# Ingmar Bergman's *Autumn Sonata*

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## AN 'INCORRIGIBLE MUSIC': INGMAR BERGMAN'S *AUTUMN SONATA*

Despite the wide critical acclaim and discussion of many films directed by Ingmar Bergman, *Autumn Sonata* (1977) has still not received much detailed critical attention. We shall attempt to redress the balance by discussing different kinds of aesthetic construction, particularly musical forms, presented in Ingmar Bergman's *Autumn Sonata*. A discussion of the different kinds of music featured in the film will be opened out to examine tensions between different kinds of aesthetic expression within the film generally. Sometimes it is eccentric to discuss the details of one medium (that of film) using templates of another medium (music). However, the very title *Autumn Sonata* invites analogies between music and film forms, music is of central importance in this film, and Bergman often describes his films in musical terms.(1) First, I shall consider two different modes of expression in music (generally termed 'Baroque' or 'Early Classical' and 'Romantic') manifested in the form of the film. I shall then more broadly consider the film as it maps out limitations, dangers and also positive possibilities of aesthetic construction.

The title '*Autumn Sonata*' sets up aesthetic expectations defied by the form of the film. Autumn is a time of harvest, of things coming to fruition *before* the slide into winter, and of breathtaking colours. Ironically, Bergman uses a consistently washed out 'palette', the appearance of a few blossoms coupled with the pervading gloomy gray place the film in no particular season, it is neither Spring nor Winter, about neither new beginnings or deaths -- the film resists any absolutes, positive or negative.(2) The 'sonata' of the title most immediately refers to the first movement of Händel's Sonata in F (opus 1) played during the credits. In Händel's era, the Baroque period, the 'sonata' is a loose description for a composition for solo instrument (here flute) and continuo accompaniment (here cello and harpsichord), usually of several separate, contrasting movements. Since Bergman's film has the feel of one unified, organic movement, the title word 'sonata' presumably also refers to the one-movement sonata *form*. This musical form, having rose to prominence in the Classical period, is usually 'transparent', and balanced being comprised of three principle sections of 'exposition' (introducing two main subjects), 'development' (consisting of material already presented but expanded and developed upon), and 'recapitulation' (a varied repetition of the exposition, sometimes then finished with a 'tailpiece' or coda which gives a greater feel of completeness). Superficially, Bergman's tightly constructed(3), Strindbergian 'chamber piece' figuratively follows these rules of musical construction.

The 'exposition' of *Autumn Sonata* includes the highly self-conscious introduction of two main subjects, Eva (Liv Ullmann) and Charlotte (Ingrid Bergman). In the first scene, Eva sits at a writing table in the manner of a gentlewoman in an eighteenth- or nineteenth-century painting. Her poised figure is framed by the lines of architecture: her figure is 'framed' by the window behind her, and her little writing space is 'framed' by the doorway of a larger room in the foreground. Her husband, Viktor (Halvar Björk), introduces her to us (first in voice-over, then direct to camera after entering the frame). Before Viktor enters the frame he seems to be speaking from where the camera is so we are aligned with him. He is there "without her knowing" just as we are.

We are made self-conscious as viewers by the voice-over, the aesthetic distancing invoked by the painterly first shot, and Bergman's use of the theatrical convention of a monologue given by one character while another is there, silent and oblivious in the background. Eva, writing a letter to Charlotte, is introduced to us in the manner of an Elizabethan stage 'discovery scene', the action being separate from and flanked by the larger acting space. Similarly, Charlotte is introduced to us through the painterly *frame* of the windowpane through which Eva's sees her arrival. Charlotte gets out of her Mercedes and in a self-conscious, and histrionic manner arches her back, aching after the journey. Charlotte adopts various roles and her 'theatrical' posturing, the self-conscious 'performances' within Ingrid Bergman's performance of the character literally embody the self-consciousness of Bergman's work as a whole.

Perhaps the 'development' of *Autumn Sonata* begins with the scene where Eva and then Charlotte play

Chopin's second prelude. But there is no clear sense of closure, no 'tonic' resolution to Bergman's piece as we would expect in a sonata form. As with *Cries and Whispers* (1971), the credits precede the main action, and there is no 'falling away' in emotional tension in the final moments which we would expect from a typical classical sonata form movement where the final moments contain and blend the facets of the piece, shaping them neatly into a final singular strand of resolute conclusion (e.g., the sonata form first movement of Mozart's Symphony 40).

I suggest that Bergman's exposition, the repeatedly poised, painterly, symmetrically balanced mise en scène (particularly in the first half of the film) evokes a 'Baroque' (early Bach, or Händel) or 'Early Classical' temperament. What Godard writes about Hitchcock, in response to the argument that director "lets the wires show too often", may apply to Bergman's *Autumn Sonata*: "because he shows [the wires], they, are no longer wires. They are the pillars of a marvellous architectural design made to withstand our scrutiny" (Godard 38).

Bergman's film repeatedly draws attention to itself as a mode of aesthetic expression in the manner of musical forms like the Baroque fugue, or the Classical symphony and sonata form. These forms are at least superficially 'transparent', the tools employed by the artists can be clearly identified and delighted in. There is joy and satisfaction in seeing all the parts, the way they are interconnected, the artful use of devices. In conventional Baroque or Classical music, melodic strands are clearly delineated and developed. In Bergman's film, scenes are often composed of painterly, balanced memorable 'pictures' (consider the 'eloquent' though usually wordless flashbacks), the characterization is complex but very clear; the characters are clearly delineated through intimate details, the deployment of their past.[(4)] (Paradoxically, such specificity does not undermine the strange 'familiarity' of their story.)

The camera work is deceptively simple, hardly ever moving suddenly or jerkily (which tends to suggest the imposition of subjectivity or unpredictability). The 'Baroque' or 'Classical' mode of transparency and restraint: 'accessible' and 'familiar' characters, a steady, usually 'objective' camera, the subdued palette, the painterly compositions, the prevalence of medium- and long-shots, the placid editing pace, shape the first half of the film. But certain aspects of *Autumn Sonata,* such as the final confrontation between Eva and Charlotte, and the 'discordant' ending - a commingling of hope and despair, are a reflection of 'Romantic' expressiveness and uncontained torment expressed in, for example, the music of Chopin.

The slow rhythm of Bergman's editing, that initially evokes placidity is soon overlaid by the quick-paced changes in emotional register, especially in the climactic confrontation scenes. The central relationship between Charlotte and Eva, made of love and hate, mutual attraction and repulsion, is fraught with contradiction. Boundaries between these explosive characters, and temporal boundaries are broken. The superficial pleasantries of their first meeting are, the effort to 'get along' is displaced by an ultimate confrontation, as the present is weighed down by, dissolves into the pain of their past. This shift is prefigured by the performances of Chopin's second prelude. The undulating intensity, dramatic modulations, mixed tonalities that come with use of the pedal in Chopin's second prelude are typically 'Romantic'. In this music, boundaries between melodic lines, tonalities, and sections (musical 'breaths') are blurred. Although Chopin follows a scheme, as did Händel, Bach, and Mozart, his music does not give the same impression of planned design. Instead, like Bergman's film, Chopin's music gives an impression of rhapsodic unpredictability, of anguish just beneath the surface threatening to shatter all semblance of order.

In the final scenes between Eva and Charlotte particularly, the camera frame 'cannot' seem to contain their faces. Tight close-ups on their faces, often in part or in profile, suggest that much cannot be contained by the constraints of the frame. Only once do we see their whole faces fitting together frontally within the frame. The climax of the film comes with the shock of seeing the two faces squeezed within the frame as Eva articulates most horrible fears: "Mother's unhappiness is to be the daughter's unhappiness. It's as though the umbilical chord had never been cut... Mama, is my grief your secret pleasure?". Here, the film, like much Romantic music, becomes a kind of assault. The camera pulls in closer and closer, uncompromisingly scrutinizing the characters, exposing their ugliness and captivates in a way that is almost unbearably cruel.[(5)] As in *Cries and Whispers*, even when the camera moves close to its subjects it seldom "participates in the action", stripping them bare with the illusion of "cold objectivity" (Bergman, *Images* 86).

The conflict between these two forms of expression, between (broadly speaking) Baroque or Early Classical

restraint (Händel) and Romantic torment (Chopin), are set up in the opening where the balanced order of the Händel piece is coupled with the violent brushstrokes of an abstract painting. The music has a ring of 'familiarity', predictability while the picture of strange mixed colours, apparently swirling beyond the limits of the frame is violent and 'unfamiliar'.

The music that opens *Autumn Sonata* is emotionally 'quiet'. Bergman uses a prime example of simple beautiful Baroque music in Händel's piece (more emotionally restrained and ordered than the bravura Bach cell solo featured later in the film). The baroque placidity and balance of the music is, however, belied by the yearning sound of the quivering flute working alternately with and against the solidity of the continuo accompaniment. The flute's melody is shaped by falling phrases. The 'dying' sound of the flute, poignant yet resigned, 'falls into' the tonic place at the end. The quiet yearning of the piece, the delayed final resolution from the seventh to the tonic musically reflects Eva's quiet suffering -- only with the help of wine can she find the bravado to speak the painful truth to her mother.

The melancholy flute tune, a 'singing' singular voice contained by the rules of Baroque form, perhaps prefigures the way in which Eva falls into a kind of death-in-life state (towards the end of the film her figure is imaged 'melting' into a graveyard setting), resigned to the form of life at the parish, to a life of measured happiness, servitude, and unanswered longing. The first, Händel piece contains two 'endings'. Typically, in Baroque music, a move towards a resolute ending is unfixed by a further, coda-like ending. The 'double ending' here perhaps foreshadows the double ending of the film. The return to the image of Eva at her writing table towards the end of the film is a neat kind of 'recapitulation', but this 'ending' is followed by the reading of her letter to Charlotte. This second 'ending' is open-ended in a way that the Händel Sonata, or Classical sonata form, is not. The superficial neatness of Händel's flute sonata, all harmonious and balanced, prefigures the peaceful stillness of the first painterly shot of Eva sitting in silence at her desk. But the unsettling nature of Bergman's ambivalent ending, Eva's determination to hope "it must not be too late" coupled with her uncertainty that Charlotte will bother to read the letter (the last words of the film are "too late"), is prefigured by the tormented beauty of the first Chopin prelude, featured midway through the film.

As the music of Händel and of Chopin seem to represent two conflicting modes of expression within the film, they also signify conflicting aspects of Eva's personality. Her bodily awkwardness, tightly braided hair, glasses, and outfits Quakerish in their simplicity (buttons done right up to the neck) signify her restraint and repression. Her Parish life is ordered, contained (composing letters, carefully folded napkins, quietly caring for Helena) though full of *quiet* yearning. But Eva is also passionate, limitless, tormented, instinctual, and mystical in her sense of Erik's presence, her glimpses of myriad realities coexisting and the limitless capacity of humankind to think and feel, taking off her glasses and, having dropped all pretence, drinking enough wine to spur her torrential outburst of anger and grief to Charlotte. Initially she responds to Charlotte's limitations with quiet resignation, withdrawing into the subservience of a child. But eventually she expresses the agony that comes with realizing Charlotte's ultimate inability to love.

In Charlotte's response to Eva's performance of the second Chopin prelude we catch a glimpse of motherly love. (Indeed, it is because we, and Eva, sometimes glimpse Charlotte's possible ability to love that her selfish emotional withdrawal is so painful to watch: consider the scene where Charlotte obediently cradles Helena's head in her hands -- it is, in Eva's words, a "superb performance" of the gentle, concerned mother.) This prelude is an unusual choice from Chopin's *oeuvres* because, uncharacteristically, there is little lyrical, soaring, nothing 'pretty' about the piece. It is, as Charlotte puts it, 'almost ugly', unsettling because low notes and slightly discordant chords predominate. As Eva plays, Bergman alternates between close-ups on Eva playing from Charlotte's perspective and close-ups on Charlotte listening. Initially, Charlotte looks stern, the mouth characteristically fixed in a tight straight line. But when the music rises in optimism, modulating to a major key, her eyes melt into warmth and she seems to view Eva differently, without criticism. The musical shift signifies hope gasping forth and Charlotte's response, her openness to this, reinforces the pathos. Charlotte's eyes are downcast as the piece becomes more mournful and then a single melodic line rises, a dying phrase (also a characteristic of the first piece) and Charlotte slightly smiles through tears. Her expressions match the tonal shifts within the music - briefly then, Eva and Charlotte express themselves synchronously.

As Eva plays the piece first, the solo voice in the upper register, straining to be heard above the thick discordant left hand chords, is aligned with her. As Eva plays it, aspects of the piece mirror her: the

yearning sound of the sweet falling melodic line, the bravado of the arpeggio towards the end, the tonal shifts between despair and longing to tenuous optimism, the faltering rubato rhythms. Aspects of the first Händel piece (the melodic line quivering against a weighty accompaniment, the hard-won, quiet but resolute ending) are taken to their logical Romantic extension. When Eva finishes playing, she raises a hand to her trembling lips. The gesture suggests that she is aware of having accessed something remarkably powerful (enough to move Charlotte to tears) and her resultant sense of vulnerability, of surprise, as if she is dwarfed by the power of the piece.

Eva's performance gives a musical space for her repressed longing to be expressed. Though the performance is amateurish, unsteady, it is remarkably moving to hear the music articulate the pain she cannot express at this point. Eva's artistic expression (in her musical performance and in the letters she carefully constructs) and her personal expression are *integrated* and this separates her from Charlotte. Further, Eva conceives of her own life as a kind of construction which she tries to "practice every day". Charlotte also wants to make a pleasing construction of her own life. The difference is that where Eva conscious of this kind of self-construction, Charlotte is not. And where Charlotte wishes to contain and control the meanings of things Eva embraces the vision of a world without limitations: "As you play that Adagio in Beethoven's Hammerklavier Sonata", Eva urges Charlotte, "you must sense that you live in world without limitations, in a constant surging that you can never see and can't explore." Charlotte's response is silence. In Beethoven's sonata, indeed in the 'Sonata' that is this film, Eva seeks to break beyond the bounds of conventional, aesthetically pleasing constraints (her confrontational speech to Charlotte is erratic, 'unpolished', even brutal and offensive to some commentators like Peter Cowie) and fixed truths. Music is access to the sublime being mentioned, by Eva, in the context of the intimate, transcendental contact she feels with her dead child. Eva's musical insights are testimony to a character who can embrace limitless realities and miraculous *possibilities*. Charlotte's performance of music illuminates the character's *limitations*.

*Autumn Sonata* explores different modes of expression (as I have outlined in general Baroque or Early Classical and Romantic terms). More broadly speaking, and especially in the portrayal of Charlotte, *Autumn Sonata* explores the dangers of retreat into artistic expression when it is false to the emotional 'truth' of one's life, or to 'natural' free expression.

Where Eva sits rigid and slightly slumped on the piano stool, glancing furtively at the score as she plays, Charlotte is self-possessed, poised, and able to play without even consulting the score. Charlotte is a performer of much more control, lecturing then demonstrating for Eva the 'truth' of Chopin's second prelude. Charlotte reveals an acute ability to discuss and express emotional messages embedded within Chopin's work. This kind of emotional subtlety and sensitivity is, however, missing in her the way she 'performs' in her own life. Likewise, in the final scene of Charlotte riding away in the train she describes herself as a generous musician, having moments before revealed her ultimate selfishness in asking why Helena "can't...just die". The ugly truth of Helena's illness does not fit within Charlotte's artistic vision of her own life. She has, as Eva puts it, "set up a discount system with Life" and the "agreement" is "all on [her] side". This discrepancy between Charlotte's ability to be 'generous', to understand emotional complexity and subtlety in musical performances, and her personal emotional limitations is foregrounded because everything Charlotte says about Chopin's work resonates with the portrayal of her relationship with Eva. Charlotte's artistic expression, as Livingstone writes, "is a substitute" for direct contact with others, depriving "emotions of their importance and reality" (245-6). Charlotte decrees:

> Chopin was rich in feeling Eva, but not gushy, they're not the same. There's a great difference between emotions and sentiment.

Charlotte's judgement suggests that Eva revealed too much emotion in playing for Charlotte's taste (though she wept during Eva's performance). Charlotte resists confrontation of any kind: she applauds the quiet suffering of Leonardo, shirks from the emotional frankness of her daughter. Though she eventually responds to Eva's anger with acceptance and a cry for help, she then abruptly leaves the parish.

> The prelude you just played tells of anguish that's suppressed, it's not about grievance. Take the opening for instance, it hurts but he never shows it. And then a short release but it's very fleeting and it hardly lasts, and the pain is the same, neither heightened nor diminished.

The ending of a sonata comes at the end of a developmental journey -- the recapitulation may be almost a straight repetition of the original themes but, because of the journey, the themes sound paradoxically different, more resolute and complete. The form of the prelude is much freer and Chopin's short second prelude contains no 'development' in the strict sense. There is brief respite from the discordant solemnity, the anguish of the opening chordal patterns in the transition to a major key but the overriding impression is one of stasis, of awful sameness. The sameness of the beginning and end of Chopin's prelude foreshadows the way Charlotte will leave Eva suddenly, wearing the same clothes (literally and figuratively) she wore in her first 'entrance'. The shot of Eva towards the end of the film, sitting at a desk writing to her mother as she did at the beginning, and the continuously washed-out 'palette' of Sven Nykvist's cinematography (when compared with the colourful mise en scène contrasts of *Fanny and Alexander* for example) also strengthens the sense of horrible stasis.

> Chopin was proud, sarcastic, passionate, tormented and very male. In other words, he wasn't a sentimental old woman. This second prelude must be made to sound almost ugly. Never allow it to become ingratiating, it should sound wrong. You battle through the piece and finally manage to end up triumphant.

When Charlotte describes Chopin she describes herself. Though Chopin's music is intensely passionate, sometimes fierce in its beauty, the man himself was very private and socially withdrawn, suggesting a disjunction between his public and private roles echoed by Charlotte. He habitually wore a pair of crisp white gloves indicating his gentility but also suggesting sterility, a resistance to direct contact with others.

Similarly, Charlotte, terrified of physical or emotional 'infection' from others, often resists Eva's tactile and verbal advances -- she only asks for Eva to touch her at the moment when Eva is most distant (towards the end of the final confrontation). Charlotte is, initially, ingratiating but her pleasantries are soon revealed as superficial. For instance, she wipes the pain for Leonardo's death away from her face with a brush of one hand, as if removing an invisible mask: the tale of his death is one of many anecdotes, a kind of set-piece in a string of dramas that constitute her life. When all the masks she wears (in public and even in private) are stripped away, by the end of her final confrontation with Eva, her face is "almost ugly", haggard, shrunken and blotchy, the habitual cigarette in hand and histrionic gestures (clenched fists, shaking head, flat of palm against her forehead) are like a pathetic, grotesque parody of the Hollywood film-star that the actress playing Charlotte, Ingrid Bergman, was before working on *Autumn Sonata*.

Charlotte emphasizes the sense of hard-won triumph in the prelude, ironically something Eva never enjoys lastingly either in playing Chopin, or in relation to her mother. Before Charlotte plays to Eva she says "Listen to *it*." It is as though she says 'this is how it is', 'this is how it *should* be done' - all her preamble talk about different, equally valid interpretations is just another pleasantry. As Charlotte plays, all the emotion of the piece is kept in check, indicative of Charlotte's way of communicating generally. The camera closes in on a tight two-shot of the two women: Eva's face is turned towards the camera whilst Charlotte's face is in profile. (Charlotte's face is often seen in profile or in shadow, a silhouette against the thin white drapes, suggesting that we never see the 'whole' of her, hinting at her incapacity to address anything frontally, directly.) Eva watches her mother with a kind of horror as well as hurt, suddenly she looks very young and small. They remain like that for a painful length of time. Eva's breathless intimidation is quickly qualified by ambivalence when she says "How much I admired you as a little girl. Then I got fed up with you and your pianos for many years. It's a bit different, now I find I admire it again." Charlotte's expression moves from anger to dismissiveness as she quickly kisses Eva's cheek and lightly replies "There's still hope." Eva's response is almost a whisper, "yes, I guess."

On the word "hope" the camera pulls right back. The three people in the room (Eva, Charlotte, Viktor) are therein objectified -- even Charlotte's dramatic red dress blends in so that the figures are just like other objects, their faces become indistinct for a moment. The aesthetic distancing that comes with the camera pulling back undermines Charlotte's already tenuous throwaway affirmation that there is "still hope", foreshadowing the final ambivalent moments of the film. This ambivalence emanates from the room itself, of subdued colours even though filled with light. Here, the camera moves back to follow the mode of decorous classical 'painterly', aesthetically pleasing expression. Here, the camera, the film itself, is aligned with Charlotte in the retreat from a possible peak of emotional tension (whereas at the end of the film the camera

will pull us in very close to the characters, mirroring the mode of Eva's emotional frankness). We (like Eva) are literally and figuratively captive as Charlotte's audience for her Chopin performance.

It is disconcerting to be locked in this position for, despite all the sublimity, the emotional resonance of Charlotte's playing, the film self-consciously fixes her performance within frames of falsity. The performance, the musical piece is a fiction (an aesthetic construction) performed by a fiction (Charlotte has so long constructed herself in various guises that she is virtually all falsity -- here she plays the role of the generous performer) within a fiction (the character herself) as part of a greater fiction of the film itself. By forming most of Charlotte's audience along with Eva and, no doubt, admiring Charlotte's performance we are implicated in creating a fiction of her power.

Many forms of aesthetic construction in the film are associated with containment, with falsity, and the difficulty of achieving 'true' expression. I suggest that *Autumn Sonata* is self-consciously concerned with the limitations of *any* kind of aesthetic formulation (whether in the form of music, words, or 'painterly' cinematic framing and, by implication, cinematic form itself) to communicate events and/or emotion in a 'reliable', or unproblematized way. The funniest example of 'false' aesthetic creation is Charlotte's dead-pan short reading from a contemporary, cliché-ridden detective novel: "And so she offered him the red blossom, mute in her virginity and he accepted without enthusiasm."

More sinister examples of aesthetic construction and falsity are given in relation to Charlotte. Charlotte's aesthetic constructions are an elaborate form of lying and they are dangerous. The harm she has caused by withdrawing into music ("the only place for emotions to show") is literally imaged in the deformity of her youngest child, Helena. Charlotte constructs 'false' stories of her life, casting herself like the heroine of a trashy romantic novel. She tells Eva that the detective novelist nearly died for love of her, hinting at his and her own tragic grandeur, only to say to herself (after Eva's left the room), whilst giving a great theatrical yawn, that he was "an idiot". As Charlotte's life is full of performances, posturing, the changes within her are superficial (like dyed hair or a new trouser suit). Throughout the film Charlotte flits from one role to the next. She is imaged in the past like a glamorous Film Star (immaculate hair and fur coat, high heels, and gold earrings), the Teasing Beauty (her story of the writer to whom she "made no defence", her flirtatious conversation with her agent), the self-pitying Lonely Spinster without Leonardo, the Grateful Guest (actually treating Eva like a servant with her elaborate breakfast requirements which Eva, like a dutiful school-girl, recites before bed).

The thin veneer of Charlotte's beauty (make-up, the glamorous red dress -- a theatrical splash of colour startling in the pale mise en scène) is quickly undercut by the evidence of Charlotte's vulgarity: consider her demand for a specially fitted toilet backstage for a concert in a baroque castle so she doesn't have to "pee in a flower vase", her private obsession with her own secret vast fortune and the decision to buy Eva and Victor a car which quickly slides into a plan to give them her old Mercedes and buy a new model for herself. Charlotte's entrance in her glamorous red dress coming down the stairs (à la *My Fair Lady*) for dinner with Eva and Viktor appears absurd in its theatricality but also hints at a desperate attempt to relive the glory of lost youth; later, she tells of giving a magnificent concert in a long red dress in the heyday of her musical prowess. Without performing, without audiences Charlotte's life is meaningless; a significant slide in her performing career left her in despair. Through performing she can adopt yet another role, one of warmth and emotional generosity without the threat of intimate contact, for an audience is there to absorb and be silent until the end. Once all the masks are exposed and stripped away Charlotte faces the camera frontally and directly confronts the void within herself. Her alienation, depersonalization and despair is epitomized in the revelation that she blanks out faces of the past and present (including that of her mother), and even her own face.

Charlotte's words, "just paint", often "didn't match the expression" Eva "saw in [her] eyes". There is most 'art' in the verbal gymnastics of Charlotte's speech. Consequently, Eva distrusts words, because even beautiful words can be emptied of meaning - she is immediately suspicious of Viktor when he says, in a way that is deceptively careless, that he "longs" for her. Charlotte endeavoured to make an aesthetically pleasing mirror of herself of her own daughter, as with the Chopin prelude. (The very first shot of Eva prefigures this revelation for she is imaged as part of an aesthetically pleasing 'painterly' construction.) As Charlotte takes charge of words, contains Chopin's meaning through words, so she wanted to contain, 'construct' Eva as a

doll-child of beauty and accomplishment. We are given a long list of painfully precise details of Charlotte's physical and intellectual moulding of Eva.

In a scene from the past, little girl Eva, moving with precise, regimented movements, carries coffee to her mother. Eva opens massive black doors into her mother's practice room and her small white figure 'disappears' into the scene within: as with the end of the Chopin prelude scene (and many others in the film) the room is filled with light but the light is a kind that 'washes out' rather than replenishes. The child and adult Eva often 'melt' into the setting, or her features are shown fuzzy and indistinct, signifying the extent to which her individuality was suppressed by Charlotte. As the child Eva examines her "repulsive" body in the mirror her frail figure blends into the pink and cream of the surrounding room. Similarly, when Charlotte first arrives (in the present) and preens before a mirror we see the adult Eva hanging back in slightly fuzzy focus, almost cowering into a corner of the room. Young Eva's gestures in the past are often mirrored by her movements in the present: after her mother leaves for a concert tour, the young Eva is seen crouched small in the corner of her nursery, knees pulled up to her face and head bowed in painful meditation and after the adult Eva puts her childish mother to bed we see her dismount the stairs and sit assuming a similar pensive posture. And remember the patter of the child Eva's shoes running towards the door through which her mother left and the clatter of adult Eva's shoes running excitedly down the stairs of the parish home to greet her mother's return after seven years absence. Adult Eva says that as a child without her mother "I used to think, now I'll die. It hurts so much, I'll never be happy again. It's been only five minutes, how can I stand such pain for two months?" and "I couldn't care less about movies or ice cream because I was dying." This is a natural child's self-dramatization reflecting true grief as opposed to Charlotte's histrionic posturing.

Charlotte's voice is the only one we hear in scenes from the past, signifying the extent to which Eva's needs were silenced. In another moment which horribly fuses the past and present the adult Eva tells Charlotte "For me there just weren't any words because you had taken charge of the words in our home" and Charlotte interrupts, silences her complaint with "you're exaggerating." The "small books" Eva has written, the letters she writes to Charlotte, and her verbal dominance in the second half of the film represent Eva's move to reclaim "the words", to demand freedom of expression.

As a child, Eva was driven to destroy the "creation" Charlotte made of her, to destroy herself by pulling out her hair by the handful, biting her nails. The most damaging act of destruction is the abortion Eva had on demand from her mother. The adult Eva takes control by de-centering Charlotte's construction of the past and naming the "single truth", "the single lie" of their existence. But the certainty of simple dichotomies brings only temporary relief. In the end, it seems that Eva has destroyed something of herself. Towards the end of the film she contemplates suicide and her figure blends into the setting of a graveyard, she is gray like a stone. In her final letter to Charlotte, read at the end of the film, Eva apologizes for her outburst, and assumes full responsibility for the literal and figurative distance now between her and Charlotte. Viktor initially reads the letter aloud and his voice melts into that of Eva as we see her in close-up, addressing the camera. Her close direct address and measured voice suggest unmediated strength but in the end she is left in a position of subservience, hoping (as at the beginning) for her mother's return. Eva's letter writing that begins and ends the film suggests that the character herself is bound within a form of circularity, contained yearning and stasis like the emotion of the Chopin Prelude.

*Autumn Sonata* explores limitations and/or dangerous elements of aesthetic construction. Even as Bergman's camera pulls in very close as if to "get through the faces" Bergman seems aware that "the hidden truth revealed by means of an actress' face is also a lie because it is art." Bergman will not talk about truth because "it doesn't exist! Behind each face [most obviously in the case of Charlotte] there is another and another...In each thousandth part of a second an actor gives you a different impression, but the succession is so rapid that you take them all as a single truth" (Bergman quoted by Samuels 121).[(6)] That could be a metaphor for the film as a whole where "a succession of individual frames perceived by the eye as one moving image" (Samuels 121). Any kind of aesthetic construction, such as sonata form, is a necessarily selective, subjective and illusory vision of 'truth' that orders and thereby contains emotional expression.

However, Bergman's film also explores the possibility of somehow reaching beyond stasis, beyond containment into unlimited joy and/or freedom of expression. Initially, there is a modernist anxiety (in the manner of

Eliot's *Four Quartets*) about the slippery nature of words which "strain,/Crack and sometimes break...Decay with imprecision, will not stay in place,/Will not stay still."[7] In his speech at the beginning of the film, Viktor despairs of words to express his love for Eva: "I would like to tell her she is loved for herself and as the way she is. Truly loved, completely... I just can't put it into words."[8] Paradoxically, he has just succeeded in putting his 'inexpressible' sentiment into words. Even when words are emptied of import they resonate: the superficial pleasantries exchanged between Charlotte and Eva at their first meeting after seven years are meaningless and full of meaning. Likewise, Helena's sounds, though inarticulate, are full of import and indescribable pain. Consider the vision of Helena's response to Charlotte's departure: the contorted hands in her lap, her convulsing body, her head shaking from side to side as she screams like a baby in pain, her hair streaming tangled over her cheeks. Her screams are primal, horrible, the character is incapable of anything like pretence -- in Lena Nyman's portrayal of Helena is a remarkable feat of acting to present emotional 'truth'. The black and white photos and colour slide-show photos of Erik are also moving beyond measure despite the aesthetic distancing they invoke: the succession of slide-show pictures of Erik is a kind of film within the film, another way in which Bergman draws attention to the medium itself. These artistic snapshots of the boy create the sense of his character even without his actual screen 'presence'. The clarity of these pictures of Erik is startling in contradistinction to the many pictures hanging in the parish and the 'painterly' scenes from the past or present where the details are indistinct. In each case, his face fills the frame but still appears very small and delicate.

The vision of Helena of the past, showered with light as she listens to Leonardo's music, is a 'painterly' expressionist construct of equally indescribable beauty. The music is ordered yet moving, like the little straight, suddenly self-possessed, calm but moved figure, illuminated before the cellist and his music though the other four people present are in shadows. Such lighting effects, or Bergman's occasionally 'dramatic' camera movements are not gratuitous tricks of technical virtuosity but integrated with the psychology of his characters (Godard (85) argues this in relation to Bergman's films generally).

The excerpt from Suite number 4 in E flat is a late, meditative work of Bach, and in a mode somewhere between the Baroque restraint of the first Händel piece and the Romantic expressionism of the Chopin prelude. The music is a restless, pained solo voice, slow successive rising figures finally descend into a low imperfect ending. The music and the image of Helena figuratively convey all the delicate pathos of a "butterfly fluttering against a windowpane". Yet even through the pain, the sense of searching in Bach's music, there is also a sense of solidity and strength. Of Bach's music Bergman said: "he gives us the profound consolation and quiet that previous generations gained through ritual. Bach supplies a lucid reflection of otherworldliness, a sense of eternity no church can offer today" (Bergman quoted by Livingstone 249). In such expression, then, Bergman finds an answer to "the scourge of religious anxiety" (*Bergman on Bergman* 195).

Where words may fail, music forms a complex and 'direct' form of communication (between characters and/or between the character and film audience). The music of Bergman's films, as Livingstone says, is "the 'touch' in all of its forms: the touch desired, promised or withdrawn, the touch that is temporary or lasting, superficial or real" (248).[9] Bergman, being "suspicious of words", describes musical notes as much more 'reliable', "the most perfect signs that exist between creator and performer" (as quoted in Samuels 101, 112). Unlike many other filmmakers who use music as a subordinate form, supporting and supplementing the film narrative, Bergman's music is a kind of narrative (albeit wordless), inextricable from the rest of the work. Through music, lighting, and, simple gestures, the careful composition of such scenes as Helena listening to Leonardo's performance, Bergman ensures that we receive all the necessary information and appreciate the craft of his vision. Bergman presents artificial beauty, self-consciously, repeatedly drawing attention to the film as an artistic construction, especially with his 'painterly' flashbacks. But he also gives the impression that what the film presents is entirely 'natural', not choreographed.[10] We may see "that there is no magic in [his] work, and that there is nevertheless a magic in it" (Bergman, *Ingmar Bergman: Four Decades in the Theater* 14).

The climactic moment, when Eva and Charlotte (facing us and not each other) both briefly touch their own face, mirroring each other's gestures without apparently knowing it, must have been choreographed. But this moment, where "they unite for a few brief moments in perfect symbiosis" (Bergman: *Images* 328), as Eva expresses the profound connections between them in suffering as "though the umbilical chord had

never been cut", is eerie and mesmerizing in its apparent 'naturalness'. At such points Bergman's art, unlike Charlotte's art, embodies, serves the confrontation of certain (though undefinable) 'truths' - no matter how uncomfortable they may be.

Perhaps it is impossible to explain why such visions are so beautiful because they are filmically 'poetic' in a way that beggars description. Godard captures something of the flickering magic, the "wordless secrets"[(11)], the transient beauty of Bergman's work when he describes other Bergman films as "Like the starfish that opens and closes, they can reveal or conceal the secrecy of a world of which they are the sole repository and also the fascinating reflection. Truth is their truth. They secrete it deep within themselves, and yet with each shot the screen is rent to scatter it to the winds" (75). In *Autumn Sonata*, past and present fuse in a timeless instant.[(12)] The weight of this sad time (contained within no particular season) is, in Godard's words, "a vast, limitless meditation upon the *instantaneous*" like "one twenty-fourth of a second metamorphosed and expanded over an hour and a half" (77). The film is linear only in the most basic sense of being built around Charlotte's arrival and departure because all elements (past and present, music and image) fuse completely.

In *Autumn Sonata*, the anxiety about the limitations of, the possible dangers implicit in making any form of art meets the possibilities manifested in the film itself of presenting uncontainable, indescribable beauty, of expressing the 'inexpressible'. The formulaic stability (the circular and simple plot formulations, and deceptively simple camera work) is superceded by the emotional and intellectual complexity of the piece, particularly of the central relationship. In the second half of the film the camera fixes close-up on its subjects without mercy as the pain of their present dissolves into that of the past.

The camera holds them and us "fugitive", delving deep into each moment "to give it the quality of an eternity" (Godard 85).

## Notes

1. See, for example Ingmar Bergman's Images: *My Life in Film*, trans. By Marianne Ruth (London/Boston: Faber and Faber, 1994) or "Ingmar Bergman: An Interview" by Charles Thomas Samuels in *Ingmar Bergman: Essays in Criticism*, ed. by Stuart M. Kaminsky with Joseph F. Hill (London/Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press, 1975), pp. 98-134.

2. Virtually all the action takes place in a Norwegian parsonage but Bergman's setting is not merely representational: "one is liable", as Richard Combs (in his review for *The Listener*, 114: 2925, 5 September (1985), 31) says, "to translate [the setting] into something much more non-denominational, non-geographic and non-specific in one's mind." Combs sees Bergman's setting as a kind of "landscape of the soul". The metaphorical setting coupled with psychological 'realism', the enclosed, sometimes austere nature of the film, being an intense study of a few characters, reflects Strindberg's influence on Bergman.

3. "The first script, according to Ingrid Bergman, would have run for four and a half hours [about the length of a full text Shakespeare tragedy] had Bergman not removed large chunks of dialogue during the rehearsal period." (See Peter Cowie's *Ingmar Bergman: A Critical Biography* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1982, 319.) Bergman's work is Shakespearean in its tight organic construction, its 'open unity' - all facets of the piece cohere and open out in limitless suggestiveness.

4. The characters appear 'familiar' and transparent enough that, in his *Ingmar Bergman and the Rituals of Art* (Ithaca/London: Cornell University Press, 1982), Paisley Livingstone speaks of Eva and Charlotte like real acquaintances, hypothesizing about ways they would behave in hypothetical circumstances not depicted in the film. With reference to Eva's performance of the Chopin prelude he writes: "Eva demands praise, and is not content with her mother's modest yet very warm and personal approval. Yet if Charlotte were to betray her knowledge and offer the desired praise, Eva would doubtlessly launch into one of her tirades about her mother's dishonesty and accuse her of superficiality" (247). Even as Livingstone responds to the characters as 'real' people (and Bergman's characters are complicated enough to prompt such responses) he simplifies the relationship, the film's thematic concerns, in claiming that Eva's accusations are "exaggerated and relentless", "motivated by a needless hostility" and "the difficulty central to *Autumn Sonata* is that of judging the status of the virulent accusations voiced by Eva" (246). By contrast, for John Pym, Eva (not

Charlotte) is a "caricature" of the victim, and Charlotte the villain -- "one is so meekly unambitious..., the other so vacantly ambitious." (See "Film Reviews: Autumn Sonata", *Sight and Sound*, 48:1 (Summer 1978), 56.) Bergman's film would not be nearly so captivating if he presented simple dichotomies of right and wrong, villain and victim. As Eva says, "in man, everything exists" and Bergman is anxious to portray "the wholeness inside every human being. It's a strange thing that every human being has a sort of dignity or wholeness in him" (Bergman in Cowie, 323). Despite their differences, Charlotte, Eva, and Helena are all "paralyzed" in different ways. When shots of Charlotte and Helena, each lying on the floor, pleading for help, are juxtaposed it is not the "crude", "easy parallel" that John Pym makes out but a disturbing reflection on the way pain (however differently manifested) may be inherited, passed on from the parent to the child and never alleviated, or on the way the seeming 'villain' is, even without always knowing, a paralyzed 'child' ("one who has never grown") more pathetic, because of her ignorance, than her disabled daughter.

5. The explosive resonance of Bergman's drama leads me to argue against *The Listener's* Richard Combs who claims that the anguish portrayed is "tidily contained by the situation" because it 'refuses' "to open out to into any other dimension (into the worlds at war, say, of *Persona* or *Shame*). "However, as Peter Harcourt points out (in his *Six European Directors* (England: Penguin Books Ltd., 1974), 180) the utilization of such explicit political references may be simplistic, even offensive. Ultimately, as Harcourt says, Bergman (like Charles Dickens) is concerned with "the violence closest to home, the violence that is directly a part of our own domestic lives" (180-81). Perhaps this is why the film, for Gavin Miller, is about "deepest crisis" and therein resists containment (see *The Listener*, 101:2605, 5 April (1979), 492-3). For Combs, Bergman does not delve deep enough, because "the film offers us the easy course of taking the emotions at face value". I suggest it would be a mistake to take Bergman's methods or his characters at "face value" for the strange light of *Autumn Sonata*, that drains rather than illuminates colour, forms an expressionistic 'backdrop' for a psychologically complex world, where boundaries will be blurred and broken and the characterization (breaking away from the 'allegorical' mode of Bergman's early films) is, as the film develops, anything but clear-cut or 'schematic'.

6. Interconnecting layers of 'truth' and art shape Fanny and Alexander (1981-2) which is, among other things, a reworking of Hamlet. Searches for any stable truth in this 'Winter's Tale' are difficult because different kinds of reality merge and slip through the fingers like water. Family homes, theatres, churches are all places where masks are worn in the world of this film. Yet, in hearing the cries of Emilie on the death of her husband, for example, one may sense contact with a "wordless secret", a 'true' grief enacted so convincingly that it seems anything but constructed.

7. T. S. Eliot, "Burnt Norton (V)" from *Four Quartets in Collected Poems 1909-1962* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1936), 180.

8. This suspicion of words is taken to an extreme in *Persona* (1965) where Elisabet Vogler (Liv Ullmann) will not speak because she wants to avoid lying.

9. Consider the reconciliation scene in *Cries and Whispers* between Maria and Karin: we do not hear their words but see their faces move close together accompanied by the Bach cello suite (the "temporary" touch) or the scene from *Fanny and Alexander* where Lydia, alienated from her husband (Carl), attempts to communicate with Carl through singing -- she holds her palms together as she sings so the music is like a prayer for his mercy ("the touch desired", and "the touch denied"). In *Persona* music sometimes functions as internal diegetic sound, seeming to emanate from or resonate in Elisabet's mind -- since the character does not speak except once, music and gestures are the principle ways we 'read' her (here music is the "touch" between Elisabet and film audience).

10. As Peter Harcourt puts it, though with reference to Bergman's films prior to *Autumn Sonata*: "we may be at times unbearably moved by the convincingness of the action, but at the same time we experience an exhilaration because, among other things, we can feel the presence of the artist's controlling hand in all the situations that are moving us." (144).

11. This is Bergman's phrase from *Images*, 65.

12. Although time is an important theme of *Autumn Sonata*, Bergman does not feature clock faces or chimes as he does in many films such as *Cries and Whispers* or *Fanny and Alexander*. The fusion of past and present

in *Autumn Sonata* means that precise times in the present are immaterial and meaningless.

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