

Philosophy and Film in Dialogue

Ingmar Bergman

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In the world of arts one can identify two groups of people operating. One deals with amazement, wonder and looking while others are more contemplative, discursive and abstract. In the first group you find artists like Flaubert, Keats, Satyajit Ray. And in the later case you are confronted with Kafka, Ritwik Ghatak and Bergman.

As a matter of fact taking into account the particular case of Bergman we would see philosophy has acted as a Cross to bear ever since he has joined the film culture. He appears more like a modern Kierkegaard who incidentally uses images instead of words. That way he is a thinker and the audiovisual images are merely a mode of expression with him.

How to define Bergman? What would be his portrait as an artist? How to locate him in the trajectory of film history?

Undoubtedly he is a great filmmaker—an icon in himself—rightly considered to be one of the foremost figures who lent a kind of dignity to the otherwise mundane popular form of moving images.

Yet positioning him is not so simple.

He cannot be compared with Antonioni. After all he does not enjoy the art of seeing as his Italian counterpart would enjoy. As Truffaut would argue, he is the least pictorial among the filmmakers. He is not a Godard talking ceaselessly to himself. Neither he is interested in the possibility of developing a tricky narrative in line with Hitchcock. He, on the other hand, says what he has to say quite calmly before the moment of finality: This is my hand, I can move it, fill the blood pulsing through it. The Sun is still high in the sky and I, Antonius Block, am playing chess with death.

So Bergman ultimately has been trying ever since his first film to write a testament for himself so that civilization can decode his hidden messages in near future. When I go through in between the lines of his films again and again I am reminded of the great chapter named the *Grand Inquisitor* in *Brothers Karamazov*. I would humbly claim that as was fiction in the case of Dostoevsky, film too with Bergman represents too narrow a domain to limit himself. He is more. To be precise, in Ingmar Bergman we discover a geography of an anguished soul who uses audiovisual signs only as means of expression to communicate the eternal questions of existence. Bergman is more a philosopher than a filmmaker. Whatever sickness he experiences is in a Kierkegaardian sense, sickness unto death and obviously belongs to the zone of allegory.

This is not to argue that I question his integrity as an artist. What I humbly submit is that as a cartographer of the soul, he can be compared and contrasted with the 17th century Spanish painter Velazquez. When in 1655 Velazquez painted *Las Meninas* he could expose an entire system of representational thought characteristic and revelatory of the age in which they were produced which Foucault calls *Episteme*. Applying Foucault's observation on *Las Meninas*, we can take into account Bergman's creations and ask both how individual films embody convention of representation that make them characteristic for their time and how they themselves think about —indeed, philosophize upon these conventions.

In 1960, *Time Magazine* inscribed two lines on him which perhaps describe him best: "His is a voice crying in the midst of prosperity that man cannot live by prosperity alone."

So we begin our tale. In the beginning was the image. In the early 1970s, in Kolkata, his summer days completely bowled us out. Both *Summer Interlude* and *Summer with Monika* were films of our salad days, of our twenties, of our stolen kisses. In *Harriet Andersson* we discover a note from Jibanananda Das—'if only a moment becomes eternity in the galaxy of the woman'. *Summer with Monika* to us was the first Baudelairean film. A kind of pure sin – *Les fleur du mal*. I still remember the extraordinary long take when Harriet chooses hell instead of heaven. This uncertain look is the saddest shot in the history of cinema.

I can also point out how apparently he could defamiliarise an overused technique—a track out at dawn to express Monika's pleasure in her journey by boat through an awakening Stockholm, and later the same tracking shot on the river but forward this time as Monika returns disillusioned to a sleeping town.

This is only a part of the story. This cannot make someone so great. Bergman's subject subsequently and increasingly began to deal with ethical issues. Albert Camus in his *Myth of Sisyphus* claimed that while antiquity deals with the metaphysical, the modern sensibility involves the ethical. From *The Seventh Seal* onwards the artist in Bergman turned inward like Rembrandt. He became interested in representing true portraits of the human being—the interior and not the face. His goal is an essential portrait, an image of human being with its hearts exposed a picture of what we each look like without our protective illusions, evasions, and lies. Such reduction to essentials provides a mirror in which we can see ourselves as we truly are face to face. God's probing eye is replaced by our own and all that remains is for us to acknowledge the verdict.

All men, according to Bergman, try to live up to their appearances. The moment of truth is the moment when the mask is torn aside and the real face uncovered. Every Bergman film turns on this process. The mask is shown, examined and then removed. That is why the close up forms such a vital part of Bergman works.

He, though remains within a habit of flirting with a popular medium, also celebrates the artistic pleasure of displeasing the public.

In 1968, in a Swedish TV interview, he claimed : 'We become a plague, I feel sort of parasites existing in the material world without any meaning at all whenever we do not function in relation to other people.'

That is why he goes on illustrating: Film is a language, the sentences of which are literally spoken by one soul to another and which escapes the control of the intellect in an almost sensual fashion.

Thus we are left to no alternative but to believe that what Dostoevsky is to modern prose, Goya to modern painting, Strindberg to modern drama and Baudelaire to modern poetry, Bergman occupies the same status in modern films. After all what was film in the beginning? Not more than a

roadside vaudeville show. It was a quick fun — at best a medium to tell you tales comprising lovely boys and smart girls. Nobody thought that these moving images can be utilized for describing the existential sufferings of human beings. Ingmar Bergman can be considered one among those rare fews who took up the cause of cinema for asking questions. Permit me to quote Godard: The cinema is not a craft. It is an art. It does not mean teamwork. One is always alone; on the set as before the blank page.

And for Bergman to be alone means to ask questions. And to make films mean to answer them. Nothing could be more classically romantic.

There are people who accused him for taking recourse to extreme metaphysical attitudes. True, Bergman in a conventional sense is not interested in political turmoil and societal upheaval but if we carefully consider his case we would be left to believe that a Godard or perhaps an Antonioni or a Fellini are contemporaries rather than moderns in the perspectives of total Bergman oeuvre. As an example we can examine the similarities and dissimilarities of self-portraits as evident in Manik Bandyopadhyay's *The Artist*, Bergman's *Sawdust & Tinsel* and Fellini's *La Strada*. We would see that while Manik Bandyopadhyay vertically invades our complacency, Fellini desperately searches for a way out, Bergman studies *The Fallen Victim* with all the composure of a philosopher.

This is why when he made *The Seventh Seal*, apparently people took it as a medieval tale but in a detailed analysis one understands it is Bergmanian confession on the holocaust. Whatever he does comprise not only properties of the aesthetic, he oversteps and like a prophet tries to unearth the ailments of modern existence, namely, alienation. No wonder that in his youth he was influenced by both Kafka and Camus. Sweden is a wealthy country, perhaps more affluent than California, and there lies the secret of a great tragedy. Like an ancient Tiresius, Bergman identified so many King Midas. He saw people in the debris of consumption. They have everything, but they have no means of communication. Bergman courageously walked alone and interrogated the curse everywhere, in *Persona*, in *Silence*, in the *Winter Light*, you find the same answer to the same question.

What is the penalty?

The usual one, I suppose loneliness.

He issues the necessary warning.

We draw a magic circle and shut out everything that does not agree with our games.

We seldom care.

But there is considerable evidence, more often than not, that history takes note of these cautions and warnings. That is why Bergman in not so distant future would be treated like a contemporary Dante who walked through the hell of 20th century, not knowing whether resurrection is possible or not.

In a world where communication is possible only through sex or violence of some kind, in a world where words are no longer carrier of meanings, Bergman represents a kind of protest. The protest is not against any government, bureaucracy or military industrial complex, but against the nature of existence itself, against finitude.