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Ingmar Bergman
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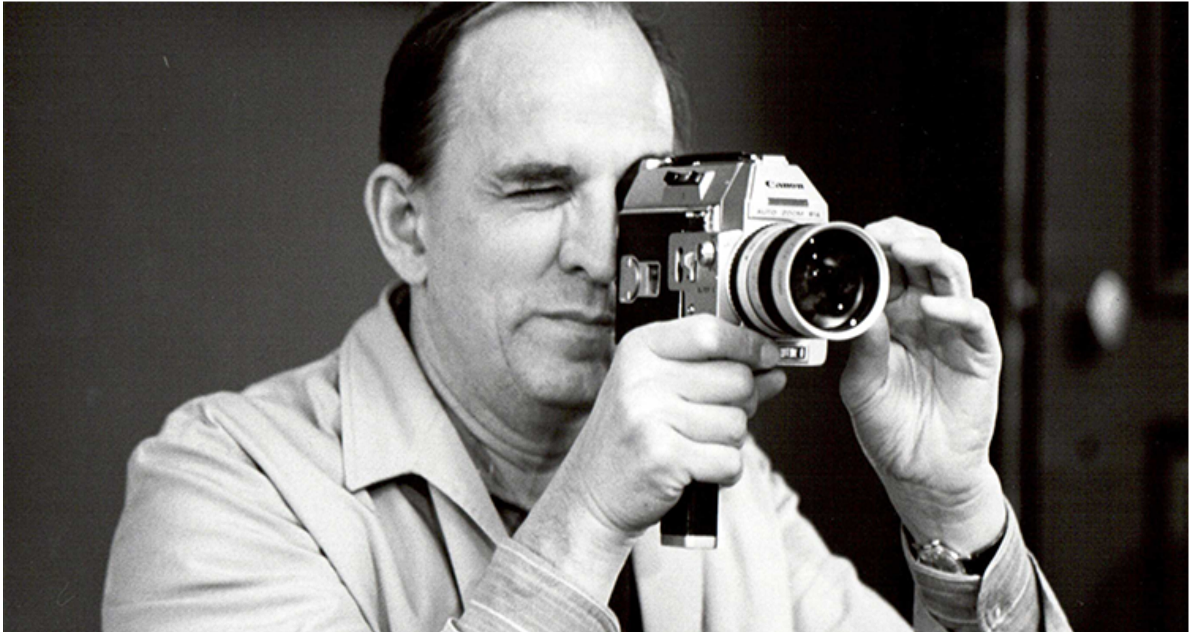

Ingmar Bergman

Hamish Ford • December 2002

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b. July 14, 1918, Uppsala, Sweden
d. July 30, 2007, Fårö, Sweden

The radical intimacy of Bergman

Prologue: facing the void

> *I came out of that movie house reeling like a drunkard, drugged speechless, with the film rushing through my bloodstream, pumping and thudding*.
>
> Gunnel Lindblom, star of *The Silence*, describing her first experience of a Bergman film in 1949

Ingmar Bergman's mature cinema provokes the viewer into an intimate engagement in which a range of uncomfortable feelings are opened up, shared and laid bare. And this often occurs, quite literally, face-to-face.

An encounter with Bergman's seminal 1966 film *Persona* is exemplary here. The film's original title was *Cinematographet*, Swedish for 'cinematography'. But either name is appropriate for a work that enacts inquiries into cinema *and* the subject in states of fecund but disturbing ontological breakdown. And this can perhaps most clearly be seen in Bergman's extraordinary use of the close-up, which Gilles Deleuze described as enforcing a coalescence of the human face with the void. The relentless close-up of the face is a useful formal and thematic key to Bergman's work. In these frequent, almost embarrassingly close and radically elongated moments the viewer can *see*, *think* and *feel* existential sureties in different states of crisis – as we watch subjects reduced to pure flesh, bones, mouth, nose, hair and eyes.

The detail of this fine-focus dissection forces us to confront both the inscrutable materiality of the face, and its role as the communicative nerve centre of the individual subject's investments. The camera moves in uncomfortably, almost seeking to go inside – until a giant abstracted face fills the frame, stopping the zoom dead. The viewer is confronted with a close yet also alienating proximity to such a large expanse of human exterior, while we watch our enormous diegetic companion ask of itself 'what' it is, as it faces a very personal void.

A dual gaze of inquiry takes place here, whereby the onscreen subject's gaze of self-conscious crisis meets the viewer's implicated looking upon – and participation in – that image. Both face and viewer seem to *feel* the intermixing and breaking down of diegetic and meta-diegetic space, and intensities of looking. This is sparked and enforced by Bergman's tight use of a 1.33:1 frame which often excludes any clear glimpses of the world beyond a face which finds no up, down, left or right in which to direct its gaze.

Imprisoned in its relentless close-up, the face seems to search beyond the dimensions of the frame only to find a black-hole space immune to cinematic life. Shut in on all four sides, the face then looks to the one direction not limited by the screen's graphic dimensions, into a space that is much more than a black hole.
This final movement where the giant face gazes straight out of the screen, visually exploring a world beyond that in which it traditionally exists, connects the space of the diegetic subject to *my* space. And here I sit, troubled yet also thrilled by this uncomfortably intimate experience.

Where is Bergman?: the problem of (a) demonic authorship

The central presence of Bergman's films in my own experience and personal cinema history contrasts strongly with their position a propos of revisionist film histories. Bergman's work was totally unmentioned during my undergraduate studies in the early/mid-1990s, and I only developed a relationship with the films through auto-didactic means. In many ways, of all the renowned filmmakers from the past, no-one's reputation seems to have fallen so

far from international deification to obscurity.

Bergman has written and directed around fifty feature films, and for over twenty years from the late-'50s his work was canonical to 'art-house' movie culture, academic cinema studies and film clubs all over the world. Today, a young film enthusiast or student is most likely only to have seen *The Seventh Seal* or perhaps *Wild Strawberries* (both 1957), or in some countries, *Persona*. However, they are just as likely to have seen no Bergman at all.

Taking nothing away from the '50s hits that made Bergman *the* cult director of art cinema's pre-nouvelle vague heyday, I would contend that the key to his work for the serious contemporary viewer potentially lies with this filmmaker's unique modernism, most notably found in the '60s films.

Unsurprisingly, the apogee of Bergman's idiosyncratic modernist explorations also comprises the work in which his particular authorial intensity is at its strongest. In an ambivalent article in the January 2002 issue of *Sight and Sound*, Peter Matthews suggests Bergman's critical fate rests on authorial markers that are almost uniquely "overdetermined". All Bergman's mature work exhibits what is both the most appealing and disconcerting about his films; no one has enunciated a clearer and more intimate authorial voice through cinema's mass-produced, industrial medium.

At the time of release, Bergman's most important work was often received as a 'personal cinema' of virtually unparalleled strength. There was something very exciting about images that could generate such feelings of raw, complex subjectivity. Yet reading some of the critical work from the 1960s and '70s there also seemed something worrying about this cinema's power, especially as enunciated and shaped through the figure of a demonic author-subject.

By the 1980s and into the '90s, the kind of excessive authorial stamp Bergman's films so powerfully rendered sure enough became increasingly suspect. As Matthews tells it, once authorship and the film 'masterpiece' came to be broadly critiqued and the deified film artist was downgraded to make way for genre valorisation amid revisionist histories of cinema, Bergman became a target of attack or was deemed an irrelevancy. Surveying the impact a changing view of authorship has had on Bergman's reputation, Matthews concludes he must be "denied the foremost rank among the auteurist seraphim."

Yet Matthews' essay itself illustrates that ultimately Bergman's work cannot really be accounted for within the criteria of auteurism, which was originally designed as a polemical means to unearth authorial traces and visual artistry in Hollywood cinema, (and which Truffaut, among others, declared by the early-'60s to be outdated). The excessively foregrounded appearance, or 'function', of Bergman's authorial signature – in late modernist tradition, to the point of extreme auto-critique and crisis – that Matthews highlights, is precisely what makes an attempt to try judge the films in auteurist terms unconvincing.

Nowhere in Bergman's most important films is there the energising tension between 'content' and 'form' that auteur criticism saw in select Hollywood films. Bergman wrote the majority of his screenplays alone, and at the height of his

career experienced an unparalleled creative freedom. As read into the films, author 'Bergman' feels the existential *weight* of expressive responsibility, as he revels in modern cinema's aesthetic and philosophical potential while also asking what relevance and ethical effect the culturally-encoded author has within modernity's social real. Some mythically inscribed author-function is both demonically *felt* by the viewer in engagement with these films, and always *in crisis* as a performatively exaggerated and disturbing modern subjectivity exploring vertiginous freedoms of address through cinema's plastic expression.

After marking him an also-ran auteur, Matthews' article changes tack for the final sentences, saying:

> *Bergman's guilt-ridden desire to crack open the narcissistic shell and face reality strikes a distinct chord in our newly troubled times. Perhaps he is only just beginning to speak to us.*

This undeveloped point adds to broad questions of late which ask whether recent global events might contribute to a realignment of what strikes us as relevant and worth facing in contemporary art, discourse and everyday experience.

So 'apolitical' and self-obsessed to his detractors, Bergman's most difficult work forces us to ask of ourselves who and *what* we are, and *how* we live with others – hardly questions outside proper contemporary ethical, political and social considerations. Cocooned in social networks and watching a new global war slowly gestate on television, the freshly darkened skies bring such basic, yet hard and disturbing engagement to the forefront of our difficult thought and action in the only sphere over which we have any real control, daily experience.

But where *is* the quintessential writer-director of what Matthews calls "the hard stuff" (the title of his Bergman article)? Where is the figure that at one time in the 1970s was the subject of more book-length studies than any other filmmaker? Important here is the recent availability of Bergman's films on DVD.

With their abrasive intimacies, there was always something a bit too public, too 'shared', about watching films like *Through a Glass Darkly* (1961), *Persona*, or *Scenes from a Marriage* (1973) with strangers *or* friends in the cinema. At home, with a film preserved in almost hyper-real fidelity, one has the undistracted opportunity to experience and reflect upon the awkwardly close power of our singular encounter – face to (onscreen) face.

Perhaps most importantly, DVD allows Bergman's peak modernist work, in which the thorny issues of demonic subjectivity and authorship are most thoroughly explored and intertwined, the possibility of a fresh position within contemporary film discourse and history. In his excellent 1982 book *Ingmar Bergman and the Rituals of Art*, Paisley Livingston hones in on the problem of Bergman's particular modernism, saying that already:

> *[t]he filmmaker who still best exemplifies to a large part of the public the*

serious and difficult artist is often ignored by critics whose stated concern is the art of film. To them, Bergman represents only a stage in film history that has been bypassed in the inexorable progress of the avant-garde. As a modernist who is no longer new, Bergman falls prey to the danger identified in one of Oscar Wilde's sayings: "Nothing is so dangerous as being too modern; one is apt to grow old-fashioned quite suddenly."

Livingston counters what he saw at the time as a fashionable view that the questions Bergman's cinema asks have been answered or overcome. Twenty years later, the kind of linearity avant-garde discourses may have privileged in the past now seems emblematic of modernism's ideology of forward thrust. Removed from their role as a stretch of road in modern cinema's relentless progress, Bergman's films can today be looked at through new eyes and re-thought, to see what they might now say in newly troubled times.

It may be that the problems Bergman's most challenging cinema so powerfully and disturbingly raises have not only not been answered; looked at afresh, they could be more pressing than ever. Rather than experiments overcome by newer progressive models, now that the era of modernism is deemed to have passed, this work seems more daringly etched and radical then ever.

The high modernism of films like *Persona* is not the beginning of the Bergman story. Yet some of the problems viewers and critics have had with his mature work stretches right back to the beginning of this filmmaker's massive corpus.

Stylistic diversity, nihilism and comedy: early work (1945 – 1956)

The fifteen feature films Bergman directed between 1945 and 1954 received very mixed reactions in Sweden. A review of *Crisis*, his first film as director, argued:

there is something unbridled, nervously out of control in Bergman's imagination that makes a disquieting impression. He […] seems to be incapable of keeping a mental level of normalcy. What the Swedish cinema needs in the first place are not experimenters, but intelligent, rational people…

Such criticism exemplifies problems Swedish film writers would intermittently continue to have with Bergman's work throughout his career. This quote and the copious writing that followed over forty years (perhaps most notably the criticism he received from the Swedish Left in the 1960s) suggests this filmmaker's position as a pebble in the shoe of a hyper-Enlightenment culture, loudly articulating repressed aspects of a highly rationalist modernity.

Bergman's 1940s work, to which domestic criticism responded so

unenthusiastically, is drenched through with a pessimistic existentialism. The protagonists of these films are young disaffected figures that dwell on the social and economic margins of contemporary life in Stockholm, outraged at the inevitable failure of their attempts to find a niche in the daily modes of a tedious and conservative socio-economic real.

If there is a consistent thematic of youthful existential despair, these early films also show Bergman trying out diverse formal techniques to fit his thematic concerns. Hence we can see the clear influence of Rossellini in the gritty mise-en-scene of the films right after the war, and Hitchcock (with *Rope*) around 1948 with a move towards long takes and tracking shots.

The '40s work comes to a peak with what now seems the clearer early formal-thematic Bergman signatures of 1949's *Prison*, with its nihilistic brooding and harsh expressionism. However, it is with *Summer Interlude* (1951) that we find the filmmaker's first wholly masterful utterance. This film goes beyond a precious youthful cry at the abyss, and adds rich layers of memory and projection to the portrayal of a thirty-something woman as she looks back on the choices made when she was young enough to not feel the weight of time. In the final scene we watch realistic yet at the same time highly oneiric images of the central character confronted backstage at the theatre by a man in grotesque clown make-up, as she is forced to 'confess' her chilling and vertiginous freedom and responsibility.

The newly mature existentialist quandaries of *Summer Interlude* clearly states the modern subject's situation which one can discern in every Bergman film of the 1950s: how to sustain a life without real belief – in human good, in society, in God, or even in the self.

Finnish writer and filmmaker Jörn Donner described Sweden in 1972 as the most secularised country in the world, and hence the furthest down the road of a crisis related to the disappearance of belief. Continuing this line in 1995, Swedish Bergman scholar Maaret Koskinen argues that as new secular forms "did not succeed in filling the void and replacing the old norms, a spiritual unrest emerged in Swedish society." Koskinen and Donner both argue Bergman's films are a reflexive symptom of this crisis, awkwardly and noisily playing it out. In this way, the religious element in Bergman's films is really an image of *lack* rather than belief – as Koskinen says, rendering the "void that 'has remained' after material welfare has been taken care of. Or, as Bergman himself is supposed to

have said, 'When all the problems seem to be solved, then the difficulties come.'"

In contrast to influential Scandinavian and Anglo-American thematic analysis, it was the formal aspects of Bergman's films which first attracted French critics, whose response (starting with Bazin in 1947) really kick-started Bergman's international success in the 1950s. In Godard's overview on the occasion of a hugely successful 1958 Bergman retrospective in Paris, there is a rapturous discussion of a shot in *Summer with Monika* (1953).

In the film, a fantastic summer-idyll has been terminated by chilly reality for the teenage Monika (played by Harriet Andersson, an icon of unbridled 'natural' Swedish beauty, and of whom Antoine's friend in *The 400 Blows* [Truffaut, 1959] steals a publicity still) and her boyfriend. Having returned to a drab rational civilization from paradise gone sour, Monika rejects her lover and father of her child, motherhood and family life. Amid this rebellion comes Godard's moment of fascination. In a grimy cafe Monika slowly turns to face the audience to stare out without reservation at us, in a then remarkable meta-diegetic excursion in narrative cinema – a sober and reflexive marking-off of illusion through a young woman's 'no'.

Monika enacts here a typically Bergmanesque moment of ambiguous negativity (is she an existentialist hero, or moral villain?). Her actions both question the metaphysical investments of a culture and its control of individual subjects, while also forcing us to consider the dissenting individual's ethical impact on others. These gestures will be played out in even more violently ambivalent ways through other Bergman films.

Released the same year, *Sawdust and Tinsel* is the expressionist correlative of *Summer with Monika's* gritty realism. Here Bergman uses circus performers to exaggeratedly portray an everyday life where bodies are always in the service of others – in ritualized daily employment and in interpersonal relations, where abject humiliation and emotional violence are the result of a crisis-ridden subjectivity's impact on the immediate world. Slated upon release for its harsh images and portrayal of debased personal and professional relations, the film was later seen as a quantum leap for Bergman's formal-thematic inventiveness.

But films like *Sawdust and Tinsel* were commercial disasters, so in an attempt to keep working Bergman also made a series of comedies at this time for

his studio, Svensk Filmindustri. These more commercial efforts like *Waiting Women* (1952) and *Lessons in Love* (1954) show Bergman's unease with the comic idiom. But their tensions between comedy's normal function and Bergman's more typical inclinations also create a fascinating conflict, something self-consciously developed in the final (and finest) of these works, *Smiles of a Summer Night* (1955).

Winning a major prize at Cannes in 1956, and setting Bergman off to international success, *Smiles of a Summer Night* now looks atypical of Bergman's brooding philosophical cinema. Yet despite its air of French farce, its primary mood is Mozartian comedy with a dark underbelly, energized by a dialectic of humor and rancid truth beneath the veneer of self-conscious laughter. This is a comedy about the failure of comedy to fulfill its promise of cathartically laughing away the horror and absurdity of human emotions and the pathetic farce of subjects attempting to satisfactorily *live* by ridiculous societal rules. *Smiles* deals with the problems of how human beings behave when belief lies in shreds – something Bergman's next films more directly and seriously pursue.

With the Svensk Filmindustri phones ringing hot for sales of Bergman's international hit comedy, the filmmaker slipped his most personal script yet onto the producer's desk. Drunk with the success their Cannes-crowned auteur was bringing the company, a cheap shoot was approved. The outcome was *The Seventh Seal* – a genuine landmark in film history that would exemplify 'art cinema' the world over for years to come.

Belief in crisis: The Seventh Seal & halcyon art cinema (1957 – 1960)

The Seventh Seal is Bergman's most famous work, much pastiched by Monty Python, Woody Allen, and in David Lynch's *Mulholland Drive* (2001, via a metaphysical cowboy, one of his many Bergman references). Starring Max von Sydow, Gunnar Björnstrand and Bibi Andersson, this story of a Knight who plays a game of chess with Death as he returns from the Crusades, made Bergman *the* cult director of the late-'50s. Its beautiful high-contrast images of medieval Sweden and von Sydow's anguished performance made for icons of a new existentialist cinema that resonated deeply with a world at the height of the Cold War. To late-'50s audiences it asked what metaphysical schemas and values humanity can possibly live by in a time when apocalyptic death is a daily threat, and when structures of belief seem to bring only regression, blindness and servitude.

Like *Rome, Open City* (Rossellini, 1945) and *Rashomon* (Kurosawa, 1950) before it, *The Seventh Seal* was a watershed 'foreign film' in its critical and audience impact around the world. It became perhaps the central work in a halcyon period for 'art cinema', opening the way in the US and Britain for the early-'60s successes of Fellini, Antonioni and the nouvelle vague. Stamping its images into the cultural memory of world cinema, *The Seventh Seal*'s aesthetic and thematic richness also hugely influenced the development of film societies

and then academic cinema studies in North America.

Also like *Rashomon*, when looked at today *The Seventh Seal* is partially a victim of its success. It has been held up as exemplary prosecution *or* defense witness for 'art cinema' *per se* and is hence frequently over-praised or unfairly dismissed. But like all seminal texts, this film must be approached both through an appreciation for its historical importance, and yet also by striving to really *watch* the film without letting the parodies and pastiches with which we are familiar dictate our engagement. Only then perhaps can one truly appreciate Bergman's astonishing achievement with this film: a compacted, logical and linear, yet crystalline and endlessly refractory tragi-comic parable, the aesthetic-conceptual density and genuine cultural universality of which is truly Shakespearean.

Today we hardly know how to approach something so serious and philosophically 'big-picture' yet also so accessible and burlesque as Bergman's most famous film. This is at least in one sense odd: for all its preposterous thematic reach and blatant theatricality, the film achieved its immense cultural impact (still being shown twice daily somewhere in the US four years after initial release) through a reflexively coded intertextuality – something not so unfamiliar to attuned postmodern minds after all.

The Seventh Seal works like a prism and entry point of a monster oeuvre, laying out trajectories more confrontingly explored in Bergman's 1960s work in which (unlike at the end of *The Seventh Seal*) no-one really escapes the horrific *and* liberating negativity that lies beneath the modern world's veneer. But first, other late-'50s films would continue to mine a mid-century crisis of belief through varying subjects, discourses and lenses.

Wild Strawberries, another big worldwide hit, is a very different film to its predecessor. Here the crisis of belief is entirely immanent (the God debate's only appearance is through a quaint argument between teenage suitors), in the form of a longing for personal self-acceptance and reconciliation with others and one's past. The film influentially renders the achronological affectivity of time and memory as seen in old age. Victor Sjöström, Sweden's most important director of the silent era (who then went to Hollywood), stars in the film as a crotchety old professor who travels south from Stockholm with his daughter-in-law to receive a career award from his alma mater. *Wild Strawberries*' realist address is punctured throughout by the rich expressionist imagery of its famous dream sequences/flashbacks, the crystalline temporal layering and confusion of which was revolutionary at the time (clearly

influencing Tarkovsky's work).

So Close to Life and *The Magician* followed in 1958. The former, a clinical study in close-up of three women in different stages of pregnancy and abortion (which I have not been able to see), reminded viewers that Bergman refused to stick to one style as he explored what seem like characteristic themes. By contrast, *The Magician* is a very densely layered, baroque work. Set mostly in mid-19th Century Stockholm, this complexly ironic and expressionist film enacts classic Enlightenment quandaries, playing off science-reason and art-magic. Dismissive yet also frightened of each other, these binary discourses emerge as similarly ritualised performances maintained *through* and *for* the personal sustenance of their adherents. Desire and anguish are here spread out into broadly painted figures – and portrayed as inextricably allied with regimes of belief central to an emergent modernity.

The Virgin Spring (1960) is a gruesome tale set in medieval Sweden when Christianity was just in the ascendancy over Paganism, about the rape and murder of a girl and her father's quest for revenge. A huge success, winning the first of Bergman's three Academy Awards for 'best foreign film', it is nevertheless in many ways his least interesting work from the period. However, it does mark the beginning of the filmmaker's collaboration with cinematographer Sven Nykvist, replacing Gunnar Fischer (whose richly textured, densely lit images were so important to Bergman's '50s work). This would turn out to be one of world cinema's most important and productive director-cinematographer partnerships, continuing to the end of Bergman's filmmaking life.

1960 also saw *The Devil's Eye, which*, like its predecessor, Bergman also regrets making. This take on the Don Juan story is a kind of filmed version of one of Bergman's stage adaptations (its theatricality is hyper reflexive), which again shows the filmmaker's uneasy hand with comedy. After two films he deemed artistic failures (despite the critical and commercial success of the former), Bergman went about reinventing his cinema. The change was extraordinary.

Metaphysical reduction: the 'faith trilogy' (1961–4)

"The more mature Bergman becomes as a filmmaker, the more caustically and inexorably he focuses on the destructive forces that flow beneath harmonic culture." So writes Swedish film scholar Mikael Timm. This is true of Bergman's thematic and hermeneutic explorations in the 1960s, and equally so of the films' formal developments. In his most radical decade, Bergman increasingly made films that attack modern culture and its various investments from beneath, in dissonant terms, developing a new, much less tonally 'centered' cinema in which violent engagements with alterity, doubt and negativity seem to prevail. As a result, this period of Bergman's work tends to either radically repel or attract viewers and critics alike.

In his 1999 book *Ingmar Bergman: Magician and Prophet*, Marc Gervais sees Bergman's films as a struggle between the 'life force', an affirmational

humanistic pole, and abstract negativity, a bleak engagement with nihilism and hopelessness. He sees the best films as balancing the two, and while Gervais doesn't really like the apparent trajectory of Bergman's '60s films (his dialectic now supposedly drowned by the negative pole), still admires them for their multi-faceted subversions. What became known as the 'faith trilogy' – *Through a Glass Darkly*, *Winter Light* (1962) and *The Silence* (1963) – set the tone for these increasingly harsh explorations.

The first thing one notices about *Through a Glass Darkly* is that it *looks* remarkable. There is a new kind of complex realism and clarity to the image; the viewer can almost smell and feel the film's rendered world, the infinite shades of gray and semi-audible sounds of a remote Baltic island off the Swedish coast in summer. (This is Fårö, which would provide the sparse setting for many Bergman films to come, and which from 1966 would be his home). Opaque dawn skies, a rocky shoreline and a pre-industrial house dominate the mise-en-scène, along with only four humans we first glimpse emerging out of a primordial sea.

With this film, the viewer confronts images of a bare world where those who survive are the rational men of a cold modernity, while those who flounder might have been its best hope. In a protean performance as Karin, Harriet Andersson dishes out both emotional warmth *and* shards of negativity in her sublime but fragmented engagements with others and the world. Her subjective focus is insufficient to consistently master linear demands, and religious belief is a kind of madness taking her away from reality rather than means to a centering affirmation, when her ethereal fantasies turn to revulsion. (Karin's sensuous wait for God in the attic culminates when she sees him as a spider that tries to penetrate her body.)

On the surface, her father (Gunnar Björnstrand) and husband (Max von Sydow) have adapted to a chilly reality with more success. Karin is most at home with her teenage brother Minus who is engulfed in his own identity crisis as he gallivants around the island rocked with doubt, not at home inside himself or his culture.

Following her breakdown in the attic Karin is penetrated again, by the all-too-real cold fluid of science as her doctor/husband calmly applies a sedating needle, to which she responds with only marginally more displeasure than to the benign and genuine (but to her, meaningless and perfunctory) words of love he offers throughout the film. Meanwhile, outside awaits the giant spider shape of a helicopter in which von Sydow will accompany her to his secular sureties of institutionalised care.

Framed by the setting sun through a window, for the first time alone (and indoors) together, at the end of *Glass Darkly* Minus asks his father how they can help Karin, and receives a 'God is love' lecture. Like earlier declarations of love for his family (to whom he gives Stockholm airport trinkets as presents after arriving home from a trip to central Europe), this man's attempt at a didactic humanist faith here seems extremely forced and tenuous. Yet Minus responds positively to this perfunctory communication in the final line of the film, "Papa

spoke to me". And in previously admitting the desire to chart his own daughter's schizophrenia so as to provide stimuli for his writing, the father also exhibits (as throughout the film) here a raw, contradictory kind of honesty typical of Bergman's dark renderings of human desire.

In *Winter Light* the surface freezing of Gunnar Björnstrand's character is just one component of austere images below which the tension of a barely repressed apocalypse is sustained for less than eighty minutes. Shivering a cold sweat of flu and doubt, he plays a priest who suffers 'bad faith', and in the face of his anguish struggles to retain belief through ritualized performance. Even when the only person attending the service is his agnostic lover (Ingrid Thulin) who suffers her own – purely secular – kind of abject love.

Yet somehow Max von Sydow's brief appearance in *Winter Light* seems the epicenter of it all, as a man worried about 'the Chinese' with their rumored nuclear weapons. In so much of Bergman's cinema, anxiety has broad social as well as existential resonance, and here it is through fear of global apocalypse (the film was made during the Cuban Missile Crisis). What is most personally *and* culturally striking is this almost mute man's total incapacity to go along with even a threadbare performance of hope – in ourselves and in this world, both physical and metaphysical. From the first time we see him, he seems on the other side of an important line to the others. Yet they themselves barely sustain their veneer. Von Sydow's terminal condition is reinforced when his priest's council slips from unhelpful insistence (replying "we *must* live" to von Sydow's query, "why must we live?") into a self-obsessed monologue betraying his own private horror.

Rather than philosophical explication, *The Silence*'s almost wordless images generate our experience and reading of a very open film, concluding the loose trilogy in an unexpected way. The complex combination of an uneasy realism with stark formalism makes for clean and complex deep-focus shots matched with an immaculate hyper-diegetic soundscape. So little is literally said here that the formal affect and hermeneutic generativity of Bergman's sound-image compositions are given space to speak louder than ever.

Through *The Silence's* aesthetic matrix we sensuously, yet uncomfortably, watch and feel two sisters and a young boy as they have experiences in the hotel of an alien city. When Gunnel Lindblom combs her hair and washes her clothes

and body before one of many solo excursions into the world, the tactile and emotional intimacy is both warmly human and erotic, and like cold machine-like fingernails on chalkboard. Meanwhile, during her own body's eruption in the throes of serious illness, the older sister (Ingrid Thulin) articulates her repulsion – "it's all just erectile tissue and bodily secretions" – in a hateful sputtering at the corporeal (and hence for her, meaningless) nature of existence.

Thulin plays *The Silence*'s only real 'believer' – in truth, reason, knowledge, meaning – and is here a decaying figure associated with death. The sheer sensuality of Lindblom's performance might comparatively offer corporeal affirmation, but the very empowerment of this very 'alive' woman can seem reactionary in its binarism (the revenge of the body, against Thulin's hegemonic, rancid Cartesianism). It is ultimately the small boy as a nubile, amorphous figure (without any conventional patriarchal model) that provides the real sense of future possibility in the film, as he bears witness to the enactments, investments and dysfunction of his elders.

The Silence enjoyed substantial international success (Bergman's last for ten years), in no small part due to its then-controversial nudity and explicit sexuality (the film was censored in many countries). Meanwhile, Bergman became director of the Royal Dramatic Theatre in Stockholm in 1963. The one film shot during this tenure was *Now About These Women* (1964). Co-written under a pseudonym with lifelong friend and star of later Bergman films, Erland Josephson, this theatrical and ill-tempered comedy was time-out from the political and workload crisis endemic to being in charge of Sweden's premiere theatrical institution, and interrupts his otherwise deadly serious film work of the period.

Limit-point negativity & modernism: Persona & beyond (1966–9)

Bergman resigned from the Royal Dramatic Theatre mid-contract an exhausted man. He booked himself into a psychiatric clinic in 1965, and after a while started working on an idea based on a physical similarity he had noticed between Bibi Andersson and Liv Ullmann when the former had introduced her young friend in the street. He invited the two actors to visit him in hospital and explained his idea for a film. They agreed to star in the project, and a few months later what would become probably Bergman's supreme achievement was in production.

Persona in many ways leads on from *The Silence*, as Susan Sontag argues in her famous 1967 essay on the former. In both films our engagement is with the multiple thematic trajectories of an ambiguous psychic war between two women, as rendered through the most radical aesthetics Bergman was ever to explore. If the first films of the '60s increasingly marked him as a difficult filmmaker, *Persona* offers greater challenges.

Out of a genuinely avant-garde prologue emerges a story in which an actress refuses to speak, while a nurse is assigned to her 'recovery'. Most of the film takes place in and around a beach-house on the windswept coast of Fårö.

But the women's experience of space and time, along with the viewer's grasp of these forms and *Persona*'s narrative, suffers increasing interruptions as fragmenting layers of formal-thematic stimuli build into one of the most difficult, open and generative feature-films ever made.

Liv Ullmann's silent portrayal of an artist confronting *and* performing her own ontological lack is dominated by twitching lips, ambivalent gazes and vampyric desire. Bibi Andersson plays the chatty state carer whose perfectly adaptive nature leads to being sucked into her companion's showdown with negativity – so that she too is made to examine what, if anything, lies behind her own socially-ordained mask.

As these dual gazes and subjectivities develop and cannibalistically intermix, halfway through the film the celluloid appears to rip and burn up in the projector. Diegetic space and cinema's sheer materiality here intermix, and we are left to work out what has become of a film whose plastic essence either violently asserts itself to *crush* the metaphysics of a fictional world – or whose fragmentation is remarkably *generated by* the psychic dissonance and heat of the diegesis. Regardless of our desire to explain the film's material violence and reflexivity, *Persona*'s formal-thematic mutation is ultimately then brought to full fruition and complexity when the famous hybrid gaze – half of each woman's face grafted to the other – stares out of an amorphous gray void, and into the viewer's own unstable space.

From the vantage point of thirty-six years, *Persona* can be seen as a standout film in terms of Bergman's oeuvre and cinema history. The essays in *Ingmar Bergman's Persona,* a 2000 compilation volume edited by Lloyd Michaels, position the film as a cinematic work of high modernism par excellence. And it is the sort of artwork about which those who have experienced it feel the *utmost* emotional and intellectual commitment.

Bergman's next film continues the highly personal relationship the viewer is forced into with *Persona*'s interior gaze. In *Hour of the Wolf* (1968) we *enter* the protagonist's gaze through a more clearly expressionistic form. Like *The Magician*, this film makes explicit what can be said of Bergman's most intense cinema – it is like an esoteric horror movie. This is perhaps one reason for the film's lesser art-house reputation – though more importantly, its proximity to its illustrious predecessor disadvantages the film, despite Bergman's stated desire that *Wolf* continues *Persona*'s innovations. But perhaps the film is ultimately less appealing because we are faced with, and *enter*, an even more demonic

protagonist. Here we are immersed in – uncomfortably seeing and feeling – the vertiginous, vampyric mind of a *male* artist (Max von Sydow), through images that seem like shards of his fracturing psyche.

Wolf does feature perhaps Bergman's single most disturbing sequence, a wordless interlude with enormous symbolic refractions featuring high contrast images shot on degraded stock. Here a young boy attacks/seduces von Sydow on jagged fishing rocks, and after a struggle where this 'little demon' bites his victim bird-like, the boy is violently beaten with a large stone and drowned in the murky water. Here and throughout, we are intimately engaged with a more directly horrific artist-subject even than that of *Persona*. We uncomfortably think *and* feel the protagonist's interior fall, through some of Bergman's most oneiric and strikingly gothic images, a terrible maelstrom around which floats the organic but increasingly nervous performance of Liv Ullmann.

Von Sydow and Ullmann are again the couple in 1968's *The Shame*. Sometimes seen as concluding a trilogy about the artist's ethical relationship to social reality with the previous two films, it also takes a step back in formal complexity. This is a war film without action, heroes or oppositional clarity, concerned with the basic responses of the human subject – in this case, two naïve ex-concert violinists – to the sheer existential un-understandability of war.

The Shame was often seen as a commentary on the conflict in Viet Nam and Bergman was attacked for not coding the film morally or politically, criticism that misunderstands what kind of film this is. *The Shame* would be as controversial today in its probing of 'engagement', and its take on the absurd affectivity of war – how such operatic violence never 'makes sense'. One can sympathise with the central characters as passive victims of a war they can't do anything about, and/or criticize them for a lack of political understanding. Their performances offer pity, resentment and pathos in turn, through the alien perspective they have on the real world outside. This makes the film (and its title) a chilling evocation of both civilian confusion/casualties *and* cultural disengagement, while grimy materiality goes on unchecked – just as it highlights that reality's being fuelled by the opaque metaphysics of ideology and politics.

War of a more purely cultural kind dominates Bergman's short TV film called *The Ritual*, released theatrically in 1969. This nasty little work features three actors who are forced to demonstrate their troupe's 'obscene' act for a civil judge/critic, a performance that in the

event kills him. They also behave violently (psychically and physically) towards each other in tableaux set in sterile hotel rooms and office spaces. The mise-en-scène is purely made up of the interiors of an affluent and powerful modern state, a surface beneath and above which these aggressive outsider figures paint a repressed metaphysical scream of gothic proportions with their grotesque rubber masks and costumes (featuring oversized dildos), and their masochistic behavior – as they voice the cry a rationalist modernity tries to paper over with material comfort.

The Ritual works like a sharp concluding jab in Bergman's treatment of the artist as exaggerated, at times monstrous modern subject. Bergman confrontingly evokes this subject's distance from bourgeois normality and assurances, and their facing *and* enactment of kinds of negativity usually hidden or smoothed over in conventional society. The artist in Bergman's films feels only ambivalence about their modernity, a subject who both yearns for and detests the surety and structure of mainstream cultural forms, sadistically undermining these structures and vampyrically turning them into material on which to feed – even as it leads to a gnawing terror and self-conscious entropy.

A Passion (1969) returns us to the culturally removed space of Fårö. Despite a muted palette, Bergman's first serious colour film looks like science fiction (one shot appears to show three suns). Here the epistemological surety of characters – and viewers watching them – unravels as we sometimes see desired or feared events actually occurring, before an unstable reality is restored. This acts like a seldom carried-through but constant threat, a sense that subject, image and world always have something horrible straining at the edges of the frame.

A Passion is a loose and very open film in which Bergman experiments with both improvisation and (scripted) out-of-character monologues by the actors, as we follow the story of a hermit (von Sydow) who starts a relationship with a woman (Ullmann) who has probably killed her husband, then another (Bibi Andersson) who is desperate for contact of any kind. They are threatened from the inside as the past hangs about their necks like a noose, in danger of being horribly replayed through regressive and destructive psychological processes. And these possibly dangerous people are themselves in danger from the outside as well (the island's animals are being mysteriously slaughtered).

Like a limit-point rendering of *The Seventh Seal*'s thematic trajectory, *A Passion* seems to posit belief *per se* as a conduit of violence, as well as encouraging a dangerously passive relationship to time and history. And the closest the film has to an artist figure is Andersson's husband (Erland Josephson), an ice-cold nihilist who collects and records images of people in moments of terrible suffering. Asked the reason for his collection, Josephson articulates what seems a central idea in Bergman's most negativity-charged cinema, when he tells von Sydow: "I'm under no illusion I'm capturing the essence of things; I am merely recording the interplay of small and immense forces. Everything is useless."

A Passion completes a remarkable and quite unique decade's work. In general, the dissonant rendering of modernity that characterises these films becomes partially submerged in Bergman's post-'60s cinema. Besides, *Persona* and other late-'60s work brought diminishing commercial returns, receiving nothing like the wide distribution of his '50s hits. So, like Kurosawa and so many of his peers, Bergman had to look outside normal channels of funding to continue working in the '70s.

Difficult humanism: international & TV work (1970 – 1983)

The 1970s was a more successful decade for Bergman in terms of both commercial and critical consensus than the '60s, even if it was also a period of intermittent creative decline. The decade certainly started off horribly when the filmmaker signed a US co-production deal in 1970 with Dino de Laurentis for *The Touch*, to be set in Stockholm but shot in English, and starring Elliot Gould and Bibi Andersson. Bergman is here clearly uncomfortable outside his own language and the film is another curious periodic low point in this workaholic's otherwise high-achieving oeuvre.

Burnt by how a new language and foreign co-producer so easily put Bergman off form, his next film was produced largely by himself along with the film's actors and Sven Nykvist, investing their work for a percentage of the film's profits. The US distribution problem was also overcome through the unlikely figure of Roger Corman, who committed to releasing *Cries and Whispers* without even seeing it. With a triumphant (and rare) 1972 appearance at Cannes to accompany the film (screening out of competition), Bergman was welcomed back into world cinema's main spotlight, as critics and audiences embraced this story of a woman who slowly dies in a country house surrounded by cold and selfish sisters and her maid/companion/lover at the turn of the century.

Maintaining the intimacy and close-ups of Bergman's '60s work, with this film décor has an added role too, thanks to Nykvist's Oscar-winning wide-screen cinematography in its rendering of a red-saturated mise-en-scène. The film was deemed harrowing at the time, yet the period setting and poetic tone also bring a movement towards grace. His biggest hit since *The Seventh Seal*, the film's heavily symbolic color scheme and mise-en-scène would influence Peter Greenaway and countless other 1980s and '90s art-house directors.

If *Cries* was the lush color masterpiece for those who found Bergman's more radical (and monochrome) '60s cinema too extreme, like *Seventh Seal*, the film is also one of his prism works. It looks back at themes more thoroughly essayed in earlier films, and glancing toward a more accessible – though difficult – humanist tonality. Yet despite its more prosaic form and thematic concerns, it is the following *Scenes from a Marriage* that more relentlessly and radically continues Bergman's diverse engagement with modernity's crisis of belief.

As Maaret Koskinen says of the "metaphysical problems in Bergman's films […], they express not so much belief, as doubt, perhaps an eternally human

and existential state of crisis, a revolt against an absolute authority who might be God, fellow human beings, or marriage." Shot cheaply on 16mm and first screened in six fifty-minute episodes on Swedish television, despite its plain appearance *Scenes from a Marriage* is as 'metaphysical' as *Cries and Whispers*. Without the previous film's elegiac notes of a decaying culture, this work is more tied to the surface minutiae *and* investments of late modernity's secular world. And with its banal setting, the piece's investigation into what lies beneath the visible plane of suburban domestic space and its epicenter of the heterosexual couple is all the more bracing.

Featuring the milieu and personas (husband and wife, played by Liv Ullmann and Erland Josephson) of Sweden's affluent bourgeoisie – a culture beamed back into its own space, as large mainstream audiences engaged with Bergman's work for the first time – the film violates the sacred ontology of those formations. Starting with a sequence in which a TV-style crew interviews the couple, this reflexive journey into the heart of a personal relationship is in many ways as thematically disturbing as *Persona*, but literally closer to home. *Scenes* may *look* less radical, but the apparent safeness of its form and setting allows for a rare intersection between television and popular culture's traditional domestic space and a more modernist insistence on the various forces of repressed negativity that flow beneath the surface of everyday life.

Rather than succumbing to its more conservative traditions, Bergman utilizes television's formal limitations so as to pursue a more extreme manifestation of his confronting close-up technique. "The human face," Truffaut says of this period in Bergman's cinema, "no one draws so close to it as Bergman does. In his recent films there is nothing more than mouths talking, ears listening, eyes expressing curiosity, hunger, panic."

The face of Ullmann, anguished performer of so many Bergman subjects, has never been more chillingly open than in *Scenes from a Marriage* as we almost embarrassingly watch it up close for v*ery* long periods without a cut. Forced upon us through such extended looking, the face has never been more confrontingly interior, our relationship with it more disturbingly intimate – as we watch the material communicative nerve ends of our giant onscreen companion as it seeks to look 'inside' itself, by means of a gaze ultimately directed straight out at us.

Television seemed the best means through which to fund new projects, and in 1974 Bergman staged, directed, and filmed a version of Mozart's *Magic Flute*. The film recreates a 17th Century Swedish theatre in which a modern audience watches the opera. The camera also shows us behind-the-

scenes moments during the performance, amid a subtle essay on the mediation of art forms and the constant presence of other textual realities (perhaps no less revealing) beneath that of the 'primary' text/performance.

Another multi-part television project followed in 1976. While I have only seen the shorter (and English-language) cut of *Face to Face*, here Bergman's detractors seem right: the film, about a psychiatrist who has a nervous breakdown, seems a hermetic and cloying work, a case where Bergman repeats and makes too literal more successful past ideas. Rather than repeating himself, another US co-production called *The Serpents' Egg* (1977) is problematic for opposite reasons. Shot in Germany and filmed in English, starring Ullmann with David Carradine, the dying days of late-Weimar Berlin is Bergman's uncharacteristically large canvas. The skills that forged his unique intimate cinema are entirely opposite to those required for this historical drama, and Bergman's lack of overt political analysis for once does make the work superficial. Like *The Touch*, the film was a commercial and critical disaster.

Filmed in Norway, *Autumn Sonata* (1978) seems a reaction against *Serpent's Egg*. This film about a celebrity concert pianist and her daughter's brief reunion, brings back Bergman's trademark 'chamber cinema' with a vengeance. Starring Ullmann and Ingrid Bergman (who developed cancer during shooting, and retired from the cinema immediately afterwards), the film also seems softer, more conciliatory, and after a harrowing night's interaction, recognizably humanist. Depending on the viewer, the film is either a more approachable chamber drama, or repetitive filmmaking with the harder edges rounded off.

Certainly *From the Life of the Marionettes* (1980) cannot be accused of humanist warmth and reconciliation. More than the epic family melodrama *Fanny and Alexander*, the critical and audience adoration of which in 1983 celebrated Bergman's whole career as he moved into retirement, *Marionettes* is a fitting coda to this filmmaker's modernist trajectories. Filmed for German television, it is the hardest and bleakest work of Bergman's final decade. A very idiosyncratic take on German enunciation and filmmaking, the film stands as a powerful continuation – a coda, really – of Bergman's almost career-long focus on the doubt-ridden confrontation with a very immanent and personal abyss, and the aesthetic rendering of subjective crisis that generates a horrible kind of intimacy for the viewer.

Marionettes' long confessional monologues in part tell the story of a man who has killed a prostitute, and in fake 'investigation'-style flashbacks, partakes in murderous games with his wife – with whom he seems to share a horrible grafting beyond love or hate. Though usually compared to *Scenes from a Marriage*, with its airless interiors rendered through spare monochrome images without a hint of sunlight or nature, and in which a violent interpersonal life nastily plays out amid the clean modernist designs of Munich, the film seems just as linked to the hard lines of *The Ritual*.

Bergman decided to retire from commercial filmmaking with a return to Sweden. With long-time friend, filmmaker and writer Jörn Donner acting as

executive producer for this Swedish/West-German/French co-production, *Fanny and Alexander* was Bergman's (and Sweden's) most expensive film, with lavish set design and cinematography winning two of the film's four Oscars. Yet despite its ostentatious scale, the film's best scenes still feature intimate spaces and interactions, and the extended television version in particular is much more Bergmanesque than the work at first appears.

The full five-hour cut of Bergman's last official film includes some of this filmmaker's clearest, most mature working through of age-old concerns, in the guise of a warmer, more accessible address. For casual viewers *Fanny and Alexander* is Bergman's most attractive film, while for connoisseurs it is a massive crystalline prism text that refracts the central concerns of a forty-year oeuvre.

Coda: an epilogue and film history

Bergman immediately followed the huge success of *Fanny and Alexander* with a much more characteristically small film called *After the Rehearsal* (which I have not been able to see). Like *Marionettes*, it was intended only for TV, but was nonetheless then sold for theatrical release. This was the last film written and directed by Ingmar Bergman to be commercially distributed – although in late 2002 he has completed shooting a new film possibly to be released in 2003.

Bergman spent the late 1980s and '90s writing screenplays (the most recent of which was *Faithless* [1999], directed by Liv Ullmann), novels and two autobiographical books. *The Magic Lantern* (1987) is Bergman's much-lauded work about his own life, the address and thematic texture of which is uncannily like a superb Bergman film. And *Images* (from 1991) is a fascinating contemporary reappraisal of his work amid extracts from original workbooks kept during production.

He has also been intermittently directing (and sometimes writing) TV productions like 1997's *In the Presence of a Clown*, and more consistently still works in the theatre (from which he also 'retired' many times). But Bergman spends most of his days writing and looking out on the mise-en-scène of his most radical and characteristic work – the violently sublime rocky shoreline and seas of Fårö.

During this very active twenty-year epilogue to one of the most remarkable careers in world cinema, Ingmar Bergman has been a specter haunting film history. Although not often invoked in film culture, he is still in some quarters thought of as an important figure that asked of cinema what it *is* – and what *are* the beings that invent it. During Ullmann's press interviews for *Faithless*, half the questions were about Bergman. There was curiosity about his script for the film, as well as his personal and creative relationship with Ullmann. But there were also questions about Bergman *per se* as if to simply acknowledge one of the not so often mentioned masters of world cinema, and to gesture towards the corner that shrouds an already dark oeuvre.

Today's film students are often more likely to have seen *Imitation of Life* (Douglas Sirk, 1959) than any Bergman. While the revisionist approach to history and culture has been necessary, there is a real danger of writing out figures, films and bodies of work containing some of cinema's really important achievements, like *The Seventh Seal* or *Persona*. Perhaps the same people for too long said the same things about Bergman, while others saw him as personifying a cinema that had to be overcome – so students and readers understandably went off in search of new interests within film history's then neglected corners. "Yet there is no body of work of the caliber and integrity of Bergman's since the war," argued Truffaut in 1973, protesting at Bergman's decade of critical obscurity prior to *Cries and Whispers*. For me, Truffaut's considerable claim still stands. In terms of an oeuvre, the equation is daunting: around fifty films of remarkable reach, at least a third of them genuine masterpieces.

A long period away from Bergman's cinema should allow serious film culture to look afresh at a body of work that is today one of film history's best-kept secrets. Faced with new uncertainties and doubts about a turn-of-the-century world, our role in it and what we want out of images, as well as perennial problems of subjectivity that are far from overcome, fresh eyes and minds could really open up Bergman's most challenging work.

For the very first time these films can be liberated from a historical position within teleological modernism, or as components of an authorially overdetermined oeuvre. Some dense life and difficult pleasure would be generated from a brand new encounter with Bergman's very modern cinema and the radical intimacy it engenders.

Filmography

Below are all the films Ingmar Bergman has directed to date. The list omits only theatre productions of other writers' work that Bergman directed straight to television. All the films below were commercially released Swedish language productions, unless otherwise noted. The dates given pertain to when the film was first released, theatrically *or* on television. Bergman's films were often released outside Sweden with various titles. The films are listed below with the most generally well-known English translation alongside the original Swedish (allied with a general preference for the UK release titles, which are usually more accurate than the US versions).

- **_Kris_ (_Crisis_)** (1945) also writer (adaptation)
- **_Det regnar på vår kärlek_ (_It Rains on Our Love_)** (1946) also co-writer
- **_Skepp till Indialand_ (_A Ship Bound for India_)** (1947) also writer (adaptation)
- **_Musik i mörker_ (_Music in Darkness_)** (1948)
- **_Hamnstad_ (_Port of Call_)** (1948) also co-writer
- **_Fängelse_ (_Prison_)** (1949) also writer
- **_Törst_ (_Thirst_)** (1949)
- **_Till glädje_ (_To Joy_)** (1950) also writer
- **_Sånt händer inte här_ (_This Can't Happen Here_)** (1950)
- **_Sommarlek_ (_Summer Interlude_)** (1950) also co-writer, synopsis
- **_Kvinnors väntan_ (_Waiting Women_)** (1952) also writer
- **_Sommaren med Monika_ (_Summer with Monika_)** (1953) also co-writer
- **_Gycklarnas afton_ (_Sawdust and Tinsel_)** (1953) also writer
- **_En lektion i kärlek_ (_A Lesson in Love_)** (1954) also writer
- **_Kvinnodröm_ (_Journey into Autumn_)** (1955) also writer
- **_Sommarnattens leend_ (_Smiles of a Summer Night_)** (1955) also writer
- **_Det sjunde inseglet_ (_The Seventh Seal_)** (1957) also writer
- **_Smultronstället_ (_Wild Strawberries_)** (1957) also writer
- **_Nära livet_ (_Brink of Life_)** (1958) also writer
- **_Ansiktet_ (_The Magician_)** (1958) also writer
- **_Jungfrukällan_ (_The Virgin Spring_)** (1960)
- **_Djävulens öga_ (_The Devil's Eye_)** (1960) also writer (adaptation)

- **_Såsom i en spegel_ (_Through a Glass Darkly_)** (1961) also writer
- **_Nattvardsgästerna_ (_Winter Light_)** (1963) also writer
- **_Tystnaden_ (_The Silence_)** (1963) also writer
- **_För att inte tala om alla dessa kvinnor_ (_Now about_**

these women) (1964) also co-writer

- ***Persona*** (1966) also writer
- ***Daniel*** (1967) also writer, photographer, narrator; short episode in the compilation film *Stimulantia*
- ***Vargtimmen*** **(*Hour of the Wolf*)** (1968) also writer
- ***Skammen*** **(*The Shame*)** (1968) also co-producer, writer
- ***Riten*** **(*The Ritual*)** (1969) also co-producer, writer, actor; television mini-feature, followed by theatrical release
- ***En Passion*** **(*A Passion*)** (1969) also co-producer, writer
- ***Fårö-dokument*** **(*The Fårö Document*)** (1970) also producer, writer, performer; television documentary
- ***Beröringen*** **(*The Touch*)** (1971) also co-producer, writer; Sweden/USA, English language
- ***Viskningar och rop*** **(*Cries and Whispers*)** (1972) co-producer, writer
- ***Scener ur ett äktenskap*** **(*Scenes From a Marriage*)** (1973) also producer, writer; 300-minute television version in 6 parts, 168-minute theatrical cut
- ***Trollflöjten*** **(*The Magic Flute*)** (1975) also writer (adaptation); television production, theatical release
- ***Ansikte mot ansikte*** **(*Face to Face*)** (1976) also co-producer, writer; Sweden/USA; 200-minute television version in 4 parts, 136-minute theatrical cut
- ***Das Schlangenei*** **(*The Serpent's Egg*)** (1977) also writer; West Germany/USA, English language
- ***Herbstsonate*** **(*Autumn Sonata*)** (1978) also producer, writer
- ***Fårö-dokument 1979*** **(*The Fårö-document 1979*)** (1979) also co-producer, writer, narrator; television documentary
- ***Aus dem Leben des Marionetten*** **(*From the Life of the Marionettes*)** (1980) also co-producer, writer; West Germany; television feature, theatrical release
- ***Fanny och Alexander*** **(*Fanny and Alexander*)** (1982) also co-producer, writer; Sweden/West Germany/France; 312-minute television version in 5 parts, 183-minute theatrical cut
- ***Efter repetitionen*** **(*After the Rehearsal*)** (1984) also producer, writer; television mini-feature, theatrical release
- ***De två saliga*** **(*The Blessed Ones*)** (1985) television feature
- ***Dokument Fanny och Alexander*** **(*Documentary of Fanny and Alexander*)** (1986) also producer, writer; television documentary
- ***Karins ansikte*** **(*Karin's Face*)** (1986) also producer, writer; short television film
- ***Larmar och görsig till*** **(*In the Presence of a Clown*)**

(1997) also writer; television play
- ***Bildmakarna*** (2000) also writer (adaptation); television feature
- ***Anna/Saraband*** (2002/3, in production) also writer; shot for theatrical release
- **OTHER CREDITS**
- ***Hets*** **(*Frenzy*)** (1944) Dir: Alf Sjöberg (co-writer)
- ***Kvinna utan ansikte*** **(*Woman Without a Face*)** (1947) Dir: Gustaf Molander (co-writer, synopsis)
- ***Eva*** (1948) Dir: Gustaf Molander (co-writer, synopsis)
- ***Frånskild*** **(*Divorced*)** (1951) Dir: Gustaf Molander (co-writer)
- ***Sista paret ut*** **(*Last Couple Out*)** (1956) Dir: Alf Sjöberg (writer)
- ***Lustgårde*** **(*The Pleasure Garden*)** (1961) Dir: Alf Kjellin (co-writer)
- ***Reservalet*** **(*The Reservation*)** (1970) Dir: Jan Molander (writer) television feature
- ***Den goda viljan*** **(*The Best Intentions*)** (1991) Dir: Bille August (writer) television series
- ***Söndagsbarn*** **(*Sunday's Children*)** (1992) Dir: Daniel Bergman (writer)
- ***Enskilda samtal*** **(*Private Confessions*)** (1996) Dir: Liv Ullmann (writer)
- ***Trolösa*** **(*Faithless*)** (1999) Dir: Liv Ullmann (writer)

LA CINÉMATHÈQUE

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Wild Strawberries
1957

Wild Strawberries: The Roar of Silence

Mervyn Marshall • 4 March, 2016

'Life' says Kierkegaard, 'can only be understood backwards; but it must be lived forwards.' Bergman never acknowledged the influence of the Lutheran that was often attributed to his work. Yet it is this momentum forward, a rapid acceleration of life towards the end that causes Isak Borg to reflect on his youth and his family. 'No form of art goes beyond ordinary consciousness as film does… deep into the twilight room of the soul' wrote Bergman in 1987. Here, in his films, dreams and memories dominate the relationship between his characters and the world. Their senses are exposed, susceptible to heat of the sun, the feel of the earth between fingers, to 'hearing the grass grow, and the squirrel's heart beat... and we should die of that roar which lies on the other side of silence.'

It is a dream that prompts Isak Borg to take the drive from Stockholm to Lund accompanied by his daughter-in-law. One night he finds himself walking down an abandoned street. A harsh and relentless sunlight blankets the empty streets. There is an unbearable silence that accompanies Isak, so much so that he can hear the beat of his own heart. Silence is loneliness. Unlike solitude, which is to be cherished, loneliness is one of Bergman's greatest fears. He will forsake many of his characters to loneliness, to anguish and death, such as Eva and Jan Rosenberg in *Shame* (1968) abandoned in a tiny life boat, adrift at sea, or Karin from *Through a Glass Darkly* (1961) whose violation at the hands of the Spider-faced god leads to her total mental collapse. However for Isak Borg, a character created out of the fusion of the turmoil Bergman found in his own inner life and the icy posterior of the director's father, the dream serves as a warning, a chance of self-redemption through reflection. To dream of oneself is to dream of death and Isak is entitled to a premonition as his body spills from the coffin and latches onto him whilst the eyeless figure that crumbles to the ground and disintegrates alludes to the ignorance and stubbornness of his will. Isak is performed by a former titan of Swedish cinema, Victor Sjöström, then 78, in a role that came first with apprehension and later, celebration. Bergman declared that '*Wild Strawberries* was no longer my film; it was Victor Sjöström's!' This sequence pays tribute to his mentor through the ghostly, driverless carriage that crashes in the street. A reference to Sjöström's 1922 film *The Phantom Carriage*, a Dickensian folktale of death and regret. Bergman's relationship with his father dominates so much of his canon and a bitter feud between the two informed much of the relationship between Isak and his son, Evald, in *Wild Strawberries*. Upon seeing the film, his father, Erik Bergman, wrote to Sjöström, stating that, 'I will always remember with gratitude the friendly, encouraging words you spoke to me about Ingmar when he was still very young, and I stood before you in doubt and uncertainty.'

Along the journey, Isak decides to make a brief interlude at the house where spent the summers of his youth. He spies a patch of wild strawberries and at a touch, he is transported into the past. The howl of the wind against the trees and the song of summer birds prompt the involuntary memory of the soul for Bergman just as madeleine cake did for Proust. Isak is taken to a memory, or rather, to the essence of a memory, a feeling of a memory not retrieved but revealed. Before him appears Sara, the love of his youth who would eventually marry his brother and have six children. Sitting amongst the grass, picking a basket of strawberries, she is approached by Isak's brother. Nature encompasses the two figures, giving way to the earthy and loose sensuality of their

body language. With this framing Bergman evokes Manet's *Le Déjeuner sur l'herbe*, his camera tracks inwards, inviting the comparisons of voyeurism. After all, what is the man who searches through memories both cherished and pale, but a voyeur?

Eventually Isak is brought back from the past by another ghost, or rather the reincarnation of his childhood love in a modern form. This Sara, both played by Bibi Andersson, reinvigorates Isak by flattering him with attention and flirtation, soon she and her companions are joining them to Lund. The ancient car driven by Isak has a metallic, tomblike physicality to it that contrasts with the spacious freedom of the Swedish countryside. No more is this deliverance into nature felt than the lunch break at Isak's family home, which takes place just after the bitter married couple have been ejected from the car. One of Europe's largest inland lakes sprawls out as a backdrop and the conversation between the companions relaxes over cigars and port. Turning, eventually to a psalm written by Johan Olof Wallin:

Where is the friend I seek at break of day?
When night falls I still have not found Him.
My burning heat shows me His traces
I see His traces whenever flowers bloom
His love is mingled with every air.

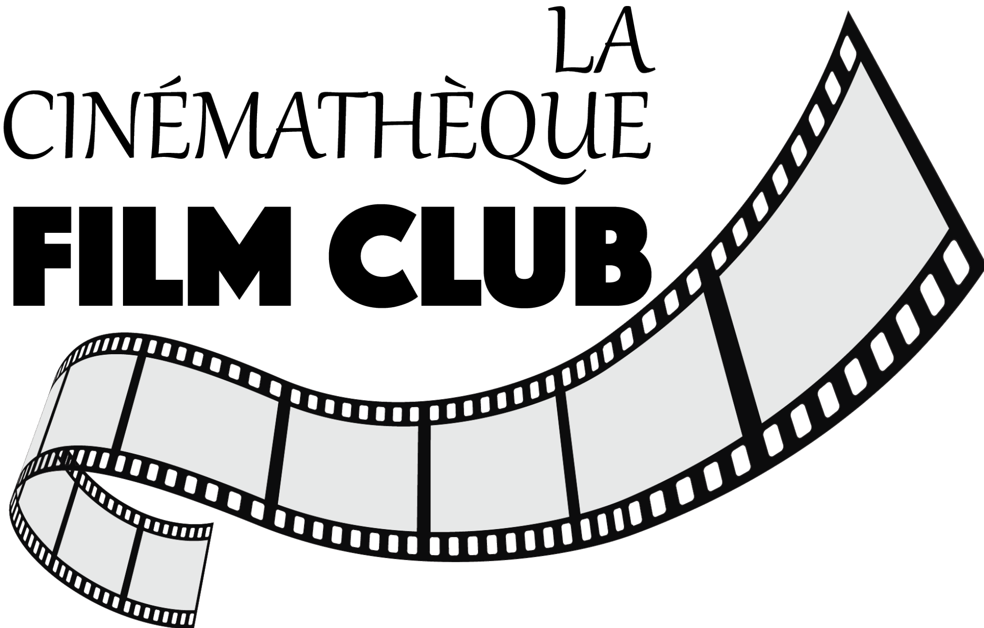
Bergman struggled with his faith throughout his life and work, but at this moment, as momentum slows in the hazy afternoon, within the expanse and serenity of his country's natural landscape he equates all beauty to the work of God.

Back on the road Isak falls into the belly of consciousness and finds himself enduring a series of painful humiliations; physically, professionally and finally sexually in an extended nightmare. Bergman codes the natural world with meaning: a flock of birds becomes a recurring audience for Isak's humiliations. Once again we find ourselves in the patch of wild strawberries with Sara, this time alone. She presents Isak with a mirror and forces him to examine the ageing features that look back at him. Allegedly, Bergman conceived the idea for this sequence whilst at the 1956 Cannes Film Festival with *Smiles of a Summer Night.* After sitting down for his portrait to be drawn by a Russian artist he noticed that 'there were two Bergmans: one, as it were, direct, and one in the mirror. The first had a childish, almost foolish expression on his face. The image in the mirror was of an old man, a ghost with a weary look.' We then bear witness to the life that was beyond Isak. Sara, child in hand, takes refuge from the night, leaving Isak with the empty cradle and the mocking of chattering birds. The twilight casts a sinister shadow over what was previously serene and tranquil. Nighttime and darkness are another source of recurring anxiety for Bergman. Famously, the tortured artist, Johan Borg (Max Von Sydow) in *Hour of the Wolf* states: *The old ones called it "the hour of the wolf". It is the hour when the most people die, and the most are born. At this time, nightmares come to us. And when we awake, we are afraid.*

Isak is then disgraced as a doctor as he repeatedly fails a series of simple tasks whilst his traveling companions look on in detached silence. This sequence demonstrates Bergman's crippling lack of confidence in himself as an artist, something else that would preoccupy much of his work. Here, Isak's judgment and ability is undermined repeatedly, bringing him to question his relevance and self-worth. First, he is unable to work the microscope, thus being rendered obsolete by technology. Secondly he cannot read or recall the first line of duty taken by doctors, as Bergman questions his role as an artist. Finally he declares a patient dead before they erupt into a violent and terrible laughter. This is most degrading, if Isak cannot recognise the signs of life, how is Bergman to find meaning and truth in his art? Finally, Isak is forced to confront a memory of his wife's infidelity and subsequent bitter tirade against his character. At this point, as Isak is abandoned by the woman he shared his life, that terrible silence of loneliness returns to blanket the forest. Once again, Isak observes the scene from the position of the detached voyeur. The deep black that encompasses him as the scene unfolds evokes the framing of Edvard Munch's *Jealousy*. The scene was originally meant to contain hundreds of snakes, however the night before the shoot they escaped from the terrarium that was holding them and then had to be recovered by the various handlers.

Awaking from this nightmare, Isak takes timid steps towards redemption by opening up to his daughter-in-law, Marianne. She explains the reason for temporarily separating from her husband was because of his reaction to her pregnancy. The flashback that ensues is one of the director's most personal sequences, a violent collision of familial conflict and existential fatalism under the howling turmoil of a storm. Evald, in fear of becoming his father, rejects the idea of bringing a child into this world. The raging current that encapsulates the two serves only to emphasise Evald's hostility against the world. The world, as if in response to Evald's reluctance to take up his natural duty as a parent, turns to chaos and violence. This completes Isak's awakening, he can now, tentatively with reservation take steps towards reconciling with his son.

As with all road movies, of which *Wild Strawberries* is surely one of the first, it is not the destination but the journey, in which the importance lies. The ceremony in which Isak is to receive his service award is brief, formal and shrouded in an uninviting darkness. It is not until the day's events are at a close that Isak can find redemption, his invitation to break down formalities with his housekeeper are ironically, cheekily spurned, of course. However as he drifts once again into sleep, a light generates from his head suggesting the redemption of his spirit. The film ends in memory, a phenomenon of old age, where childhood memories swell up through the soul and into the mind's eye, clearer than the passing day. Where 'time and space do not exist. Upon an insignificant background of real life events, the imagination spins and weaves new patterns; a blend of memories, experiences, pure inventions, absurdities and improvisations.' Where the birds sing, and the innocent love of youth brings us to the serene, warming comfort of our parents… and only then can we welcome with open arms 'that roar which lies on the other side of silence.'



Spring 2016

Persona
1966

The Persistence of *Persona*

Thomas Elsaesser • March 27, 2014

When Ingmar Bergman died in July 2007—on the same day as Michelangelo Antonioni—an unexpected controversy arose. Among the obligatory eulogizing obituaries, celebrating his towering achievements and itemizing the admiration for his work by directors ranging from Woody Allen to David Lynch and Robert Altman to Lars von Trier, there were also dissenting voices (most prominently, Jonathan Rosenbaum in a New York Times *op-ed) claiming he was overrated, lacked stylistic originality, and merely inflicted personal psychodramas on awestruck audiences. One might imagine this gainsaying simply reflected the longevity of Bergman's career and a certain iconoclastic impatience with some of the more predictable hyperbole and praise heaped on the departed. But in fact it was a repeat performance: controversy over Bergman goes back a long way, and in New York was sparked by no less a film than* Persona, *his 1966 masterpiece. While Susan Sontag wrote an enthusiastic and, as it turned out, seminal article on Persona, another critical heavyweight, Andrew Sarris, wrote a dismissive review, taking time out to attack Bergman as a filmmaker generally, arguing that he had no talent for the medium ("His technique never equaled his sensibility") and that he should have remained a theater director. Sontag anticipated much of the criticism of not only* Persona *when she wrote: "Some of the paltriness of the critics' reaction may be more a response to the signature that* Persona *carries than to the film itself." Evidently, by this point in his career, Bergman's name had acquired a fixed set of, often contradictory, associations: "lavishly inventive" as well as "facile," "sensual" along with "melodramatic." But as Sontag hinted,* Persona *was something else altogether, taking the filmmaker's stylistic and thematic repertoire to an entirely new level. Here, for the first time, was an unapologetically avant-garde work by Bergman that also dared to veer between vampire horror flick and hospital soap opera, all the while posing ontological questions about the reality status of cinema itself. Since that debate, writing about* Persona *has been for film critics and scholars what climbing Everest is for mountaineers: the ultimate professional challenge. Besides* Citizen Kane, *it is probably the most written-about film in the canon. Raymond Bellour and Jacques Aumont, Robin Wood and Roger Ebert, Paisley Livingston and P. Adams Sitney, along with Sontag and Sarris, have all written with gravity and great insight about* Persona, *not counting several books and collections entirely devoted to the film. In what follows, I shall not undertake yet another all-out assault on the mountain that is* Persona *but concentrate on what makes this film such an exemplary work of European modernism, as well as one of the creative peaks of world cinema.*

Persona is instantly recognizable thanks to two shots that have become its emblems: a boy touching a woman's face on a giant screen and two women looking at each other (and us) across an imaginary mirror. Defining images for the film, they also stand for an idea of the cinema—in fact, for two distinct but complementary metaphors of what cinema is: a portal, a window, a passage you can enter or (almost) touch, and a mirror, a reflection, a prism that gives you back only what you project onto it. *Persona* is also cinema about cinema—a point that Bergman makes clear with his six-minute prologue montage sequence—which is one of the reasons it is such an irresistible challenge for writers.

The first of these shots is from the prologue. A young boy with thick glasses, lying on what looks like a hospital bed, closes the book he is reading, sits up, and reaches out toward the camera, before a reverse shot reveals this to be a translucent surface, on which appears the face of a woman. The close-up of the woman's face projected onto the surface and tentatively touched by the boy visualizes the cinema as a window that both fuses and separates, that invites touch but keeps us (like the boy) isolated in uncertain anticipation. As it becomes

larger and larger, this face is both too close to be recognized and too blurry to be grasped. Representing the archetypal maternal imago, it is at once immediately tactile and irredeemably virtual: the boy's longing for his mother, for direct contact and physical fusion, must remain unfulfilled, for what could bridge the gap between the two planes of psychic reality? The cinema itself is here the father figure that demands renunciation of the primary love object, to enable the boy's eventual selfhood and identity, just as the cinema demands the separation of the body from the image for there to be spectatorship. This parallel is underlined by the boy's initial gesture toward the invisible fourth wall, thereby obliging the spectator to feel directly implicated in his longing and to experience the separation right from the start: we will always remain "virtual" to him, meaning that he, like indeed every character in the film, exists only to the degree that we are prepared to grant him "reality," through the act of activating our empathy, our human touch, the intelligence of our bodies.

If the cinema is a tactile window in the first iconic image, in the second, another look into the camera/screen, it is imaged as a mirror: Elisabet (Liv Ullmann) and her nurse, Alma (Bibi Andersson), face each other in the middle of the night in front of what may be the bathroom cabinet, where the two of them discover—or merely imagine?—an uncanny resemblance. As the scene unfolds and the lightly clad actresses move as if to kiss, their faces overlap, seem almost to be superimposed—anticipating a later shot where a split-screen image of the two women combines their faces, and making us wonder not only who but what is this face looking so intently at us.

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From the 1960s to the mid-1970s, film theory, influenced by Bertolt Brecht's distanciation effect and modernist self-reflexivity in literature and the visual arts, often focused on a film's "mirror construction." In this, -theory tried to catch up with the practice of European art cinema. Reference to other films and self-reference to the fact that you were watching a film became essential elements in the stylistic arsenal of New Wave directors in France and elsewhere—Godard's *Contempt* and Fellini's *8½,* both from 1963, being *Persona*'s precedents. If Hollywood made sure you could enter the world of a film through a metaphoric window or door, the mirror construction was meant to block this passage, rendering the relationship of spectator to screen more complicated (and complicit), especially when it came to deciding what was "out there" and "for real" and what was "inside" and "subjective," or even merely a dream or a hallucination. *Persona* is almost a textbook case, relishing these confusions; we can never be quite certain if what we see has actually happened, and if so, why and to what (narrative) purpose. Sontag, for instance, suggests that Elisabet and Alma may in fact be one person: "It's correct to speak of *Persona* in terms of the fortunes of two characters named Elizabeth and Alma who are engaged in a desperate duel of identities. But it is equally pertinent to treat *Persona* as relating the duel between two mythical parts of a single self: the corrupted person who acts (Elizabeth) and the ingenuous soul (Alma) who founders in contact with corruption."

But Bergman does not keep the spectator merely guessing or at a (Brechtian) distance. On the contrary, *Persona* has an almost hypnotic pull; it draws the spectator in and never lets go, partly because, as demonstrated in the two iconic shots, the screen can be a window before it turns into a mirror. The film continually shifts between these modes, but ultimately it is the mirror that is its major structuring motif, both bringing us into the cinematic space as alternately copresent with the characters and cut off from them and defining the relation

between the emotionally remote and psychically traumatized actress Elisabet and the younger, seemingly cheerful and good-natured Alma. Having suffered a nervous breakdown onstage, in the middle of a performance of *Elektra,* that leaves her unable (or unwilling) to speak, Elisabet is placed in the care of a warmhearted but practically minded chatterbox, at first in a rehabilitation clinic and then, just the two of them, in a country cottage on a remote island. The ensuing rapprochement between the women gives rise to moments of intimacy and the promise of mutual trust, but also leads to mounting tensions and open conflict, with the fluctuating relations depicted as a temporary blurring of their identities in the mirror shot described above.

This scene is so memorable because it relates profoundly to the inner movement and dramatic development not only of these characters' journey of self-discovery but of the film itself, its narrative doublings and reversals—form and function perfectly coalescing in images of exquisite harmony and delicacy, which nonetheless leave room for extraordinary violence, both emotional and physical. The more unsettling, therefore, that the following morning Elisabet denies the very occurrence of the encounter. Yet this, too, has an inner logic, in that it corresponds to the two movements in Alma's character and sensibility: the outgoing emotion, the desire that brings the vision into being and makes it materialize on the screen, and the self-doubting, mirrorlike apprehension that dissolves it again. In such scenes, Bergman brings out fundamental tensions between emotion, intellect, and perception—our separate ways of apprehending the world—if we allow ourselves to follow the characters' actions and are willing to open ourselves to the conflicting emotional signals emitted by their often unexpectedly violent interactions. In this respect, Elisabet and Alma are stand-ins for those of us spectators who first have to sort out our complicated feelings after an intense film experience before we know what to make of it.

A look at Bergman's filmography shows that several titles reflect the importance for him of the mirror and the face: *The Face* (1958, released in the U.S. as *The Magician)*, *Through a Glass Darkly* (1961), *Face to Face* (1976), *Karin's Face* (1984). But what are the effects of looking into the eyes of a face that is larger-than-life, or of being in the presence of two women's faces, often in close-up, for some eighty minutes? Watching Persona is a draining and harrowing experience, which may explain why writers have sought explanatory assistance from phenomenology, psychoanalysis, and even the neurosciences, often with intriguing results.

I recall a paper at a Bergman conference that cited the latest research on mirror neurons—those that fire in mimetic, or empathetic, response when humans and animals observe an action performed by another member of the species—in a reading of *Persona.* This brought into focus for me a feature of the film that had always struck me as especially notable, as well as disturbing, namely the link Bergman makes between hands and the face, that is, the touch and the mirror (to a person's soul). Once more, the emblematic shot of the boy touching the screen/face seems to say it all. Yet these connections are everywhere in *Persona:* hands reaching out to caress or slap faces, or covering their own faces; even the photo of the Warsaw ghetto boy with his hands raised is scrutinized by the camera for hands and faces. More generally, these movements are a surprisingly frequent motif in Bergman. One thinks of a scene in *The Virgin Spring* (1960) where an elderly woman caresses the face of the suffering girl, or a similar one in *The Seventh Seal* (1957). We find a woman touching another woman in *Cries and Whispers* (1972), in *Autumn Sonata* (1978), and in *Fanny and Alexander* (1982), where a hand approaching a face is brusquely rejected. A man and a woman touch each other's faces tenderly in *Summer with Monica* (1953), and violently in *The Passion of Anna* (1969), and, of course, in *The Touch* (1971), we have to keep the title in mind all

the time. On a biographical point, it shows that Bergman belonged to a generation where physical chastisement of children was still the norm—Michael Haneke's *The White Ribbo*n is something of a Bergman pastiche in this respect—but from a neurological perspective, the motif confirms that few gestures elicit as much empathetic mimicry as a hand touching a face.

Even if he would have probably dismissed such scientific findings as irrelevant to his films, there is little doubt that, for Bergman, extraordinary powers are stored and enclosed in the face. Yet such powers also underline its vulnerability and precarious status: between the openly visible and the smoothly impenetrable, between the lighting up of a spiritual essence and the merely material "surface" for deceit and disguise. In *Persona,* the face goes through all these permutations. Already in the prologue, the lightly contoured visage on the screen is contrasted with the darkly silhouetted face of an old woman lying on a table in a morgue. During the second half of the film, when Alma is desperate to differentiate herself as much as possible from Elisabet, she washes her face under a running tap as if to wash away with the nosebleed also the now dreaded likeness itself. After another nocturnal encounter, this time with Elisabet's husband—perhaps a figment of her imagination—Alma decides to leave, shouting: "I'm not like you. I don't feel the same way you do . . . I'm not Elisabet Vogler: you are Elisabet Vogler." Following the scene of Alma's passionate embrace of Elisabet's husband—revealing just how far she will go to identify with Elisabet—this desperate outburst not only protests too much but amounts to a self-contradiction, made manifest in the composite image of the two women's merged faces we see.

Early on in the film, Bergman plays another variation on the theme of the face in the way he juxtaposes the two women when they go to bed. Elisabet's face, motionless and turned toward the camera, grows slowly darker and darker—an apt expression of her essentially reflective nature—while Alma, restless, switching the light on and off, comes across as temperamental and impulsive, qualities underlined by a soliloquy where just as important as what she says are her actions: rubbing on night cream, once more defining her across face and touch but where her insecurities and doubts are made to contradict, but also complement, her more resolute and self-assured daytime manner.

Something like a craving of the face for the charge and discharge of the touch is thus in *Persona* associated with Alma's personality and her inner demons. It is contrasted with the mask (as makeup) that Elisabet wears when she is onstage and suddenly falls silent, but also with her often supercilious, ironic expression toward Alma, which she puts on like a mask. The very title *Persona,* of course, refers to this mask, so that one might think the film would proceed to a mutual unmasking, where fragile, unworthy, inauthentic selves are peeled away. And in a sense, this is the case, as both women are in turn stripped emotionally bare and have moments where they lose their composure, i.e., lose "face." Opposite the mute and thus "closed" Elisabet, the seemingly carefree Alma several times "opens up" in the course of the film, sometimes verbally, at others more physically. But her fresh and open face never has the rigidity of the mask, which is what Elisabet's enforced or self-imposed silence amounts to. Yet despite this drama of open and closed expressions, of tearing at each other's protective surface, *Persona* is less about what is "behind" the mask and perhaps more concerned with what can and must pass through the mask, since besides questioning the ethics of stripping the soul naked of all pretence, Bergman also shows us both women's wily and ingenious self-fashioning during their encounters with each other.

In addition to this maintenance of the mask, there is the film's modernist self-reflexivity, which insists on our constantly remembering that we are watching a performance. *Persona* opens with scenes that bring the projector into the picture, and it ends with the camera and the crew appearing in the shot. In the prologue, an old-style carbon arc light movie projector is being lit, as if the images we are about to see are being shown from the impersonal perspective of a machine. Toward the end, the big Mitchell camera is cantilevered into the frame as it films Elisabet lying on her back; and as Alma is leaving, suitcase and all, the boy returns, once more touching the blurred screen image, as if to cue the celluloid strip to jump out of the sprockets of the projector, whose arc lights gradually dim, leaving us literally in the dark.

Yet these scenes are not merely self-reflexive, or nods to Godard's and Fellini's films about filmmaking mentioned earlier. Bergman here establishes a series of intriguing equivalences between mask and screen, skin and film strip. This has already been suggested in a scene where Alma's face cracks like glass and then burns up, a combustible film strip getting torn in the projector gate, consumed by flames like the monk protesting in Vietnam on Elisabet's television early on. A mere trick, one might think, but also a strong hint that the violence *in* the film and *on* the screen may be only a visible metaphor for the invisible violence *of* the screen, indicative of the aggression inherent in the voyeuristic interest we project onto the action as spectators, to which the director responds with a certain sadism of his own, by suddenly reminding us of the nonhuman materiality of his film.

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If it were told from a Hollywood perspective, *Persona* would be the story of Elisabet, nursed back to health by Alma while each of the women gradually "absorbs" part of the other's personality. But there is no equivalence, no lasting exchange, and their only common ground seems to be that they are both women. Set against their gender are, for instance, their very distinct backgrounds: Elisabet and Alma differ in marital and social status, in class and celebrity, as well as in temperament and moral outlook. Brought together by chance, the two are locked in a fierce power struggle. At first, it appears that "life" is all on the side of Alma, the "healthy" young woman whose optimism seems infectious. But as the film progresses, the balance of power between them shifts several times.

This is the psychological situation, and it seems that, in the end, they battle each other to a draw, with Alma perhaps coming out a bit on top, because she still has a life to live, whereas we sense that, however much she may recover, Elisabet has little to look forward to, either from her husband (whose brief visit to the island—if this, too, is not a hallucination on Alma's part—shows him so metaphorically, or even literally, blind that he cannot tell his wife from her nurse) or with her son, whom she emotionally abandoned early on (and who reappears, metaphorically, in the photo of the Jewish boy from the Warsaw ghetto). If we are to believe the sentiments Alma infers from Elisabet's tacit agreement, in the scene where Alma fills in (for us) the background to Elisabet's professional and marital life, Elisabet did not want to have the boy but was too cowardly to abort. This in contrast to Alma, who did have the strength to take such a decision when she knew she was not ready to have a child. Motherhood and the maternal are often the key characteristics of women in Bergman's world, starting with his early *Brink of Life* (1958), which features a live birth. There is thus something quite archaic or primal also at work in the women's confrontation in Persona: the power of being able to give birth or refusing to

do so, the labor of parturition and the pain of having an abortion being put in the balance and weighed accordingly.

Along with the women's psychology and gender, a literary side, too, enters the constellation, because Persona brings together two romantic archetypes: the double and the vampire. These two mythological figures are recurring motifs in Bergman's imaginative universe (1963's *The Silence,* 1968's *The Hour of the Wolf* and *Shame*), and surprisingly often, they are female, in contrast to their literary (and cinematic) equivalents. Given the initial near-death situation of Elisabet, it seems clear who here is the vampire, sucking out Alma's young blood and life force.

But as with the vampire in romantic literature, a political reading suggests itself as well. What used to be a metaphor for the (postrevolutionary) aristocracy retaining its deadly grip on a rising bourgeoisie now traces, in the confrontation between Elisabet and Alma, the outlines of another class struggle: this time between the well-to-do middle class and the menial working class. In this scenario, no longer the aphasia of a sick person, Elisabet's silence becomes a weapon, the haughty refusal to trade in the currency of common and shared humanity. It makes the babble of Alma stand for the voice of the people, needing to speak regardless, so as not to choke and suffocate in the face of injustice, prejudice, and discrimination. But such is the (Hegelian) dialectic of "master" and "slave" also in this case that dependency can shift and find itself upended, which in *Persona* is demonstrated by the cinematic dynamics of speech and space.

In the scene onstage precipitating Elisabet's nervous breakdown, when she suddenly stops midgesture, one expects a cause to be revealed, possibly by a point-of-view shot or a reaction shot. Instead, her action remains unmotivated and unexplained, a diva's caprice. Yet the way Bergman formally organizes the scene gives us the necessary clues to its function and meaning. The disposition of figure and space, of character movement and camera movement, conveys the urgency of her choice and the claustrophobia in her mind more immediately and convincingly than any of the verbal explanations given by the doctor. We first see Elektra/Elisabet with her back to the camera, addressing an audience in a theater. Gradually, she turns around, approaches the camera, until her face is in close-up and she is looking almost straight at us. Meaning lies not in the verbal commentary (which merely fills in context) but in her physical movement. The shot begins with Elisabet facing the theater audience and ends with her facing us, the cinema audience. Both audiences are "virtual" (as in the iconic shot with the boy), since the theater auditorium appears to be empty. Signaled in her turn from one audience to the other is that she has literally come to a turning point in her life. The transition from an outer void (the world of appearances and make-believe) to facing up to an inner void happens entirely in the fluid motion that joins these two virtual spaces.

This movement from an outer to an inner world is reinforced, and given a concrete spatial embodiment, by the position of the camera. Elisabet is onstage (as a diva, she is also public property), and as she turns toward backstage (where the camera is), she enters a more intimate and immediate, but also a more turbulent and ungrounded, reality (Bergman makes similar use of the backstage metaphor in 1953's *Sawdust and Tinsel* and 1955's *Smiles of a Summer Night*). Yet what is most striking in this scene is the near complete absence of perspective and depth, which becomes a guiding principle also in the subsequent action.

For most of the film, in fact, the women are almost uncomfortably close to the camera; the background is often indistinct or blurred, with their faces seen as if from behind glass. Composed of flat visual planes with

clear outlines, yet without a feeling of roundness and wholeness, Persona conveys an overwhelming sense of at once claustrophobia and trans-parency, of suffocation and an almost hallucinatory clarity. Such deliberate one-dimensionality in the image, coupled with strong bodily responses, transmits the women's predicament of being trapped directly to the spectator, making sensation a form of perception. Achieved by Bergman's refusal to let the illusion of ordinary space develop, it substitutes instead a properly "cinematic" space—without, however, destroying that sense of psychological realism, so necessary to any involvement in the interpersonal drama unfolding.

The presence of this flat cinematic space extends to the outdoor scenes, where the low horizon of the island setting, the pebbly beach and rocky outcrops are shot in a noticeably multiperspectival, cubist manner. This essentially abstract way of rendering physical space contrasts with the few scenes where there are suddenly edge, frame, and perspective. For example, when Alma tells of her sexual adventure with the boys on the beach, Bergman gives the room an extraordinary depth, with the two women as focal points, clearly distinguished and surrounded by pools of light that both illuminate (Alma) and isolate (Elisabet). Against the impersonal, flat, and evenly lit space of the other scenes, this one has an immediate, but deceptive, quality of warmth and intimacy. The function is twofold: Firstly, it clearly separates the two women, removing Elisabet from Alma's experience while giving to Alma an emotional freedom outside of their ambivalent relationship. Secondly, the deep focus, providing, as it does, plenitude to the image and extending the visual space, perfectly corresponds to the sentiment that Alma tries to express. At the same time, it associates a thematic value, making evident the immensely erotic charge and liberating power Bergman wants to convey through Alma's tale, the sensual reality of a warm, expansive day on the beach, the sexual abandon, the physical intimacy, the strangely innocent fulfillment of this impersonal commingling of bodies stirred by passion and lust. It is from all and any of this that Elisabet exiles herself with her silence and self-control, inadvertently restoring to Alma the full power and presence that come from speech and language in the cinema. The scene is evidence of Bergman's extraordinary prowess as a writer, a craftsman of words that here are temporarily (and, one imagines, vicariously) lent to the body and voice of a great actress.

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Persona is a chamber play, and in recent years, many of Bergman's films have been extraordinarily successful all over the world when staged as plays: *Persona* in Mexico City (2008), *Autumn Sonata* in Tel Aviv (2007) and Moscow (2012), *Through a Glass Darkly* in New York (2011), not to mention *Scenes from a Marriage,* performed widely. But the care Bergman devotes to his cinematic spaces gives the lie to the notion that he remained, for all the auteurist accolades he received, a man of the theater, and that *Persona,* too, is just Strindberg resurrected, set on an island instead of a stage.

Another charge made against *Persona* when it was released was that it examines the relation of the two women in a social vacuum. I've taken some pains to refute this, too, by showing the complex thematic echoes of class and status that are embedded in the themes of silence and space. But even more telling, it seems to me, are the many ways in which *Persona* actually infuses urgency and energy into the somewhat clichéd metaphor of the social vacuum. On the one hand, Elisabet's silence creates a void that Alma is compelled to fill with her words, at the risk of being annihilated by that formidable silence. On the other hand, Elisabet finds in her self--inflicted

silence a release from the extroverted existence imposed upon her by her profession. Away from the role that smothered her own self under layers of makeup, she tries to discover an inner dimension, a new intimacy as the hoped-for fruit of solitude. To this, Alma brings the necessary—-devastating—correction that there may not be a self beneath the mask.

By yet another dialectical turn, which makes the void less of a black hole and more of a white surface, Alma finds in Elisabet's silence the screen upon which she can project all the roles she has always wanted to play. She becomes an extrovert to a degree that seems to surprise even herself, though only to discover in the process that, by playing these roles, she has stripped herself of all her outward assurance and certainty. By dramatizing her own existence in front of her silent spectator, Alma becomes an actress, performing before an audience. Here, too, a metacinematic reference becomes evident, if only by the fact that Alma is of course played by a professional actress, Bibi Andersson. As David Thomson once dryly noted: "Bergman's films are about actors and artists playing actors and artists."

But a further, more philosophical point also emerges: silence and volubility are merely the two extremes of the same (modernist) theme, so often broached in Bergman's films (*Through a Glass Darkly,* 1962's *Winter Light*): the Silence of God, eliciting a complementary-compensatory, even hysterical, need for contact and communication. *Persona* bears out the convergence, but also the clash, of these extremes: of silence countered by words and words met by silence. Perhaps the women, each recognizing her contradictory, if not false, position in the mirror of its opposite, actually gain the insight that, in a world without transcendence, human beings have only each other. This very drama of self-knowledge through the other should give the film an inherent dynamic toward a more conciliatory resolution. It would be the Hollywood ending, but Bergman's sense of honesty obliges him to withhold it.

Bergman, self-confessed charlatan and conjurer, lover of the magic lantern and lifelong devotee to masters of Swedish silent cinema, is remarkably honest with his characters, but also with his audience. If the prologue of *Persona* recapitulates, as it were, the pleasures and terrors of cinema experienced by Bergman as a child, the metacinema reference to camera and celluloid toward the end freely admits to the artifice, but also to the self-deception and self-indulgence, that moviemaking entails. In this respect, he was perhaps ahead of both his admirers and his critics, as if the controversies and challenges that *Persona* continues to provoke were preprogrammed into its very conception: not only the iconic images that are worth a thousand words but also the silences that launched a thousand commentaries.

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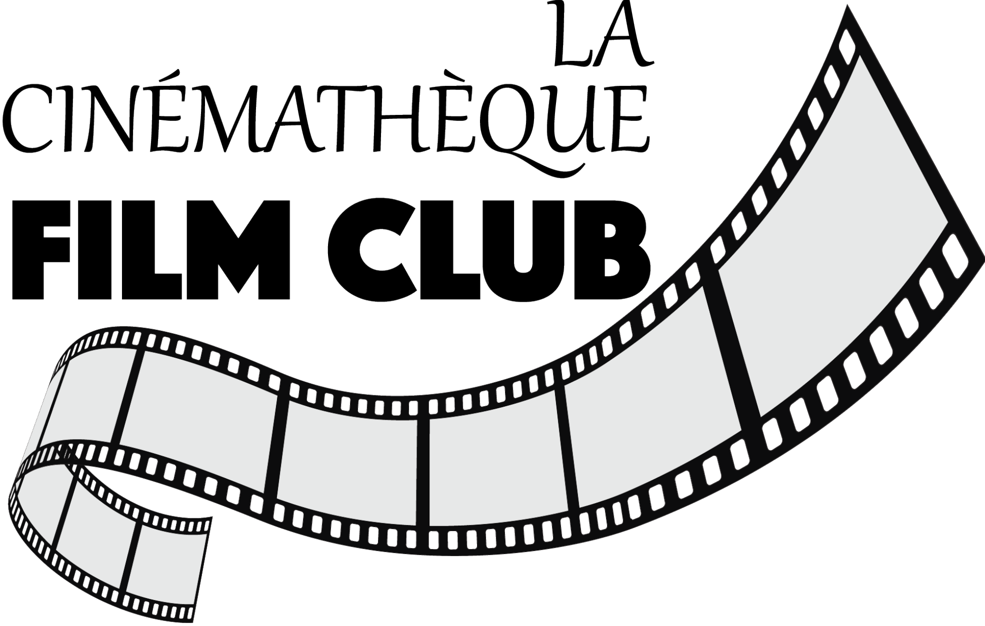

Spring 2016

Scenes from a Marriage
1973

Marriage as Cinematic Movement, or Loving the Face in Close-Up: *Scenes From a Marriage*

Kristi McKim • August, 2007

Article sourced from Senses of Cinema: http://sensesofcinema.com/2007/cteq/scenes-marriage/

What balance of novelty and familiarity sustains a marriage? How can a couple remain both dynamic and intimate? How does anyone maintain a monogamous commitment when the thrill of discovery physiologically quickens the pulse, or when one person will never be everything to another? Why does anyone betray another, when exposure can turn the stomach?

In 1960, Michelangelo Antonioni famously claimed that "eros is sick", insofar as the technologically evolving world hadn't engendered an accordingly evolved moral landscape: people's expectations for emotional commitment were incompatible with the sensual and stimulating modern world. While Antonioni's films portray this intersection of antiquated morality and technological advancement through a mostly anesthetised aesthetic (in character-diminishing landscapes and erotic encounters eerily void of pleasure), Bergman's films insist upon the pain of feeling *within* that modern world. Instead of creating stories and a style that perform this moral/technological estrangement, Bergman focuses intimately upon the emotional causes and effects of feeling incompatible desires within the modern world – a tension stunningly exemplified in *Scenes From a Marriage*.

Chronicling the waxing and waning of love and commitment between Marianne (Liv Ullmann) and Johan (Erland Josephson), *Scenes From a Marriage* moves through the daily joys and struggles of a working marriage, the devastating announcement of a desire to separate, the struggles of each person to rebuild his/her life post-separation, and the exploration of the affection that remains, despite the dissolution of marital bonds. Where Antonioni might coolly distance the spectator through stylistic numbing akin to the character's disingenuous or unfulfilled yearnings, Bergman's bold proximity features excessive facial close-ups (visually, Ullmann's lips and eyes tell their own story with a full range of emotions) and enduring long takes, which thwart a cool distance and demand spectatorial engagement. In *Scenes From a Marriage*, surprising moments of sexual attraction (e.g. Marianne's vengeful and lustful visit to Johan's office, for the signing of the divorce documents), coupled with devastating encounters of utter indifference or, worse, grief (e.g. the anxiety-laden sleepless night before Johan's morning departure), indicate the mania of this relationship; and yet Marianne and Johan's continual turning toward one another shows the gentle and consistent tenderness of their enduring affection.

First presented as six weekly fifty-minute episodes on Swedish television, *Scenes From a Marriage* was abridged into an internationally successful 168-minute film. Bergman biographer Frank Gado attributes the film's popularity to

> *its timeliness as a social document. To countless husbands and wives experiencing profound shifts in the foundations of modern marriage, the tribulations of Johan and Marianne reflected their own dramas, staged either openly or in hidden theaters of the mind behind masks of conjugal felicity.* [1]

Numerous reviews of *Scenes From a Marriage* estimate its sociological impact on modern marriage; and critics often describe the film's success in relation to an increasing prevalence of couples' counseling and/or divorce rates.[2]

Throughout *Scenes From a Marriage*'s intense and lengthy screen duration, Bergman orchestrates the beauty and terror of intimacy over time, the ways that people and relationships age: the ever-difficult lesson of any love requiring both work and whimsy, the way years breed familiarity both satisfying and exhausting, and the continual need to make new or defamiliarise what we know, such that discovery and fidelity need not be mutually exclusive. Both style and story capture the human desire to make permanent that which must change, all the while suggesting the beauty of change over stasis. In essence, *Scenes From a Marriage* advocates a cinematic *becoming* over a photographic *stasis*.

Shot in 16mm for television and transferred to 35mm for its film release, *Scenes From a Marriage*'s grainy images subtly suggest the dissolution of faces the intimate shot scale otherwise seems to love. A further result of increased grain, light seems gently to trickle into these otherwise claustrophobic interiors: we experience this film as if through a nervous yet steady light or an anxious morning haze, the features of those at whom we look simultaneously developing (as if a photograph in the darkroom) and dissolving before us. While its grainy image and spare palette wash out most settings beyond the parameters of the face, *Scenes From a Marriage* thematically and narratively explores the ways that intimate relationships and, more acutely, physical bodies bear the passage of time. As much a portrait of aging as of intimacy, *Scenes From a Marriage* considers the sexual, sensual, and familial evolution of a relationship, while also concentrating on the ways that bodies and faces weather the years.

While close-ups predominate in this and all of Bergman's films (attributable, here, to esteemed cinematographer Sven Nykvist), *Scenes From a Marriage*'s close-ups of Marianne – from her initial basking in the glow of their marriage to her devastated betrayal, from her resplendent post-separation renewal to her vulnerable self-reflection – cast her facial features as the film's most affective realm. Early in the television serial, Marianne tells a magazine interviewer, "I wish [this marriage] could always be like this, that nothing ever changed"; yet this statement occurs within a long take facial close-up, in which the gentle fluctuations of her mouth and eyes visually insist upon the impossibility of such stasis. Despite Marianne's claims to the contrary, Bergman reveals the pleasure inherent in the experience of change by focusing close-up long takes on the shifting of Ullmann's features; the film trains our spectatorial gaze to cherish the beauty of mutability through the visual pleasure of these close-ups of subtle movements. A microcosm of the film's tension between change and stasis, these close-ups establish tension between Ullmann's clear blue eyes, a gaze impervious to age, and her slightly-freckled ivory skin, whose lines and freckles only increase with age.

In one particular sequence, halfway through the film, this constancy (of Ullmann's gaze) overtly establishes the visual continuity of her character, while Marianne's words suggest the unraveling of this integrity. In this sequence, Marianne and Johan meet for the first time after separating. After reluctantly resisting Johan's advances, Marianne offers Johan insight into her emotional development by reading him her latest diary entry: "to my surprise, I must admit that I don't know who I am. I haven't the vaguest idea," she begins. In one of the most self-aware and lyrical sequences of modern cinema, she proceeds to chronicle her familial, emotional, and sexual coming-of-age. Most astonishing are the still images that visually punctuate the voiceover's lyrical self-reflection. Bergman incorporates Ullmann's own past into this fictional world, as Ullmann's baby-to-adolescent photographs comprise a montage over which Marianne reads. We glimpse a woman –be she Ullmann or Marianne – swiftly move through developmental stages, as if we can know her through this visual intimacy; yet this sequence also undermines the credibility of photographic history, insofar as these several stills hardly supplant or even approximate the actual experience of her past. Just as Marianne and Johan awkwardly "pose" for a magazine photograph at the film's beginning, these still photographs accentuate one's self-stylisation before the camera. At once Marianne's life expands (photographically creating her past) and Ullmann's personal history emerges; yet, similar to (though less acute than) *Persona*'s (Bergman, 1966) famous enmeshed facial close-up that disturbingly jolts the spectator, *Scenes From a Marriage*'s photographic stills fabricate an identity as finite as the moments captured. Moreover, this photographic montage unifies through the motif of Ullmann's eyes: from infant to schoolgirl to sexually-awakening adolescent to bride, Ullmann's eyes bear time less overtly than the physical body or skin (eyes don't *grow*, after all). In a brilliant evocation of film's complicated and shattering relation to aging (the body and face change, while her eyes continually attest to these photographs being Ullmann's own), the sudden appearance of photographic youth compresses this life – both actor and character – into these smiling, quickly aging, postures.

This photographic montage contrasts with the real-time of the marriage, rendered through agonising long takes and close-ups, in which the difficulty of being honest and loyal, of being hopeful and defensive, of waiting and of not knowing how to fill the silence with words or gestures, seems to last far longer than its actual screen duration. Towards the end of the film, Marianne and Johan celebrate twenty years of their marriage, "an entire lifetime", as Marianne says: "we've spent an entire grown-up life together; isn't that strange?" By this point of the film, we (characters and audience) have spent nearly three hours together (hardly twenty years, but a temporal endurance nonetheless). This commitment means sitting through less-interesting, even unpleasant, conversations, because we hold out hope for the return of concentrated and impassioned engagement. To compare the photographic montage with the film's duration, "time flies" in youth and moves slowly in adulthood, as both story and especially style suggest.

An important lesson in emotional literacy as well as a stylistic paean to the face in close-up, *Scenes From a Marriage* balances cringe-inducing sequences with visually stunning or heart-warming moments, such that our experience of their experience includes seduction (by words, phrases, faces, colours) and repulsion (as these faces become ugly before us, as they crumble in grief or pain; or as they hurt each other in ways that, to keep watching, we're as masochistic as they are). For example, Bergman mitigates a difficult tension-filled conversation with a close-up of Ullmann's face against a green chair – the clear emerald upholstery accentuating the vulnerable riveting blue of Ullmann's eyes. In colour and facial features, Bergman indicates a stylistic

harmony; in dialogue and plot, Bergman highlights the relationship's difficulty. Marriage believably comes to be this movement between seduction and masochism, between longing and fulfillment, between disappointment and expectations exceeded. The ways that these characters continually struggle through their pain also characterises our spectatorial experience of their relationship: the beautiful encounters make the brutality worthwhile.

Scenes From a Marriage/Scener ur ett äktenskap (1973 Sweden 168 mins)

Prod Co: Cinematograph AB **Prod:** Ingmar Bergman, Lars-Owe Carlberg **Dir, Scr:** Ingmar Bergman **Phot:** Sven Nykvist **Ed:** Siv Lundgren **Art Dir:** Björn Thulin **Sound:** Owe Svensson

Cast: Liv Ullmann, Erland Josephson, Bibi Andersson, Jan Malmsjö, Anita Wall, Wenche Foss, Barbro Hjort af Ornäs, Bertil Norstrom, Gunnel Lindblom

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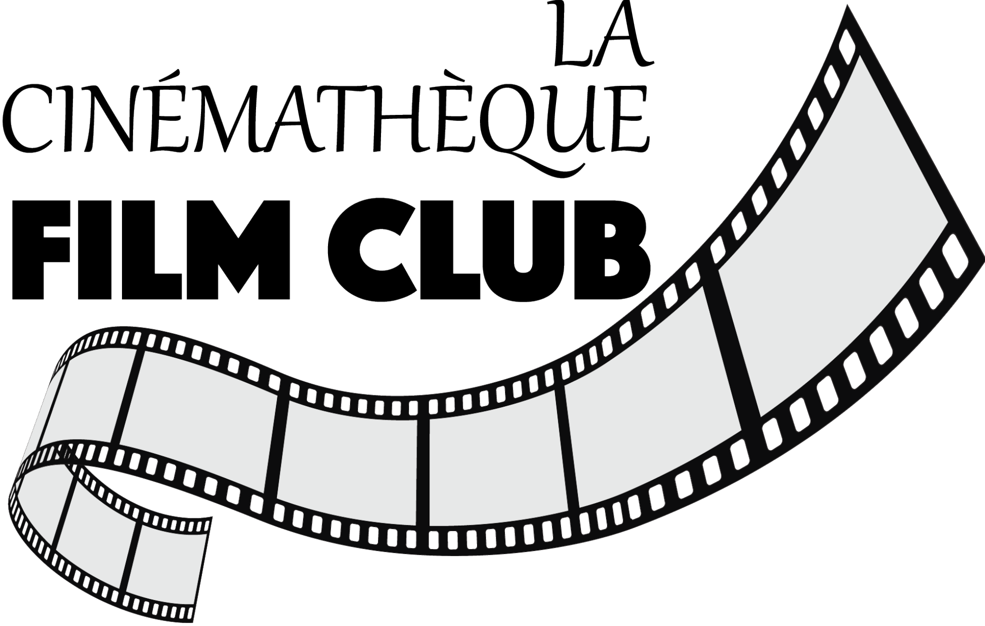
[1] Frank Gado, *The Passion of Ingmar Bergman*, Duke University Press, Durham, 1986, p. 431.

[2] See Lester J. Keyser, "*Scenes From a Marriage*: The Popular Audience", *Ingmar Bergman: Essays in Criticism*, ed. Stuart M. Kaminsky with Joseph F. Hill, Oxford University Press, New York, 1975, pp. 313-323.



Spring 2016

Fanny & Alexander
1983

The Kids Are Not All Right: Fanny and Alexander Thirty Years Later

Marc Saint-Cyr • December 2012

Article sourced from Senses of Cinema: http://sensesofcinema.com/2012/feature-articles/the-kids-are-not-all-right-fanny-and-alexander-thirty-years-later/

As an elaborately constructed, compulsively watchable piece of large-scale fiction made for the screen, *Fanny och Alexander* (*Fanny and Alexander*) is an achievement with few equals even in this new golden era of HBO and BBC. At this point, it is quite firmly cemented in the upper ranks of Ingmar Bergman's extraordinary cinematic output, which is by no means lacking in masterpieces. In fact, it could easily be considered *the* Bergman masterpiece, given its famous status as the master's intended final statement on his filmmaking career. Yet the film's completion didn't quite mark a total departure for Bergman, since he occasionally revisited the world of the image through screenplays, filmed theatrical productions, and television projects. His actual swan song, 2003's *Saraband*, returns to the central characters of 1974's *Scener ur ett Aktenskap* (*Scenes from a Marriage*) while nicely serving as a stirring, modestly scaled postscript to the grand parting letter that is *Fanny and Alexander*. But rather than just being a summation of themes and motifs, even though it indeed treads through some very familiar Bergman territory, it would be most accurate to also say that it sums up both his formidable talent and passion for filmmaking. In it, he sought to reflect everything he loved about working in the medium, and what his audience got was nothing less than a sublime feast that pays tribute to the power of storytelling through both its surface-level content and impeccable craftsmanship.

As many may already know, there are two versions of *Fanny and Alexander*: a 188-minute cut that made its Swedish theatrical premiere in December 1982, and a longer, 312-minute work that was aired on Swedish television. Even though the latter wasn't seen by the public until December 1983, it will be the main focus of this commemorative piece. While my first encounter with *Fanny and Alexander* was through the theatrical version, I can't possibly imagine returning to it now since having experienced and become so familiar with Bergman's longer (and preferred) version – the extended development of the characters, their relationships, and their atmospheric environments would be too greatly missed once removed from the viewing experience. The five-hour cut allows Bergman's powers of seduction to fully take hold, providing the necessary space and freedom for the incredible complexity and richness of his vision, which consists of a fairy tale fashioned with the scope and detail of an epic novel. Considerations of the creation and purposes of art; studies of familial, paternal, and marital bonds; an intense, devastating portrayal of human mortality; and a reaffirmation of faith in magic and the unexplainable all adorn *Fanny and Alexander*'s central narrative, which chronicles the adventures of the titular sibling duo (Pernilla Allwin and Bertil Guve) as they endure the death of their father and subsequent separation from their family. In addition to the impressive amount of themes it explores, the film is a master class in world building that, over

the course of its considerable duration, establishes an intricate ecosystem of characters, each of whom perfectly placed along their respective courses in the story. At certain points, key players and elements are casually introduced and swept aside just as quickly only to re-emerge later on with a larger role to carry out – take, for example, Bergman's sneaky inclusion of Bishop Vergérus and his mother and sister within the audience eagerly awaiting the start of the annual Christmas play, or the appearance of the shop assistant and puppet maker Aron and verbal reference to his mad brother Ismael long before their more substantial screen time in the film's fifth act as Isak Jacobi prepares to leave to join the Ekdahl family in their end-of-year celebrations. In these and many other instances, Bergman is laying down the groundwork, fulfilling his self-appointed role as the busy, scheming, ever-committed architect of his tale. All the while, he is blessed with an equally attentive creative team that carries out his bidding with impeccable results. Sven Nykvist's glorious cinematography, the art direction, the costume work (all of which earned Oscars), and the remarkable array of actors all not only bring Bergman's storybook creation to life, but also give it the sheen of artistry and splendor it deserves.

The very first moments of *Fanny and Alexander* find the latter of the pair, our main protagonist, alone in the rooms and corridors of his family's home. Here, in this richly furnished, inviting place of safety and comfort, Alexander searches in vain for human company while otherwise occupying himself with the idle delights of make-believe and aimless boredom: a miniature puppet theatre that literally raises the curtain on both the story and our little hero (one of Bergman's many affectionate tributes to the stage, his other great artistic passion besides cinema), the sight outside a frost-covered window of furiously colourful flowers on display from merchant stalls, an impersonation of a proud king interrupted by the loud *clack!* of a rat trap. As Alexander briefly zones out underneath a table, the first whiff of enchantment is introduced by way of a chiming clock, the appearance of a beam of light onto a statue that gestures to the boy, and the chilling sight of a cloaked Grim Reaper slowly dragging his scythe across the wooden floor before moving out of sight – at once a sly nod to *The Seventh Seal* (*Det Sjunde Inseglet*, 1957), a sign that this big old house might not be so safe after all, and Bergman's way of getting a head start on foreshadowing future events.

But then, with the sudden clatter of coal being poured into a hall stove, the film begins to wake up and move along into its first proper act, 'The Ekdahl Family Celebrates Christmas'. Mainly set in the Uppsala Theatre where Oscar Ekdahl (Allan Edwall), Alexander's father, stages his yearly production of the Christmas play and the Ekdahl home, this lengthy, justly famous segment introduces most of the key characters as they partake in one of the biggest – and most accurate – Christmas parties ever portrayed onscreen. Not one scene is wasted in this magnificently engineered whirlwind of exposition, each moment revealing new facets of personality and behaviour or further defining the nuances of specific characters' relationships with one another. Gun Wållgren's Helena, the Ekdahl family matriarch, is marvelously developed in an assortment of observational scenes: an inspection of the house before the guests' arrival, brief exchanges with her servants, a moment on her own in which her composure dissolves in a brief pang of reflective melancholy. Her interactions with Isak imply with total conviction a long history of friendship and lust between the two, and it is with him, while wavering between laughter and sobs, that she discusses her three sons' current predicaments, recalls memories of scandalous past events, and tearfully voices her fears brought on by the arrival of old age, all of which received with patience and kindness (even if interrupted by the odd lapse in consciousness) by her wise old companion (Erland Josephson's performance as Isak is an absolute delight, perhaps at its height in his scenes with Wållgren). As the family

steadily gathers together, energy and emotion levels build and the festivities truly kick off, with Bergman guiding Nykvist's camera across the fabulous visual splendour of the celebration – fine clothing, trees overflowing with tinsel and ornaments, candelabras, wrapped presents, Santa Clauses. And, of course, the food and the drink! But as the alcohol flows, tasty delicacies are piled up and devoured by the plateful, and merry songs are sung, less pleasant matters are also given their due attention, not least of all the deep-rooted tension between the servants and their employers, the sizable gap between them momentarily (and, to a considerable extent, uncomfortably) bridged when they all sit together to dine for the occasion. Key lines further develop an authentic sense of history between the characters – Ester (Svea Holst), one of the oldest servants, notes that this will be her forty-third Christmas with the Ekdahls to Helena; later, during the feast, a relative claims it is the twenty-fourth Christmas she and Helena have shared together – that creates a cyclical, interactive bond between the film and the loyal viewer who is revisiting it once again after a period of time. As traditions are upheld, assumptions based on familiarity and past events are fulfilled, and familiar faces are seen once again, one feels as though this is a brand new Christmas celebration at the end of a whole new year for the Ekdahls, and the habits of expectation take hold. How late will the start of the Nativity play be this year? Will Uncle Carl and his wife Lydia be late yet again? Will certain people's spirits be a little more improved from how they were last year? And the game isn't just limited to the winter season – unfolding over the course of about three years, *Fanny and Alexander* exhibits Bergman's fondness for aligning his narratives with specific seasons, here making the most of winter, spring, and summer's specific traits and tones in their own turns.

Over the course of the evening, the three Ekdahl brothers – Gustav Adolf, Carl, and Oscar – come into sharper focus, as do their respective situations. Jarl Kulle's uproarious, larger-than-life Gustav Adolf is one of Bergman's many charming satyrs, a grinning, booming, big-hearted man of great appetites who shamelessly attempts to court the pretty young nursemaid Maj (Pernilla August, credited under the surname Wallgren) with the consent of his extraordinarily tolerant wife Alma (Mona Malm). Börje Ahlstedt's Carl is a more frustrated man whose few moments of good spirits – the drunken sing-along in full swing when we first see him, the "fireworks show" he gives the children – are all-too-brief respites from the storm of anger, sadness, and self-loathing broiling within him. Criticized at his university, drowning in a sea of debt, and trapped in a stifling marriage, he takes out his rage on his poor wife Lydia (Christina Schollin), most notably in an agonizing tour-de-force scene that fully illustrates the couple's long history and ever-repeating routine of bitter attacks and pitiful consolations. Despite Carl's multiple threats to leave her, the two of them seem fated to forever keep enacting their farce in a darkly humorous Sisyphean cycle. (1) Finally, bearing a quiet contentment and domestic stability that his two brothers seem to lack, there is Oscar, whose scenes with his wife Emilie (Ewa Fröling) and children show a man who deeply loves both his family and profession. Out of the three Ekdahl brothers, he seems the most grounded and content with what life has given him.

If the film's first act offers up a dense slew of virtues and foibles that invite the viewers to form their own views and judgments of the complex, flawed people presented before them, the second act (entitled 'The Ghost Rehearsal') puts all of their (and our) separate concerns on hold to make way for a horrible, unifying tragedy. It seems that, with multiple viewings, rather than becoming more familiar and comfortable with this segment's course of events following Oscar's final journey from the stage, where he collapses during a rehearsal of *Hamlet*, to his deathbed, I have instead become more sensitive and emotional to the point that I know with absolute certainty that at some point during the painful proceedings, I will be reduced to tears. Struck down by a stroke, Oscar very rapidly slips away from life while surrounded by the ones dearest to him – his actors, his wife, his mother, his children. His sickly, pale face framed opposite Emilie's (a staggering juxtaposition), he does his best to prepare her for after his departure, calmly urging her to keep things going as usual and reassuring her that he will always be bound to her and the children. Bergman has of course specialized in confronting the cold, frightening limits of mortality throughout his whole career, but never has he been more resonant than in this heartbreaking passage. And after a year that seemed to bring an unusual amount of works that unflinchingly focus on illness and death in both the young (John Green's novel *The Fault in Our Stars*) and old (Michael Haneke's 2012 Palme d'Or winner *Amour*) – not to mention far too many cases of personal acquaintances facing such hard situations in their own lives – it packs an especially strong punch.

The following portion of the film proceeds from the trauma of Oscar's passing to the proper introduction of Bishop Edvard Vergérus, not only one of Bergman's finest characters (based on his own father, a strict Lutheran minister), but also one of fiction's most exquisitely realized villains. A grave misunderstanding on Max von Sydow's agent's part prevented the longtime Bergman veteran from obtaining the role, which was originally intended for him – and thank goodness for that. While von Sydow's interpretation surely would have been at the very least interesting to see, it is impossible to imagine the Bishop better realized by anyone else besides Jan Malmsjö. He brings before us a formidable man whose greatest weapon is his outer persona of pride, calculating determination, and utter faith in his beliefs. There is an undeniable sense of nobility in the upright, dignified way he presents himself, projecting an incredibly commanding presence – though he soon proves to be a menacing one as well. At one point aptly described by Gustav Adolf as a bully, he targets Alexander and exerts his control over the boy with a barrage of invasive gestures: taps, pats, prods, strokes, clutches, all deployed with infuriating condescension and visible nastiness. Offering the enticing prospect of a life of stability, simplicity, and relief to Emilie at a point when such other concerns as the theatre feel frivolous, he very quickly wins her over and makes her his wife – much to the discontentment of the rest of the Ekdahl clan, including Fanny and Alexander. In this particular fairy tale, the Bishop is very much the Wicked Stepfather figure, with his frigid, sparsely furnished palace offering the perfect dispiriting counterpoint to the warm cocoon of the Ekdahl home. Emilie and the children begin a new way of life not only with the Bishop, but also his ghoulish family and house staff, including his cross mother Blenda (Marianne Aminoff), his hysteria-prone sister Henrietta (Kerstin Tidelius), and the kitchen maid Justina, played by a mousy Harriet Andersson quite far-removed from the fresh beauty who appeared in *Sommaren med Monika* (*Summer with Monika*, 1952) and *Sommarnattens Leende* (*Smiles of a Summer Night*, 1955). As Emilie is introduced as a famous stage actress, it is clear that none of these people give a damn about acting or the theatre. For the imagination-fed Ekdahl children, whose love for and reliance upon stories was so effectively established in the film's earlier portions – particularly in the wonderful scene in which

Oscar transforms a simple wooden nursery chair into something so much greater with only his words and a bit of playacting – this is a toxic, dangerous place.

Dreams, magic, and the irrational versus order, logic, and institutional loyalty – this dichotomy has been seen before in at least one other Bergman film, which is perhaps the most fitting companion piece to *Fanny and Alexander*: 1958's *Ansiktet* (*The Magician*). That film's Vergérus, the doctor played by Gunnar Björnstrand, both pits himself against and yearns to better understand the brooding showman Albert Emanuel Vogler (von Sydow), who has given his life over to trickery and the impossible. His livelihood depends on people's willingness to believe the unbelievable, something that confounds and angers both Björnstrand's Vergérus and Malmsjö's. In *Fanny and Alexander*, the institution of science is replaced by that of religion, though what matters is not what each one actually consists of, but rather the stance of power it allows its appointed spokesmen. Adorned in his robes, collar, and gold cross, Bishop Vergérus sets out not to spread the word of God so much as to crush or conquer that which he cannot explain, and thus cannot control. What are fanciful tales and yarns to Alexander are described by the Bishop as harmful and dangerous lies; these differing perspectives on stories and imagination define the antagonistic relationship between the boy and his new guardian. Alexander soon realizes the impact his words have on the Bishop, and brashly uses them to hatch a new tale involving the ghosts of the Bishop's deceased daughters – suggesting he was responsible for their deaths – that strikes him like a blow. The inquisitional sequence that follows most starkly outlines the extent of the Bishop's cruelty, though it also reveals further ever-surprising layers in his character. When he faces Alexander and urges him to confess to the lie and accept his punishment, he is close to tears and swollen with emotion. His actions are evil, but he carries them out with clear faith in his own righteousness and, most interestingly, genuine concern for Alexander. "The love I feel for you and your mother and sister is not blind and sloppy," he explains in one of his most revealing moments. "It is strong and harsh." Later on, when Gustav Adolf and Carl present themselves at the Bishop's palace to attempt to negotiate the children's freedom in a delicate duel of carefully worded queries and statements, the great divide between the Ekdahls and the Vergéruses of the world becomes even clearer. What makes the Bishop such a fascinating and masterful creation is that he is not simply a bad man, but rather a complicated person who can only see things from his firmly rooted position. He has chosen his stance, and he will keep it regardless of how much it may drive him apart from others. He acknowledges this strange truth aloud to himself, voicing his sincere regret that people like him cannot forge closer ties to people like the Ekdahls.

The third major setting of *Fanny and Alexander* is Isak Jacobi's previously glimpsed shop, which, in the film's fifth act, 'Demons', is a place thick with the intoxicating perfume of magic and mystery. Amid the leering,

bobbing huddles of puppets that line the twisting, dimly lit corridors, the film becomes the most closely aligned with Alexander's perspective – which is to say, the open perspective of a child to whom the fantastical realm of ghosts, demons, and miracles is still intertwined with the realm of the possible. After all, at the start of his *La belle et la bête* (*Beauty and the Beast*, 1945), Jean Cocteau noted children's superior ability over adults to suspend disbelief and surrender themselves to the strange and mysterious. Bergman's film operates according to that same quality, and indeed, most (though not all) of its more extraordinary phenomena are solely perceived by Alexander. Both he and Fanny are able to see Oscar's white-clad ghost as he solemnly watches his family from afar; so is Helena, who in a touching scene converses nostalgically with her dead son. Meanwhile, as always with Bergman (or nearly always, given the final scene of *Jungfrukällan* (*The Virgin Spring*, 1959)), the question of God's existence is much more open. The best Alexander gets is a giant puppet controlled by Isak's nephew Aron (Mats Bergman, the director's son) – an illusion that, for a brief moment, has him fooled. However, Alexander is not one of Bergman's searching, desperate souls who strive to discover God in a solid, tangible way so as to salvage some meaning in their lives. He is simply a boy, and to him, God is just one more cryptic possibility in a world over-brimming with them, all as real as his imagination allows them to be. He isn't occupied with analysis or philosophical contemplation, but instead the uncontrollable fusion of emotions, memories, and dreams that so often overtakes him.

Though he is a fairly quiet and passive character as far as protagonists go, Alexander visibly emerges from his experiences a much wiser person. His father's death, the Bishop's tyranny, and the betrayal his mother commits against him and Fanny by ignoring their needs in favour of her own all expose him to new kinds of pain he has never before experienced. As a result, he returns to the insulated worlds of theatre and family with perhaps a more critical eye, indicated by the passive, guarded expression he wears while watching his mother greet their actor companions once more. Will he be able to laugh and play with them with the same simple innocence of the past? It is even possible that he harbours some resentment towards the actors for their preoccupation with their own matters while he and his mother and sister were in peril. For along his journey, Alexander has also become more fully aware of the negative feelings he carries and fuels within him, particularly during his secret meeting with the caged, possibly deranged Ismael (Stina Ekblad), who teaches him that thoughts and desires of ill will can bring about terrible consequences. In different ways, the Bishop, Ismael, and Oscar awaken Alexander to the hatred and bitterness he is capable of wielding against others.

Alexander comes away from his adventures changed, but thankfully, not broken, and similarly, Bergman finishes on a positive note. Echoing Oscar's touching speech to the theatre troupe in the first act that describes the simple yet essential service they as artists provide to the public, Gustav Adolf speaks before the gathered guests of the Ekdahls' double christening celebration, exalting the joys of family, safety, and small pleasures and their great importance in a world that is too often overwhelming, merciless, and cruel. Bergman has reflected this beautiful philosophy many times before in such films as *Till Glädje* (*To Joy*, 1949), *The Seventh Seal*, *Smultronstället* (*Wild Strawberries*, 1957), and *Viskingar och Rop* (*Cries and Whispers,*1972), resting on moments of peace, food, pleasant weather, and good company and offering them up as the things of truth worth in life. Alexander comes to comprehend this outlook on the struggles of life and the question of their significance in the mesmerizing story Uncle Isak tells him and Fanny in a scarlet-hued bedroom in his shop which encapsulates the many efforts Bergman has made to examine the ways people summon the strength to wake up every day and continue

onwards through the world, be it through prayer, a ceaseless search for truth, an open spirit of curiosity, or simple surrender to how things are, for better or for worse.

The final argument that art, along with communal and familial security, provides a crucial shield to the evils of the world is the film *Fanny and Alexander* itself. That Bergman dedicated himself so totally to such an incredibly developed work that coasts along the tracks of narrative with such fluid ease is his testament to the power of pure, clean storytelling. In a sense, we get the best of both worlds from it: the fun, populist appeal of Bergman's early-middle period (particularly the run from *Smiles of a Summer Night* to *The Virgin Spring*) combined with the formal mastery and discipline of his later colour works (*Cries and Whispers*, *Scenes from a Marriage*, *Hostsonatem* (*Autumn Sonata*, 1978)). Bergman's great capacity for entertainment even when considering the gravest and most intimidating subject matter (a quality that longtime Bergman admirer Woody Allen has repeatedly recognized and praised) remains one of the prime reasons for his lasting appeal. Thirty years onwards from its release, *Fanny and Alexander* stands as one of the most ideal avenues for discovering this still-underrated aspect of his work, so compelling, straightforward, and accessible is the viewing experience it offers. Universal truths about love, life, and death lie within its frames, as do torrents of humour, sadness, suspense, absurdity, and awe – yes, it delivers all of that and more, but the irresistible allure, stunning craft, and piercing impact of their presentation may yet remain this great film's most impressive accomplishments.

Author's note: While researching this essay, I was surprised to discover that Bergman revisited Carl's character, once more played by Börje Ahlstedt, in the 1997 television film In the Presence of a Clown*, which finds him as a crazed patient in an Uppsala mental ward – a grim but perhaps not so surprising fate for the troubled soul we see in* Fanny and Alexander.