



Call Me Ishmael

Bergman's statement that *Fanny and Alexander* will be his last film is doubtless to be understood more rhetorically than literally: he has already completed another. Admittedly he specified that it would be his last theatrical film, and the new one, *After the Rehearsal*, was made for Swedish television – but so was *Fanny and Alexander* in its original, longer form and the new film has already been bought for theatrical distribution outside Sweden: the distinctions blur. The declaration, however, remains useful in drawing attention to *Fanny and Alexander's* particular nature: that of an artistic testament and summation, the kind of work any filmmaker might wish his 'last film' to be. It is also the most generally accessible film Bergman has made for many years, perhaps since *Wild Strawberries* and it is in striking contrast to the immediately preceding *From the Life of the Marionettes*. Yet its accessibility and deserved popularity with both critics and public do not necessarily guarantee that it has been fully understood; I am struck by the fact that the majority of reviews have ignored or been very vague about precisely those aspects of the film that seem to me most interesting, aspects centred on Ishmael. Our critics either don't know what to make of Ishmael, or don't want to make anything of him (her). A long article on the film by William Wolf in the June *Film Comment*, for example, can offer no more than 'The rescued Alexander ... meets Isak's mysterious nephew Ishmael, who introduces him to the supernatural' (which, by the way, Alexander has already encountered on several occasions) 'with memorizing talk of magical powers'. Actually, Ishmael's most significant communication to Alexander is that he is supposed to be very dangerous, which is why he is kept locked up; we may deduce that our critics find him very dangerous too. I shall return to Ishmael, who seems to me the culmination, not only of this film, but of all Bergman's work to date.

First, I want to consider the two levels on which *Fanny and Alexander* can be seen as a 'summation'. First, on the personal level, numerous anecdotes from Bergman interviews connect him with Alexander, most notably the pun-

ishments inflicted on him in childhood by his Lutheran pastor father. Compare *Hour of the Wolf* in which the male protagonist (Max von Sydow) recounts similar memories. Asked why he didn't dramatise these in a flashback, Bergman replied that the experiences were still too close, that to do more than have the character narrate them would be unbearable. In *Fanny and Alexander* not only are they fully dramatized, but the 'father', significantly distanced as step-father, is created with understanding as a rounded character fully believing in the goodness and justice of his actions. (To understand, however, is not necessarily to forgive: there is no hint of sentimental exoneration.) Bergman's self-identification with a male child on the verge of puberty is not new; it was anticipated in *The Silence* and, crucially, *Persona*. What is especially interesting here is the way the identification becomes divided: the film moves towards the moment when the children's mother, Emilie, having at last exorcised her need to be dependent on a man, accepts the management of her first husband's theatre and plans to produce *A Dream Play* – a work with which Bergman has been particularly associated. An active, independent woman and a boy not yet indoctrinated into patriarchy but who has learnt all about fathers: in the dual identification Ishmael is already implicit.

Second, on the historical level the personal progression from abused child to producer of Strindberg is counter-balanced with a much wider though related progression, realized in the audacious aesthetic leaps of the film: from nineteenth century realist novel to twentieth century symbolic drama, Dickens to Strindberg, *David Copperfield* to *A Dream Play*. The aesthetic progression encapsulates in microcosm an essential social / sexual progression from confidence in a 'reality' built upon the traditional organization of sexual difference to the collapse of that confidence, with the emergence of Ishmael as the logical – the only possible – movement towards further progress,

In retrospect, it now appears that the turning point in Bergman's career was *Persona* or, more precisely, the

somewhat mysterious 'illness' that preceded it (and out of which it grew): an illness both physical and mental. *Persona*, of course, is intimately concerned with the experience of breakdown. Bergman's work has been haunted from the outset (it is quite explicit in *Prison*, the first film he both wrote and directed) by the notion that life on earth is already 'hell' – embodied particularly in the seemingly unresolvable tensions of heterosexual relationships. Prior to *Persona*, the commonest tendency of the films is to move towards a bleak, resigned 'happy ending' in which male and female accept each other for want of anything better, making the best of a bad job (for example, *Waiting Women*, *Smiles of a Summer Night*, *Wild Strawberries*, *Winter Light*). In the post-*Persona* films, the commonest movement is towards the relationship's final, irreparable collapse (*Shame*, *A Passion*, *The Touch*), the experience of psychological breakdown remaining a constant threat.

Yet, at the same time, an alternative movement begins tentatively to manifest itself. *Persona* is the first Bergman film to treat bisexuality seriously, as a potentially valid human experience: indeed, the film lends itself readily to the reading that it is the denial of lesbian attraction that perverts the two women's relationship into a vicious power-struggle that reproduces, internalized and in microcosm, the brutal imperialism of the male-dominated external world of which the Vietnam and Warsaw Ghetto references stand as emblems. The film that immediately followed, *Hour of the Wolf*, though its essential movement is somewhat obscured by the elaborate 'baroque-gothic' trappings, unmistakably attributes its male protagonist's torments to the repression of homosexuality (von Sydow's fantasy / memory of murdering a seductive boy). *Face to Face*, though one of Bergman's least successful, most sterile films, abruptly (too abruptly, as if Bergman himself were taken by surprise) produces a male protagonist who is balanced, self-accepting and gay.

But the key film in this altogether surprising line of development – among the finest, toughest, most rigorously non-evasive of all Bergman's works – is *From the Life of the Marionettes*. It is also, unfortunately, one of his most neglected and inaccessible, a film totally devoid of any of the ingratiating features that have made *Fanny and Alexander* so popular. The point is not so much that one of its central characters is gay (though this is one of the most sympathetic and imaginatively 'inward' portrayals of a certain recognizable type of homosexual the cinema has given us): the film culminates in a psychiatrist's diagnosis that the root of the male protagonist's psychological problems lies in his repressed homosexuality. Like his female counterpoint in *Persona*, the psychiatrist is neither wholly endorsed nor wholly repudiated: the film suggests that his insights are valid within certain limitations. A (real-life) Swedish psychiatrist once remarked to me succinctly that most psychiatrists are not interested in making people healthy but only in making them 'adjusted', and Bergman's presentation (in both films) reflects this very shrewdly and precisely. The psychiatrist of *Marionettes* has his own stake in the patriarchal *status quo* to the extent of trying to seduce his patients' wives in order to confirm his 'masculinity', and his diagnosis has the effect of categorizing the protagonist as a 'special case'. The film as a whole, especially when viewed in the context of Bergman's general development, effectively questions such as categorization, presenting its hero as representative rather than exceptional. We are very close here to the theories developed by, for example, Marcuse and Gad Horowitz, and many feminists, out of Freud's discovery of constitutional bisexuality: theories that see the repression of

an innate bisexuality as the key to our society's construction of hopelessly incompatible gender roles, the so-called 'norms' of masculinity and femininity, hence as the root cause of the strains and conflicts that characterize heterosexual relations within our culture.

At the climax of *Fanny and Alexander*, Alexander, rescued from the house of his tyrannical stepfather, and precariously in hiding sees for the last time the ghost of his benevolent but ineffectual real father and dismisses him, telling him he's no longer of any use to him. This is followed almost immediately by his discovery of Ishmael who, because he is so 'dangerous', is kept permanently locked up, a secret from the world. Ishmael is a man played by a woman: in appearance, voice and behaviour, an embodiment of the principle of androgyny. He / she is also presented in a context of pervasive sexual ambiguity, the 'brother' of Aaron, who physically caresses Alexander and kisses Ishmael tenderly on the lips. The brief scene in which Ishmael and Alexander join forces is given powerful erotic overtones: Ishmael encloses the boy in his / her arms, and together they will the death of the stepfather, the overthrow of patriarchal oppression (the enactment of Alexander's secret, unspeakable wish) which makes possible not only Alexander's freedom but Emilie's – her independence, her acceptance of the theatre management. When Ishmael invites Alexander to write his own name, the name he finds he has written is Ishmael's. The pre-pubescent male child becomes identified with the symbolic figure of androgyny; the woman becomes active and autonomous; Bergman identifies himself with all three. At last a Bergman film has achieved a triumphant happy ending – a triumph qualified but not *dis*-qualified by the brief intrusion of the stepfather's ghost.

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