

## About Ingmar Bergman

“It is said, with some truth, that there are three major film-makers who empty cinemas these days: Bergman, Godard and Chaplin.” (Derek Malcolm, in the *Guardian*, 1999) :-)

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Ingmar Bergman was born in 1918 in Uppsala, Sweden, the son of a stern Lutheran parish pastor who eventually became chaplain to Sweden's royal family. His mother he described as “alternately very warm and very cold” He was raised with strict discipline, sometimes “spending hours in a dark closet for infractions of his father's rigid ethical code.” ‘What was outwardly an irreproachable picture of good family unity,’ he reported, ‘was inwardly misery and exhausting conflicts...my parents lived in a permanent state of crisis with neither beginning nor end.’” His brother attempted suicide and his sister was forced to have an abortion to protect the family reputation. When his father accused him of shirking his studies at age 20, “Bergman knocked his father to the floor and avoided seeing him again for several years.”

Bergman, unlike most movie directors, controlled the writing, the direction, the entire production of his films. His films project all the concerns of one artist. Woody Allen commented of Bergman's 60 or so films that some people may prefer *The Seventh Seal*, some *Wild Strawberries*, some *The Silence*, and so on, but it's the entire body of work that makes Bergman Bergman.

Bergman's films repeatedly ask (and rarely answer) the question, “Is God absent from the world?” For Bergman, “whose father was a representative of God, whose father locked him up in closets, the question is crucial. For him God seemed absent.”

“I think the great thing about Bergman -- I suppose if he had an early theme, it was the silence of God, the mystery of the universe, the fact that it was just a great, black void out there. And this, for a young guy who had been brought up in a strict Lutheran tradition in Sweden, was a terrible loss.

Later on, I think that his great theme was the failure of people to fully communicate with one another....” (Richard Schickel , 2007 NewsHour interview)

Hamish Ford, in his Senses of Cinema profile of Bergman, talks about the close-up camera shot and Bergman's use of it to convey both intimate humanness and alienation:

“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.”

After grappling with it for film after film, and usually depicting God as either silent or malevolent, Bergman eventually seems to have lost interest in the question of God: “Anyway the crux of the matter is -- the problem doesn't exist any more. Nothing, absolutely nothing at all has emerged out of all these ideas of faith and scepticism, all these convulsions, these puffings and blowings. For many of my fellow human beings on the other hand, I'm aware that these problems still exist -- and exist as a terrible reality. I hope this generation will be the last to live under the scourge of religious anxiety. ... As the religious aspect of my existence was wiped out, life became much easier to live.” (in *Bergman on Bergman*)

He's also said: “My basic view of things is -- not to have any basic view of things. From having been exceedingly dogmatic, my views on life have gradually dissolved. They don't exist any longer...” (*Bergman on Bergman*)

Early on, Bergman says that he believed in “the existence of a virulent evil, in no way dependent upon environmental or hereditary factors. Call it original sin or whatever you like -- anyway an active evil, of which human beings, as opposed to animals, have a monopoly. Our very nature, qua human beings, is that inside us we always carry around destructive tendencies, conscious or unconscious, aimed both at ourselves and at the outside world.”

Eventually (by the late 1960s), he observed that his questing for God was “being replaced by a sense of the holiness -- to put it clumsily -- to be found in man himself. The only holiness which really exists. A holiness wholly of this world. ... The notion of love as the only thinkable form of holiness. At the same time another line of development in my idea of God begins here, one that has perhaps grown stronger over the years. The idea of the Christian God as something destructive and fantastically dangerous, something filled with risk for the human being and bringing out in him dark destructive forces instead of the opposite.” (*Bergman on Bergman*)

His official website (affiliated with the Bergman Foundation) comments that Bergman's “‘present conviction’ of a world without God in which human beings carry their own holiness sums up his own religious credo. But how can such a view be reconciled? Can one believe in anything holy without God? The contradictory label ‘protestant atheist’ does indeed appear to have some substance. It would be incorrect to describe Bergman as non-religious.”

Bergman said, in 2005, that “Christ is a philosopher who gives testimony to the existence of other worlds. Just as Bach does.”

In *Winter Light*, *Cries and Whispers*, *Wild Strawberries*, and many others of Bergman's films, “a handful of people close to one another, often a couple, do terrible things to each other, abuse each other physically or psychologically. They live, as Bergman puts it in such an ingeniously paradoxical way ... within a ‘selfish community’. Because regardless of their despicable treatment of each other they remain mutually dependent. They cannot cope by themselves. These characters’ only hope of salvation lies in those rare moments of contact, of humanity, of love itself. Ingmar Bergman's view of morality might perhaps be summarised in these terms. It is a morality which -- irrespective of whether he believes, or we believe, or not -- is, in essence, profoundly Christian.” (from website Ingmar Bergman Face to Face: Son of a Preacher Man)

Bergman is preoccupied with the ideas of human cruelty and humiliation, and for him these things are related to humans' ideas of God:

“Unmotivated cruelty is something which never ceases to fascinate me; and I'd very much like to know the reason for it. Its source is obscure and I'd very much like to get at it.” (*Bergman on Bergman*)

“One of the strongest feelings I remember from my childhood is, precisely, of being humiliated; of being knocked about by words, acts, or situations. Isn't it a fact that children are always feeling deeply humiliated in their relations with grown-ups and each other? I have a feeling children spend a good deal of their time humiliating one another. Our whole education is just one long humiliation, and it was even more so when I was a child. One of the wounds I've found hardest to bear in my adult life has been the fear of humiliation, and the sense of being humiliated ... To humiliate and be humiliated, I think, is a crucial element in our whole social structure.

“I stick to what I know. If I've objected strongly to Christianity, it has been because Christianity is deeply branded by a very virulent humiliation motif. One of its main tenets is 'I, a miserable sinner, born in sin, who have sinned all my days, etc.' Our way of living and behaving under this punishment is completely atavistic. I could go on talking about this humiliation business for ever. It's one of the big basic experiences.” (*Bergman on Bergman*)

Swedish film scholar Mikael Timm says of Bergman that “the more mature Bergman becomes as a filmmaker, the more caustically and inexorably he focuses on the destructive forces that flow beneath harmonic culture.”

In Bergman's films, “this world is a place where faith is tenuous; communication, elusive; and self-knowledge, illusory,” said Michiko Kakutani in the *New York Times Magazine*.

Adam Bernstein wrote in the *Washington Post* that “In Europe, movie directors such as Jean-Luc Godard and François Truffaut helped break visual and narrative rules, but Mr Bergman stood out for dreamy and often disturbingly psychological films that expressed emotional isolation and modern spiritual crisis.”

Bergman himself observed that “The people in my films are exactly like myself -- creatures of instinct, of rather poor intellectual capacity, who at best only think while they're talking. Mostly they're body, with a little hollow for the soul.”

Bergman was married five times (marriages to Else Fisher, Ellen Lundstrom, Gun Hagberg and pianist Kabi Laretei all ended in divorce; his fifth wife, Ingrid Karlebo von Rosen, died in 1995) and had nine children through his marriages and other relationships. In 1976 he was arrested on charges of income tax evasion “stemming from an abandoned business deal with an Italian television company,” and this seems to have precipitated a nervous breakdown. (The case was dropped.) He went into self-imposed exile in West Germany for a while, and when he returned home to “the rain-swept, stony seascape on Faro Island,” he “spoke of his need to live a remote existence, among the sound of waves and a ticking grandfather clock. He called the island an ideal place to confront his daily fears about death.

“On his admitted disregard for parenting” he said, "I had a bad conscience until I discovered that having a bad conscience about something so gravely serious as leaving your children is an affectation, a way of achieving a little suffering that can't for a moment be equal to the suffering you've caused. I haven't put an ounce of effort into my families. I never have."

Bergman died last summer at the age of 89.

Sources:

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