



Moments of Release

It was *The Seventh Seal* in 1957 that established Bergman's reputation internationally. At the time, the film appeared a vividly imagined medieval fresco with contemporary overtones. In fact, it also established a basic structure that has recurred intermittently in Bergman's films ever since. The opening of the film sets two groups in an opposition defined as much by poetic detail as by character: on the one hand, the Knight and Squire, outcasts on a barren beach, perpetually awake or tossing in disturbed sleep, the Knight confronted by a vision of Death; on the other, the travelling players, their caravan harmoniously integrated in a composition of trees and meadows, their sleep disturbed by nothing but a mosquito, the clown Jof the recipient of a vision of the Virgin and Child. But Knight and Squire are themselves opposed, the former a tormented, frustrated seeker, the latter a stoical materialist, bound to each other in perpetual, mutual resentment, never making more than transitory contact with the players.

This triangular structure recurs, obviously, in *The Face*, where parallel roles are played by the same actors; and less obviously in *The Silence*. Here, Knight and Squire are transmuted into the sisters Ester and Anna, and their confrontation is accordingly more naked and intense; the travelling players are condensed into Anna's son Johan. The importance of this structure – clearly at root a psychological one – is suggested by its recurrence beneath such very different overt subject-matter.

Bergman described his trilogy (*Through a Glass Darkly*, *Winter Light*, *The Silence*) as 'Chamber Films', pointing to their intimacy and inwardness by analogy with the 'voices' of a string quartet; but his films have always been to varying degrees psycho-dramas with the characters deriving their intense life partly from their nature as projections of interior drives and conflicts. Many of the films (the trilogy, *Persona*, *Cries and Whispers*) resemble a sort of internal group therapy session in which the personae within

Bergman's own skull battle with debatable degrees of success towards health or resolution.

Reduced to its fundamentals, the recurrent structure has two characters, one spiritual / intellectual, the other materialist / sensual, bound to each other by a need that is itself ambiguous (sado-masochism or a striving after wholeness?); and a third character (or group) much less clearly defined and less 'inwardly' portrayed, but representing a potential health. The travelling player always seemed a somewhat facile wish-fulfilment; the unformed, immature nature of this aspect of the structure is much more satisfactorily expressed in the frail, vulnerable child of *The Silence*.

The most significant point about these characters, in psychological terms, is that they are always outside the main conflict and seem scarcely susceptible of integration. In *Persona*, the boy from *The Silence* (same actor) has been pushed outside the action of the film into some strange, undefined never-never land: the effect is to insist on his symbolic status but also to reduce him to a mere rhetorical gesture. Yet here again (like Jof and Johan) he is associated with the idea of new life and resurrection.

Bergman's films since the trilogy fall into two alternating series: one (*Now About These Women*, *Hour of the Wolf*, *The Rite*) hermetic, very stylised and formalist, often retrospective and arguably retrogressive; the other (*Persona*, *Shame*, *A Passion*, *The Touch*) much more open and exploratory, with an increasing tendency to improvisation and spontaneity; contemporary in setting, more outward-looking, comparatively naturalistic in style. If one sees his work in terms of a tension between a striving towards health and wholeness and tendency to indulge neurotic traits in sterile and perverse self-torture, it is easy to associate the latter impulse with the hermetic works, the former with the exploratory.

Cries and Whispers (Curzon, X) belongs, on the whole, among the hermetic films, though it is a richer work than its

predecessors in the series. Stylistically, it is far removed from the spontaneous inventiveness of *A Passion* and *The Touch*: here, every composition, each effect, seems pondered and deliberate. The red interiors that, with the actresses' white dresses, determine the film's stylised formal beauty, also emphasise its enclosedness, hence its nature as interior drama: Bergman explained that he once imagined the soul as enclosed in a red membrane.

The recurrent structure I have noted is present in a particularly clear-cut and complete form. Of the three sisters, the dying Agnes (Harriet Andersson) is a constant reminder of the threat of death; the other two, Karin (Ingrid Thulin) and Maria (Liv Ullmann), recapitulate, with variations, the spiritual / materialist conflicts of *The Seventh Seal*, *The Silence* and *Persona*. Set against these characters is the devoted servant-girl Anna (Kari Sylwan), accepting, altruistic, Christian: a clear derivative from the travelling players, more fully-realised and convincing but still outside the main psychological conflict and scarcely affecting it. The film strikes one as among Bergman's most authoritative and assured, but the high valuation such a description implies is qualified by one's sense that it breaks little new ground: what is most admirable and moving in Bergman's work as a whole is the presence of intense dynamic drives, the ability to develop. *The Touch*, much less realised and successful than *Cries and Whispers*, is in some respects more promising.

The difficulty with the 'Christian' characters in Bergman's film is that the attempted affirmation they represent is really the denial of everything that is most vital in his art. The core of his work is the conflict of broken but complementary psyches, its life is its ambiguous (destructive or constructive?) energy. The values embodied in the servant of *Cries and Whispers* are essentially passive. The film's most moving scene has nothing to do with her: it is the moment when Karin and Maria, after a fiercely destructive quarrel, suddenly break through to reconciliation and passionate contact, a moment Bergman celebrates characteristically, with the sudden irruption of a Bach cello suite on the sound track.

It is the most marvellous moment of release he has ever given us, and without any equivalent, structurally, in the previous films: short-lived, but containing a powerful suggestion that the future health of his art lies in the resolution of its psychological conflicts, not in their denial.

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