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The Films of Ingmar Bergman

This volume provides a concise overview of the career of one of the modern masters of world cinema. Jesse Kalin defines Bergman's conception of the human condition as a struggle to find meaning in life as it is played out. For Bergman, meaning is achieved independently of any moral absolute and is the result of a process of self-examination. Six existential themes are explored repeatedly in Bergman's films: judgment, abandonment, suffering, shame, a visionary picture, and above all, turning toward or away from others. Kalin examines how Bergman develops these themes cinematically, through close analysis of eight films: well-known favorites such as *Wild Strawberries*, *The Seventh Seal*, *Smiles of a Summer Night*, and *Fanny and Alexander*; and important but lesser-known works, such as *Naked Night*, *Shame*, *Cries and Whispers*, and *Scenes from a Marriage*.

Jesse Kalin is Andrew W. Mellon Professor of Humanities and Professor of Philosophy at Vassar College, where he has taught since 1971. He served as the Associate Editor of the journal *Philosophy and Literature*, and has contributed to journals such as *Ethics*, *American Philosophical Quarterly*, and *Philosophical Studies*.

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Preface

Ingmar Bergman began his film career as a scriptwriter for Svensk Film-industri in March 1943 at age twenty-four. A treatment for a coming-of-age story was referred by the studio's artistic director, Victor Sjöström, one of the founders of Swedish cinema and an internationally acclaimed director, to Alf Sjöberg, who developed it into *Torment*. It premiered on October 2, 1944, and was shot by Sjöberg in a mature expressionist style that conveys its feelings of forbidden love and hopeless entrapment in a way still exciting today. *Torment* caused some controversy in the Swedish press with its attack on a humiliating system of education and its portrayal of a repressive family (and the fact that the models for much of it were easily known). It was a fresh, more serious voice in the cinema, and the debut of a formidable talent.¹

During production, Bergman worked in the background in charge of continuity, but he was soon given the opportunity to direct on his own. *Crisis*, his adaptation of a current play, was released in February 1946. Since then, Bergman has directed forty films until his "retirement" in 1984 after *Fanny and Alexander* (1982) and its "follow-up," *After the Rehearsal* (1984). Of these forty-one films, Bergman was sole writer of twenty-seven (neither cowritten nor adaptations), including all the films for which he is best known, with the exception of *The Virgin Spring* (1960).² This book focuses on that body of work.

The first film Bergman directed using only his own material was *Prison* (1949), a quintessential Bergman work. In it, Paul, a former teacher of the director Martin Grandé, proposes a film in which the Devil is in charge of the world – life is now Hell, and things go on as before with little change:

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After life there is only death. That's all you need to know. The sentimental or frightened can turn to the church, the bored and indifferent can commit suicide. . . . God is dead or defeated or whatever you want to call it. Life is a cruel but seductive path between life and death. A huge laughing masterpiece, beautiful and ugly, without mercy or meaning.

In the thirty-six films following *Prison*, this thought is never very far away.³

This does not mean that Bergman himself always believes it. Rather, this, the meaning of life, is what must always be struggled with, and for. In this regard, Bergman's work falls into two major parts. The **first period** is dominated by the "great synoptic" films of the 1950s in which his central filmic images and tropes are formed and life's "huge laughing masterpiece" is in fact portrayed not as merciless but as always offering rebirth and renewal. This period has three phases: a more austere beginning that leads to *Naked Night* (1953); its culmination in the mid- and later 1950s with the poetry of *The Seventh Seal* (1957), the transcendence of *Wild Strawberries* (1957), and most of all the gentle and knowing laughter of *Smiles of a Summer Night* (1955); and then a long struggle from the late 1950s into the 1960s to sustain the heart of this vision, ending with *The Silence* in 1963.

Though despair and suicide are often central themes, as in *Prison*, Bergman's earliest films end with a resolve to continue on in the face of life's adversities of failure, humiliation, abandonment, and death (even *Torment* ends with a certain exultation, though this may have been just Sjöberg's own addition).⁴ Characters see who and where they are and grasp that some measure of life and love is still possible for them. All of this is hard to discover, harder to sustain, and not ensured to last, but the hope found, even if muted or only temporary, never seems hollow. This period of "music in darkness" has its climax in *Naked Night*, which, while both wildly reviled yet also highly praised at the time, can now be seen as the first film forming the foundation of Bergman's international reputation and his finest statement of a "gloomy optimism" that trudges resolutely onward.

This fragile hopefulness is transformed by the central films of the 1950s into a more comprehensive and archetypal picture of life that celebrates the cycles and rhythms of coming to be and perishing; the flourishing and passing of love; youth and age; the different times, seasons, and smiles of life; and above all the discovery of a second chance. Each individual story is part of a great narrative scheme, and our grief and suffering a moment

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in a larger grand dance of life. (This is their “synoptic” vision in which the elements and phases of life are tied together.) In these works, there is a joy and lyricism that borders on the rhapsodic. As films, they are in love with life (even in *The Seventh Seal*), accepting it unconditionally with their eyes wide open and celebrating its gift that is too often lost or hidden. In the “great synopsis” there is in fact both mercy and meaning. Its first fully developed expression is *Waiting Women* in 1952, one of Bergman’s unknown and neglected masterpieces (along with the preceding *Illicit Interlude* in 1951), and its culmination is *Smiles of a Summer Night*.

Even though the lyrical in Bergman is never positioned apart from the brooding and the ugly, this hopefulness becomes increasingly difficult to maintain and ultimately forced. With *The Magician* in 1958 and *The Virgin Spring* in 1960, the 1960s begin a period of almost vertiginous decline in which Bergman struggles to maintain and reaffirm the basic narrative of second chance and rebirth of the 1950s in the face of growing doubt and despair. The era of the great synopsis, which had occupied him for nearly twenty years, is brought to an end with the “metaphysical” trilogy of *Through a Glass Darkly* (1961), *Winter Light* (1963), and *The Silence* (1963).

Now the joy of the dance of life is gone, and the possibilities of nourishing each other or flourishing in a reclaimed life seem more and more remote. This **second period** in Bergman’s films extends from *Persona* in 1966 to *After the Rehearsal* in 1984. During this time Bergman is overcome by a sense that what was once possible has now somehow become even more difficult and perhaps lost. At best, one can only disengage from the turmoil and devastation engulfing everyone and look back in sadness that nothing ever turned out the way it could have (as in *Shame* [1968]) or, if fortunate, find a moment of peace and comfort in the touch of another, alone together and isolated from the rest of the world (*Scenes from a Marriage* [1973]).

What develops during this time is very much a cinema of ruins and remnants, on the one hand, and replacements and substitutions on the other. The films of this period always have in their background those that preceded, and they may often be seen as new versions of these earlier works, now falling short of the old vision and ending in regret. This second period, too, can be divided into three parts.

The five films of the late 1960s (excluding the two documentaries) represent the bottom of the abyss and the point of Bergman’s deepest doubt and despair. These are also the films in which he seems most self-conscious about film itself and his own artistry. As a filmmaker, he is like Johan in

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Hour of the Wolf (1968), lost and stumbling about in some vast swamp. Yet two of his greatest achievements – *Persona* (1966) and *Shame* – come from this time, as does his darkest and perhaps most hateful film, *The Rite* (1969).

The films of the 1970s – from *The Touch* (1971) to *From the Life of the Marionettes* (1980) – are devoted to coming to terms with this darkening of the world and retrieving as much of the old synthesis as possible. His two finest works of this decade – *Cries and Whispers* and *Scenes from a Marriage* (both 1973) – partially succeed in doing this, yet even their achievement does not survive to its end. *The Serpent's Egg* (1977) projects a social and cultural malaise and grayness of soul that brings either collapse or violence, while *Face to Face* (1976) and *Autumn Sonata* (1978) find a growing internal disturbance and “dis-ease” in the soul that culminates in the psychopathology and murder of *From the Life of the Marionettes*.

If these were to be Bergman’s last words, the modern world of *Shame* and *Persona* would have won completely and indeed left us “without mercy or meaning.” *Fanny and Alexander* may be regarded as both an epilogue to all this and a valiant attempt to reassert the optimism and essential goodness of the world portrayed in the films of the great synopsis of the 1950s.⁵ As such, it is an attempt to reinstitute that vision and insist on the faith and spirit of those films in the face of a contemporary deadliness of spirit. It is also a portrayal of the origins of the artist and of Bergman’s own art. Yet, as always before, hope must be qualified, and Bergman tacks on one last final “final” word, *After the Rehearsal*, to keep us honest, as it were. With this rueful story of a director at the end of his career (Alexander in old age, perhaps), Bergman in effect “ends” his film career by giving us a choice for the answer to the original question of “mercy and meaning,” a choice between two visions of human life not ultimately compatible: the exuberance and promise of *Fanny and Alexander* (and the films of the 1950s) or the regret of *Shame* and the resignation of the early 1970s.

After 1984, Bergman made a short film about his mother, *Karin's Face* (1986), directed for the stage and television, and wrote memoirs (*The Magic Lantern* [1988]; *Images: My Life in Film* [1994]) and screenplays about his parents (*Best Intentions* [1991], *Sunday's Children* [1992], and *Private Confessions* [1996], filmed respectively by Bille August, his son Daniel Bergman, and Liv Ullmann). He has recently directed his own work again, for Swedish television – *The Last Gasp* (1995) and *In the Presence of a Clown* (1997) – as well as writing *Faithless* (2000), directed

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by Ullmann, in which Erland Josephson plays Bergman wrestling “with remorse over what he did to the woman he loved.”⁶ Not all these films are readily available, and an assessment of this last – highly autobiographical – phase of Bergman’s career remains to be done.⁷

Bergman throughout his work is concerned with a common set of themes, situations, feelings, and images as he probes this question of whether life offers either mercy or meaning. Indeed, one is startled in looking at his first films at how familiar they already are, and amazed at how the latter ones avoid repeating themselves. It should therefore be possible to give an account of Bergman’s work that focuses on these common elements without regard to the films’ historical or biographical order, uncovering the essential philosophic, narrative, and filmic foundations of the final choice they offer. This I do in Chapter 1, where I pursue Bergman’s idea of a “metaphysical reduction” to arrive at an essential map of our being, what I call a “geography of the soul.” This describes the world as a place of possibilities and thus of different spiritual locations in which one can come to reside – some darker, some happier than others, but each part of an overall fabric of human existence. In a particular film, as well as at different times of our lives, one place may be given emphasis or come to be dominant, but it will always be part of a larger whole and derive its ultimate meaning from its place in that picture.

This attempt at a comprehensive overview then informs the six following chapters, which focus on eight films central to Bergman’s career as it has been described above – *Naked Night* (or *The Clowns’ Evening*), *The Seventh Seal* and *Wild Strawberries*, *Smiles of a Summer Night*, *Shame*, *Cries and Whispers* and *Scenes from a Marriage*, and *Fanny and Alexander*. (A number of other films are discussed in these contexts, including especially *Persona* and the “metaphysical” trilogy of the early 1960s.)

There are many kinds of book that can be written about Bergman. It is beyond the scope of this project to give a detailed account of each film or of Bergman’s work in the theater (including the most important matter of his relation to Strindberg), for instance. Much of this has already been done (though with his memoirs and films about his parents, plus the television films in the 1990s, there is a new chapter to be written). Peter Cowie’s *Ingmar Bergman: A Critical Biography* is a standard reference for the biographical and historical context of Bergman’s work, while Frank Gado’s *The Passion of Ingmar Bergman* provides additional detail and an extensively developed psychological (or even psychoanalytic) interpretation that focuses on Bergman’s development as an artist and the origin of that art in his personal life, where it stands “as surrogates for conflicts

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lodged deep in Bergman's personal history" (xv). Hubert Cohen's more recent *Ingmar Bergman: The Art of Confession* provides a more thematic treatment of Bergman's films. All three are extremely valuable works, and the reader should refer to them to gain a more complete understanding of Bergman. (A short "Biographical Note" is included in the Afterwords following Chapter 7.)

However important and illuminating these other approaches may be, the heart of Bergman's achievement is moral and philosophic, and this book is a set of essays that attempts to state that account both systematically and with detailed attention to specific films and their filmic style. As such, I hope it will serve as a fundamental introduction to Bergman as a "filmic thinker" (for he is always that!) addressing what used to be called "the human condition."