving this human mystery, a close-up of a human foot as a young dropout lectures his friends on the art of walking to ensure even wear and tear on shoes. Even more than in *Mouchette*, Bresson is concerned here with the system of defences with which modern man shores up the form he has contrived to give to the void: on the one hand, the array of ideologies with which he ensures his spiritual well-being, and on the other, the battery of alarms and devices with which he protects his physical safety.

At the very end of the film, however, after the film-length flashback explaining how the young suicide came to have one bullet in his back and another in the back of his head, it is again night. And in the cemetery, in a movement paralleling that of the mysterious *bateau-mouche* – as though he and his burden of human responsibility were the cargo it bore away to oblivion – the assassin strolling casually away suddenly picks up his heels and disappears into the obscurity. Between these two points of darkness that might be one, Bresson celebrates what Franju once described as 'a ceremonial of death'. The death of a man, certainly. Of God, probably. Of the world ... maybe.

'What impelled me to make this film is the mess we have made of everything. This mass civilisation in which the individual will soon no longer exist. This demented tampering with things. This immense demolition job in which we shall kill ourselves by trying to go on living. This incredible indifference shown by people, except for some of today's youth who see things more clearly.'

Given the simplicity, indeed almost the naiveté of Bresson's statement of intentions concerning *Le Diable, probablement*, some critics seem to have

been encouraged to adopt the easy way out of dismissing it as just another ecological tract. There is that side to the film, of course. The documentary shots of the baby seal lolling appealingly in the snow, then being clubbed to death to provide an undamaged pelt for the fur trade, are as heartrending as ever. So are the appalling images testifying to the long-range effects of mercury poisoning in the Japanese fishing community of Minamata. Under the eye of Bresson's camera, as the sounds of electric saw and of tortured wood mingle in a cry of pain while huge trunks topple in helpless majesty, the felling of a tree reverberates like the doom of some tragic hero. Excitedly gathering round a lone fisherman dozing in the sun as his marker begins to bob in the polluted water of a river, casual onlookers become celebrants at a modern mystery where an awed, anonymous voice starts the litany: 'He caught a live fish.'

Yet it is evident that for Bresson the ecological message conveyed by such images, familiar or otherwise, is self-evident. Far from preaching to the converted, he is concerned less with the impact of these images and intimations of disaster than with the implications apparent in the ways people respond to that impact. Time was, in Bresson's world, when the tormented soul of the young *curé* of Ambricourt, even though assailed on all sides by an irredeemably sinful society, could look out from within himself, see that it was good, and contentedly murmur 'All is Grace'. Is this still possible in this most modern of all possible worlds?

The title of *Le Diable probablement*, implying (hypothetically, at least) some sort of malevolent supernatural force at work, derives from a line of dialogue in the most materially appointed sequence in the film. Boarding a bus with his friend Michel, after attending a lecture in which the latter's active concern about safety measures in nuclear waste disposal runs up against the passive wall of the lecturer's bland reassurances, the would-be suicide Charles (Antoine Monnier) listens neutrally as Michel (Henri de Maublanc) continues fulminating against the government for shirking its responsibilities. 'Don't blame the government,' someone sitting in front intervenes. And the general argument that ensues ends with one passenger angrily asking 'Who made this mockery of humanity?' and another replying 'The devil, probably.'

Tom Milne, *Sight and Sound*, Winter 1977-78

THE DEVIL, PROBABLY (LE DIABLE PROBABLEMENT)

Director: Robert Bresson
©/Production Company: Sunchild Productions
Production Company: GMF Productions
Executive Producer: Marc Maurette
Producer: Stéphane Tchaladjieff
Producer: Michel Chandlerli *
Unit Production Managers: Alain Depardieu, Patrick Bordier
Unit Managers: Christian Danzas, Juliette Toutain
Production Administrator: Chantal Rolgen
1st Assistant Director: Mylène van der Mersch
2nd Assistant Directors: Thierry Bodin, Humbert Balsan, Eric Deroo, Mahaut de Cordon
Script Supervisor: Françoise Renberg
Screenplay: Robert Bresson
Director of Photography: Pasqualino De Santis
Camera Operator: Mario Cimini
Assistant Operator: Bruno de Keyser
Key Grip: Jean Hennau *
Gaffer: Jean-Claude Gasché *
Editor: Germaine Lamy
Assistant Editors: Martine Fleury, Annie Reffet
Art Director: Éric Simon
Props: Jean-Pierre Bazerolle
Costumer: Jackie Budin
Make-up: Christine Fornelli
Music: Philippe Sarde
Extracts from Ego dormio by: Claudio Monteverdi
Orchestrations: R.P. Martin
Sound Recording: Georges Prat
Mixer: Jacques Maumont
Sound Effects: Daniel Couteau

Cast

Antoine Monnier (*Charles*)
Tina Irissari (*Alberte*)
Henri de Maublanc (*Michel*)
Laetitia Carcano (*Edwige*)
Nicolas Deguy (*Valentin*)
Régis Hanrion (*Dr Mime*)
Geoffroy Gausson (*bookseller*)
Roger Honorat (*police officer*)
Vincent Cottrell
Laurence Delannoy
Laetitia Martinneti
Martin Schlumberger
Thadée Klossowsky
Miguel Irissari
Nadine-Boyer Vidal
Roland de Corbiac
Dominique Lyon
France 1977©
93 mins

* Uncredited

**OF SIN AND SALVATION:
THE CINEMA OF ROBERT BRESSON****The Devil, Probably (Le Diable probablement)**

Sun 19 Jun 18:10; Mon 27 Jun 20:30

**Diary of a Country Priest
(Journal d'un curé de campagne)**

Mon 20 Jun 18:10

Lancelot du Lac (Lancelot of the Lake)

Mon 20 Jun 20:45

Mouchette

Wed 22 Jun 20:45

**A Man Escaped
(Un Condamné à mort s'est échappé)**

Thu 23 Jun 20:45

**The Trial of Joan of Arc
(Procès de Jeanne d'Arc)**

Wed 29 Jun 20:50

BECOME A BFI MEMBER

Enjoy a great package of film benefits including priority booking at BFI Southbank and BFI Festivals. Join today at bfi.org.uk/join

BFI PLAYER

We are always open online on BFI Player where you can watch the best new, cult & classic cinema on demand. Showcasing hand-picked landmark British and independent titles, films are available to watch in three distinct ways: Subscription, Rentals & Free to view.

See something different today on player.bfi.org.uk

Join the **BFI mailing list** for regular programme updates. Not yet registered? Create a new account at www.bfi.org.uk/signup

BFI SOUTHBANK

Welcome to the home of great film and TV, with three cinemas and a studio, a world-class library, regular exhibitions and a pioneering Mediatheque with 1000s of free titles for you to explore. Browse special-edition merchandise in the BFI Shop.

We're also pleased to offer you a unique new space, the BFI Riverfront – with unrivalled riverside views of Waterloo Bridge and beyond, a delicious seasonal menu, plus a stylish balcony bar for cocktails or special events. Come and enjoy a pre-cinema dinner or a drink on the balcony as the sun goes down.