Sexual Antagonism in Early Bergman

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THE PUBLICATION, in 1987, of Bergman's autobiography, *The Magic Lantern*, and the release, at Christmas 1991, of Bille August's *The Best Intentions* (*Den goda viljan*) have cast a new light on the human relationships in those films directed by Bergman prior to 1951. The example of his parents' marriage, achieved against severe odds and then deteriorating into sullen, armed neutrality, manifestly affected Bergman and his attitudes to the sexual bonding between man and woman. If in old age he has at last felt able to articulate and analyse his parents' relationship, as a young man he sought to sublimate these acute personal memories into not only the films he directed but also the screenplays he wrote for others.

"My parents lived in an exhausting, permanent state of crisis with neither beginning nor end," he wrote in *The Magic Lantern*. "They fulfilled their duties, they made huge efforts, appealing to God for mercy, their beliefs, values and traditions of no help to them. Nothing helped. Our drama was acted out before everyone's eyes on the brightly lit stage of the parsonage. Fear created what was feared."(1) Although Bergman ran away from home, he soon agreed to marry a dancer and choreographer named Else Fisher. Although the first year or two must have been fun, the marriage soon began to crack apart. Bergman flung himself into theatre and film, and when he was appointed director of Helsingborg City Theatre in April, 1944, Bergman had to come to terms with a routine of hard work during the week, and quarrelsome reunions with Else at weekends. When he became infatuated with Ellen Lundström, a dancer, his relationship with Else quickly dissolved. Just as Else may be regarded as the model for such characters as Maggi in *It Rains On Our Love* (*Det regnar på vår kärlek*) and Sally in *A Ship Bound for India* (*Skepp till Indialand*), so the more fiery, sexually-based marriage with Ellen inspired the incessant wrangling between the lovers in *Prison* (*Fängelse*), *Thirst* (*Törst*), and *To Joy* (*Till glädje*). His divorce from Ellen Lundström took place in 1950. A few months later he wrote the screenplay for Gustaf Molander's film, *Divorced* (*Frånskild*), and married Gun Hagberg. A new, more mature phase of his life emerged with the new decade; the Angst of the 1940's gave way to the sunnier, world of *Summer Interlude* (*Sommarlek*) and *Summer with Monika* (*Sommaren med Monika*). The love affairs in these films might be doomed, but their intrinsic intensity and passion justified their fleeting existence.

The eight films (leaving aside the commissioned potboiler *Sånt händer inte här*) directed by Bergman during this early period, plus the four features which he wrote for other film-makers, provide a wealth of variation on the love-hate relationship he experienced with women. Sexual antagonism rears its head in the very first film with which the Swede was ever associated: *Torment* (*Hets*), directed in 1944 by Alf Sjöberg from a screenplay by Bergman. The female heroine, Bertha (Mai Zetterling), is involved with the Yin and Yang of Bergman's male world -- on the one hand the sadistic, probably homosexual Caligula (Stig Järrel) and on the other the eager, naif young student, Jan-Erik (Alf Kjellin). Caligula's inferiority complex is such that he must destroy any positive, vital personality with whom he comes in contact, and that includes both Bertha and Jan-Erik. Like all the women in Bergman's very early career, Bertha has no validity other than as a foil for the men in her life. Not until the appearance of Eva Henning's characters, in *Prison* and *Thirst*, will Bergman's screen women overcome this lack of self-sufficiency. The director's alter ego during this period -- whether it be Stig Olin or Birger Malmsten -- remains a narcissist, but by 1948 he must accept the ability of women to snarl and spit every bit as effectively as he does.

John Boorman, writing about Oshima's *In the Realm of the Senses* (*Ai no corrida*), has commented that, "Sex is only interesting when it releases passion. The more extreme and the more expressed that passion is, the more unbearable does life seem without it. It reminds us that if passion dies or is denied, we are partly dead and that soon, come what may, we will be wholly so."(2)

Bergman has throughout his career accentuated the physical sights and smells of sex, rendering the act of copulation at once accessible and sordid. The sex in films like *Torment*, *Woman without a Face*, *Prison*, and *Thirst* embodies a revulsion against the pleasures of the flesh. The act of love in Bergman's work is seldom prolonged, relaxed, or sensual. On the contrary, his characters seize their sexual gratification as greedily and

brusquely as they might a draught of water on a hot day (viz. the encounter between Anna and the barman in *The Silence*).

Like Caligula in *Torment*, Jack in *Crisis* confesses to a murder deep in his past. Whether or not these tragedies ever occurred, whether or not they stem from the fantasies of a twisted inferiority complex, remains uncertain. What emerges with distinct clarity, however, is a Strindbergian fear of women without Strindberg's perennial misogyny. Bergman himself has said, "Strindberg's way of experiencing women is ambivalent. While he's an obsessive worshipper of women, he also persecutes them obsessively. He does both things at once. His psyche is fifty percent woman and fifty percent man. You can see this most clearly in *Miss Julie*, where the man and the woman never stop swapping masks."(3) Bergman, in these early films, exhibits a loathing for men and women alike. Together, the sexes dwell in the worst of all possible worlds, which explains that memorable line from the closing sequence of *Thirst*: "Hell together is better than Hell alone."

Of the two male personalities who dominate the first five years of Bergman's career as a director and writer, "Jack" (first introduced in *Crisis*) regards women with more scorn and cynicism. They are marionettes to be jerked about at the will of a faceless and inimical God. Yet Jack himself is for Bergman also the Devil incarnate, as he was in early plays, and sketches for plays, written by Bergman during the early 1940's. As played by Stig Olin, he communicates the writer's disenchantment with himself and the world about him. In *Woman without a Face*, which Bergman scripted for Gustaf Molander in 1947, Olin is cast as the world-weary narrator. He recounts the story of a nymphomaniac girl and the man who had entered her life. Bergman's portrait of Rut Kohler is dipped in sulphur, an act of revenge on a woman he had met soon after leaving home, prior to the marriage with Else Fisher. Rut, cruel and insensitive, epitomises the Strindbergian female. In the screenplay, Bergman describes her in these terms: "Her face is not beautiful. Her irresistible attractiveness is found in something else, something indefinable -- in the soft smile and the hard laugh, in the voice, ingratiating and devoted, caustic, scornful, and brutal, in her quickly changing moods, the facial play of emotions in her springy and delectable movements, in the catlike grace and elasticity of her body. A little *femme fatale*, a cuddly little puma with deadly claws."(4) Bergman found himself fascinated by such women (Harriet Andersson, for example, both on and off screen), women for whom antagonism became part of the sexual process.

In *A Ship Bound for India*, one relationship seems to prefigure the other. the sea captain, Blom, and his wife have been married for twenty-five years, increasingly trapped in an arid and passionless relationship, while his son, Johannes, tries to nurture a fledgling love with Sally, the chorus girl brought back to the boat like a prize by Blom. The tension between father and son climbs to a climax in their rivalry for Sally's affections. After one particularly violent confrontation with his father, Johannes tries to rape Sally on board the boat. In Eva, scripted by Bergman for Gustaf Molander one year later, the young boy Bo is beaten black and blue by his father after letting a blind girl die.

Undoubtedly, then, Bergman's relationship with his parents coloured the emotional fabric of his early work. His father, a parson who by assiduous application had become Chaplain to the Royal Court of Sweden, repressed his feelings until, in unpredictable moments, they boiled over into rage -- as Bille August's *The Best Intentions* illustrates. Although Bergman rejected his father (and his religion) at an early age, he also experienced an ambivalent relationship with his mother. In his autobiography, *The Magic Lantern*, he notes that "My devotion disturbed and irritated her. My expressions of tenderness and my violent outbursts worried her. She often sent me away with cool ironic words and I wept with rage and disappointment." Even more than for most boys, Bergman's mother represented a tantalising ideal hovering beyond his reach. When later in life he became aware of the traumatic commencement of his parents' own marriage, Bergman describes them in the screenplay for *The Best Intentions* in terms not entirely dissimilar to those of his early films. His maternal grandmother fought tooth and nail to prevent his father and mother marrying, and the meek yet obstinate nature of Bergman's father is reminiscent of Johannes in *A Ship Bound for India*. Having achieved their own marriage only after much suffering and separation, Karin and Erik Bergman settled into a form of armed neutrality, the example of which manifestly inhibited their children.

Inhibition lies at the root of much sexual conflict in Bergman's apprentice work. Sometimes, a physical malady or handicap serves as an emblem of this repression: the Captain's encroaching blindness in *A Ship Bound for India*, Bengt Vyldeke's accidental blindness in *Music in Darkness*, and the abortions or loss of

babies that occur in *It Rains on Our Love*, *Port of Call*, and *Prison*. In certain films (*A Ship Bound for India*, *Music in Darkness*, *Thirst*), the male "hero" relies on women to assert themselves and make decisions for him. In others of the same period (*Crisis*, *Port of Call*, *Prison*) the "heroine" lacks fibre and self-confidence. This psychological incertitude leads to mutual mistrust and rancour. Bergman the director skilfully chooses the right environment in which his lovers' frustrations can emerge: the tiny, cramped cabins on board the boat in *A Ship Bound for India*, the claustrophobic apartment in *Port of Call*, the train compartment in *Thirst*. "As a human being," Bergman recalls telling himself at the time, "I have made an enormous fiasco, therefore I must try to be a very good director."(5)

Another root cause of sexual antagonism in the films of this period stems from Bergman's need to escape from the religious straitjacket of his youth. In rejecting his parents' rigid adherence to the practice of righteousness he was confronted with an emotional and moral void. If God is dead, as so many of Bergman's characters declare between 1945 and 1950 (on screen, on stage, and on radio), then does there exist any alternative other than the Devil? Not surprisingly, the opposite sex, "the unknown", becomes the Devil incarnate. (Significantly, the two living symbols of Death in these early films are both women -- the statuesque girl in the dream in *Prison*, and Mimi Pollak's grim, black-clad old lady with an umbrella in *Summer Interlude*). Bergman's youthful heroes may end up arm in arm with a decent, even innocent young girl, but they are much more profoundly disturbed by (and attracted to) subtle, sophisticated seductresses as Nelly (Margit Carlqvist) in *To Joy* or *Susanne* (Eva Dahlbeck) in *Eva*. This latter siren even encourages Birger Malmsten's Bo to kill the musician who stands in the way of their sexual bonding (the incident occurs in a dream, but in Bergman, of course, the truth will always out in dreams).

In *The City*, a radio play first broadcast in early 1951 but written by Bergman shortly after his return from a trip to Paris in 1949, the bitter antagonism between the sexes emerges unqualified: "We were intoxicated with each other's flesh and so deluded our hearts that this was the great truth. But when our bodies grew tired and sated we could not deceive ourselves, and we accused each other for a love that was insufficient." In *Thirst*, released in 1949, the theme is equally harsh and acrimonious. Bergman's second marriage, to Ellen Lundström, had disintegrated in a seething broth of recriminations. The principal couple (Birger Malmsten and Eva Henning) in *Thirst* act out the vituperation that Ingmar and Ellen must have hurled at each other during early 1948. As they travel back by train to Sweden after a holiday in Italy, they score points at each other's expense until their mutual loathing (and self-loathing) explodes to the surface. "I hate you so much I want to live just to make hell for you," snaps Rut. In a parallel story within the film, the lonely Viola (Birgit Tengroth) is pursued first by a satanic male psychiatrist and then by a lesbian dancer. (Women turn to lesbianism in Bergman's films as a means of eluding on the one hand loneliness and on the other an infernal marriage.) These experiences contribute to Viola's suicide by drowning in Stockholm harbour -- just as the train bearing Rut and Bertil arrives in the city.

Hers is not the only suicide in early Bergman. His characters resort to this "exit" from life as frequently as do those of his spiritual mentor, Strindberg. Consider the melancholy catalogue: Jack shoots himself in the street in Crisis. Captain Blom, maddened by encroaching blindness and jealousy of his own son, hurls himself from a high window. Martin slashes his wrists in a hotel bedroom in the wake of a rancorous relationship in *Woman without a Face*. Berit, in the opening sequence of *Port of Call*, jumps into the harbour only to be rescued by a passing sailor. Birgitta-Carolina takes her own life with a knife in the cellar, in Prison. Nearly all these suicides, successful or unsuccessful, stem from the failure of sexual relationships, from a profound belief that the wheels of sex grind in disharmony rather than flowing smoothly as they do in romantic novels. At the beginning of *Divorced* (which Bergman wrote with Herbert Grevenius in late 1950), Gertrud contemplates suicide. "My life ends here," reads an entry in her diary, after her marriage of more than twenty years has fallen apart.

In his autobiography, Bergman has admitted that *To Joy* "was about Ellen [Lundström] and me, about the conditions imposed by art, about fidelity and infidelity [...] Under the influence of a dawning hope of a possible future for our tormented marriage, the portrayal of the film's leading female character turned into a miracle of beauty, faithfulness, wisdom and human dignity. The male part, on the other hand, became a conceited mediocrity; faithless, bombastic and a liar." The character of Nelly must have been inspired by the Russian-American painter whom Bergman met on the Riviera while writing the screenplay. In Bergman's eyes, this woman (who never quite managed to seduce him) was "athletic but well-proportioned, dark as

night with bright eyes and a generous mouth, a statuesque Amazon radiating uninhibited sensuality."[6] The central core of *To Joy* examines the male-female relationship in an altogether more sophisticated, more balanced, and less hysterical way than Bergman had achieved at any earlier point in his career. Martha and Stig "compete" on equal terms. Both are musicians in an orchestra. If either of them has a skeleton in the cupboard, it is Martha: she has been married before, and declares that her life has been nothing but a fake. Soon, however, the habitual weakness of the Bergman lover emerges. When Martha approaches the hours of parturition with their first child, Stig panics and leaves his wife in labour, only to be told by telephone later that a son has been born. As his affair with Nelly begins to infect him, Stig resorts to shouting and violence in arguments with his wife. The marriage crumbles beneath its own weight.

The final part of *To Joy* suffers from a certain melodramatic desperation; Martha dies in an accidental fire at the couple's summer cottage, and Stig plays Beethoven with the orchestra while his small son enters the auditorium like a token of hope for the future. From one standpoint, this conclusion may be viewed as a retreat from commitment to Bergman's fundamental theme; from another, it anticipates the brighter, more passionate films of the 1950's. *To Joy* is also the first of Bergman's films in which the characters revel in the alfresco delights of a Swedish summer, and in which the open horizons of the sea offer the promise of escape from the drab, sordid routine of everyday life. The artificial sets and the claustrophobic environment of Bergman's first few films contribute to the disharmony of his sexual relationships. In *To Joy*, Bergman appears to emerge from beneath the dark penumbra of his rebellious youth. During the summer of 1949, while shooting *To Joy*, Bergman turned thirty-one. When the film had finished shooting, he flew to Paris for an "illicit interlude" with his new love, the journalist Gun Grut, and in *The Magic Lantern* he recalls the sense of deliverance: "Hitherto I had worked hard and relentlessly in my profession. So coming to this autumn-warm Paris was an experience which had the effect of knocking down barriers. Love had both time and opportunity to grow freely, opening closed rooms and knocking down walls. I could breathe."[7]

Notes

1. Ingmar Bergman, *The Magic Lantern*, translated by Joan Tate (London: Hamilton, 1988).

2. *Projections*, edited by John Boorman and Walter Donohue (London: Faber and Faber, 1992).

3. *Bergman on Bergman*, edited by Stig Björkman, Torsten Manns, and Jonas Sima, translated by Paul B. Austin (London: Secker & Warburg, 1973) .

4. *Djävulens ansikte: Ingmar Bergmans filmer*, by Jörn Donner (Stockholm: Bokförlaget Aldus-Bonniers, 1962).

5. Quoted in *Ingmar Bergman: A Critical Biography*, by Peter Cowie (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1982; revised edition - London: André Deutsch, 1992).

6. *The Magic Lantern* - op. cit.

7. *The Magic Lantern* - op. cit.

Author Information

Peter COWIE was an Exhibitioner in History at the University of Cambridge. In 1963 he founded *International Film Guide*, which he continues to edit. He has written numerous books on the history of the cinema (with a particular focus on Scandinavia), and is sometime Visiting Professor in Film Studies at UC Santa Barbara. He is European Publishing Director of *Variety*, and lives in London.