

Ingmar Bergman (1918-2007): An appreciation and a lament

Marty Jonas
17 August 2007

With the coincidental deaths of film directors Michelangelo Antonioni and Ingmar Bergman on Monday, July 30, we note not just the passing of two great artists, but the passing on of a great generation of world cinema. The *World Socialist Web Site* has already covered the career of Antonioni; I will make some comments on the significance of Bergman.

Ernst Ingmar Bergman was born in 1918 in Uppsala, Sweden. His father, a Lutheran minister, was strict and brutal, basing the punishments he parceled out to his three children on his fundamentalist religious beliefs. His mother was restrained in her affections. These facets of his upbringing would shape his beliefs and attitudes and come up again and again in his films.

After university, in 1941, Bergman became involved with theater. He directed Shakespeare and Strindberg and began writing his own plays. His work came to the attention of Svensk Filmindustri, the leading Swedish film company, and he served a lengthy apprenticeship before writing his first screenplay, for *Torment* (1944), directed by Alf Sjöberg.

While making his mark in film, he remained primarily a man of the theater (and would divide his time between theater and film for the rest of his life). At the age of 26, as director of the Halsingborg City Theater, he was the youngest director of a major theater in northern Europe.

He went on to head other theaters in Stockholm and Malmo, writing plays as well as directing them. His experience in playwriting would serve him well in films, where he wrote the majority of the screenplays for the 42 films he directed.

Bergman's first films, such as *Port of Call* (1948) and *Thirst* (1949), show the influence of the neorealism that was dominating Italian films. Subsequently, he would make films that probe family relationships and sexual passion and question the existence of God. A mood of postwar despair had taken hold in Europe, and Bergman, like the existentialists in France, expressed this in his films.

This despair—broken by passion, madness, and joy—runs through his work, with the notable exception of *Smiles of a Summer Night* in 1955 (the studio ordered him to do a comedy, and he succeeded beautifully). In his trilogy *Through a Glass Darkly* (1961), *Winter Light* (1961) and *The Silence* (1962), he posits a universe in which God has deserted us and is silent.

In making his films, Bergman employed members of his theatrical troupe. These same actors—among them, Harriet Andersson, Gunnar Björnstrand, Liv Ullmann, Max von Sydow,

Ingrid Thulin and Erland Josephson—would stay with him through his prolific film career (as well as appear in his theater productions). Some, such as von Sydow and Ullmann, would go on to be international film stars. He also worked with two of the greatest cinematographers, Gunnar Fischer and Sven Nykvist.

After unexpectedly winning the Special Jury Prize at the 1956 Cannes Film Festival for *Smiles of a Summer Night* (the film was submitted by Svensk Filmindustri without his knowledge), the film company gave Bergman carte blanche. He then made *The Seventh Seal* (1957), the work that brought him international recognition (and was incidentally one of the two or three films that helped launch “art house” movie theaters in the United States).

In the film, a knight (von Sydow) and his squire (Björnstrand) return from the Crusades in the Holy Land to a Sweden in the fourteenth century that is ravaged by the plague and religious hysteria. Corpses are everywhere, women are burned as witches, processions of flagellants march through the villages. The knight doubts the value of the Crusades and the existence of God. The figure of Death, white faced and in a black cloak, shadows the knight, and—in one of the most famous sequences of the cinema—they play chess for the knight's life. The film ends with another iconic sequence: the Dance of Death, with figures in silhouette against the night sky.

This film—parodied and paid homage to many times since—introduced Bergman to an international audience. It encompassed one of his major themes: facing off with a God who doesn't care or isn't there.

Bergman's vast creative output would continue treating this question, as well as madness and the agony of personal (especially family) relationships.

One outstanding work on the fragility and complexity of human relationships is *Scenes from a Marriage* (1973), originally done as a miniseries for Swedish television and released theatrically in an abbreviated form. Staged as a series of chamber plays, with small sets and few characters, and spanning many years, the film shows the disintegration of a “perfect” marriage.

The couple (Josephson and Ullmann) break up, get together, break up once more and find that, like it or not, they are entangled for life. The miniseries—admittedly based on Bergman's own relationships—is truly insightful, engaging and depressing. It was immensely popular when it appeared on Swedish television—keeping viewers at their television sets night after night and filling the offices of marriage counselors and divorce lawyers.

Thirty years later, Bergman would return to this couple in his final film, *Saraband* (2003), also made for television. In this sequel, the couple (played by the same actors) meet again, and the character played by Josephson is sunk even further into the misery in which we left him in 1973. Family agonies beget family agonies, and he is battling a son who hates him.

As a filmmaker, Bergman is one of the giants. His insight into his characters, especially the women, is precise and sympathetic. Unlike Antonioni, he puts no emotional distance between the audience and the characters. He has courageously reached into his own past, his relationships, both agonizing and glorious, and put them on the screen in a more direct and powerful way than most filmmakers. In films like *Scenes from a Marriage* and *Fanny and Alexander* (1982), Bergman is unsparing of the viewer—and of himself.

In collaboration with his cameramen Fischer and Nykvist, he put images on the screen that are sharp and potent. His black-and-white films can evoke the bleakness of a Scandinavian winter or the ecstasy of a summer day. His later use of color, whether muted or rich, captured the details and textures of the houses of the upper middle class and the lush countryside.

This, for Bergman, amounted to truth. But though he gets painfully close to his characters, he remains aloof from the stream of history and politics.

There are a few films where Bergman gives us a glimpse of the world beyond his characters' lives: In *Thirst*, for example, a crowd of starving people beg at the window of the couple's railway car when it pulls into the station in Germany; we can see the silhouette of bombed-out buildings in the background. In *The Silence*, tanks can be heard rolling through the streets beyond the hotel window; and in *Fanny and Alexander*, we catch the whiff of anti-Semitism directed by some of the characters at the Jewish friend of the family. But these few hints of the external world are peripheral to the films.

Despite his many creative strengths, how could so sensitive an artist leave out or minimize the world in which his characters live and which, ultimately, shapes them?

Some light is shed on this aloofness by Bergman's early personal history. At the age of 16, he went as an exchange student to live with the family of a Nazi pastor in Thuringen, Germany. He stayed for six weeks, but his attendance at a Nazi party rally in Weimar in 1934 aroused the enthusiasm of the impressionable youth. He raised his hand in the Nazi salute and was swept up in the crowd's hysteria over Hitler's speech. According to Bergman's 1987 autobiography, *The Magic Lantern*, "For many years, I was on Hitler's side, delighted by his successes and saddened by his defeats."

Bergman's sympathies toward the Nazis were buttressed not only by his brother being one of the founders and organizers of the Swedish fascist party and his father consistently voting for them, but by his belonging to a social milieu in Sweden that shared these enthusiasms. Bergman writes: "Our history teacher worshipped 'the old Germany,' our gymnastics teacher went to officers' meetings every summer; some of the pastors in the parish were crypto-Nazis and the family's closest friends expressed strong sympathies for the 'new German.'"

His Nazi sympathies were to last until the end of the Second World War, when he saw the first horrendous photos from the death camps. He told an interviewer, in 1999, "When the doors to the concentration camps were thrown open, at first I did not believe my eyes. ... When the truth came out it was a hideous shock for me. In a brutal and violent way I was suddenly ripped of my innocence."

He says in his autobiography, explaining his long fascination with fascism, "The surface luster blinded me, and I did not see the darkness." These are not satisfying comments.

Toward the end of that same page, what conclusion does he draw from his 11 years of willful naiveté?: "Politics—never again!" This is not very helpful, nor does it suggest that he ever seriously submitted his own fascination with fascist irrationalism to criticism. Major questions in his life and work remained unresolved.

Bergman did attempt to come to terms with this period, and perhaps with his grotesque youthful enthusiasms, in one film, *The Serpent's Egg* (1977). Filmed in English, in Germany, and starring David Carradine and Liv Ullmann, it takes place in 1923, in the Weimar Republic. Germany is in turmoil, anti-Semitism is rampant, Nazi thugs roam the streets and a series of random suicides are taking place.

The film's plot is incoherent and does not warrant summing up. It is a very distant and abstract film, with preposterous situations, wooden dialogue and flat characterization. In the melodramatic conclusion we learn that behind all the suicides and chaos (and the Nazis?) is ... a mad scientist! Tellingly, most critics agree that this is Bergman's worst film.

Bergman's failure to understand fascism or its attractions for the Swedish petty bourgeoisie and his self-imposed distance from politics mark the distinct limits of his vision. But this is not to downplay his vast talent or accomplishments.

Bergman is one of the last of a generation of filmmakers that came to creative maturity after the Second World War. Unlike many of today's directors, whose only culture is film and television and who read books only with a view to acquiring them as film properties, the men and women of Bergman's generation were immersed in the arts and culture. Their influences and impact were international.

The great directors—Welles, Kurosawa, Satyajit Ray, Wajda, Fellini, Bresson—all were aware of or active in other cultural areas. Bergman not only directed plays by Scandinavians Ibsen and Strindberg, he also staged Shakespeare, Eugene O'Neill, Edward Albee, Albert Camus and Tennessee Williams, as well as many operas (he made a film of Mozart's *The Magic Flute* in 1975). Along with this, he wrote novels and short stories.

Those are the traits of an international cinema that is disappearing, to be replaced by a cinema that is international only in the marketing sense.



To contact the WSW and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact