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BERGMAN'S ROMANTIC AGONY

by Judith Thurman

Ingmar Bergman, who will be sixty-five in July, has announced that *Fanny and Alexander* is his last film. He intends to go on directing for the theater, the opera, and for television (*After the Rehearsal*, made for Swedish TV, will be released theatrically in the US next fall), so he apparently doesn't feel bereft of creative power. He is renouncing, rather than retiring from, the cinema. But doesn't such a resolute closing of the parenthesis usurp fate a bit too anxiously and prematurely? It creates a false sense of pathos—the pathos of “finality,” which works not only on the audience but on the artist himself and on the movie he has charged with being “the sum total of my life as a filmmaker.”

Fanny and Alexander seems on the surface to be an anomaly in Bergman's career rather than its summation: a reproduction gingerbread house in a landscape of fanatically pure and strange glass boxes. The tale is set in 1907, or just before the First World War—that halcyon moment when the world was supposed to be still intact. The pulling back is intended to give us a “whole” picture—the picture of a family and of a “little world unto itself,” the provincial Swedish town of the Ekdahls, who own the town's theater. They are all great voluptuaries. They cry and rage easily; they live to give and to take pleasure; they are broadminded about transgression; they are splendidly corrupt, imperfect, suffering, ticklish, vulnerable, impulsive. Bergman has never been more loving as an artist to his characters, and the vignettes of family life in *Fanny and Alexander* are triumphs. But they are triumphs in what finally is a failure. For the film isn't redeemed by its elegiac beauty, nor by the valor of its cast and crew—Bergman's old-timers and young protégés working their hearts out for the master.

Bergman's failure is not one of bad faith or lack of ambition. The master is in the ripeness of his craft here, and is doing in *Fanny and Alexander* what he has done in the forty-two films that preceded it, the masterpieces as well as the flops. He is exploring the way experience and consciousness get fragmented, splitting character into raw feelings that compose it, and re-presenting those feelings as images, symbols, gestures, things, events with a more charged and suggestive relationship.

When people speak about the “difficulty” of modernist art, and of Ingmar Bergman, the problem seems to be intellectual and formal: simply to figure out how things looked before the mysterious Accident (historical? spiritual?) that mangled them. But I think the difficulty one has

with Bergman's best films, and with the best modernist art, is an emotional one: our unwillingness to face, and our resentment when confronted by, an extreme version of our own fragmented state. The anguish in Bergman's films is a more intense version of an anxiety almost everyone knows: the inability to make the center hold; the constant undertow of loss.

“Meaning” in a work of art is a sort of metaphor for that visceral wholeness which is so elusive in real life. “Meaningful” art is very comforting. By fracturing the coherent structure of his narratives and of his characters' personalities, Bergman-the-modernist deprives us of a very important vicarious consolation: the confidence that order and control can be restored.

Bergman has always been compassionate toward his audience, concerned that we *feel* what he has to give us. He has also expressed impatience, rightfully, I think, with critics who find him hard to understand. “I make my pictures . . . to put me into contact with other human beings,” he told Charles Samuels in 1971, “to whom I give them and say, ‘Please use them. . . .’ My impulse has nothing to do with intellect or symbolism, it has only to do with dreams and longing, with hope and desire, with passion. . . . So when you say that a film of mine is intellectually complicated, I have the feeling that you don't talk about one of my pictures.”

Fanny and Alexander is not modernist at all, of course. It is blatantly, luxuriously Romantic. In his program notes, Bergman calls it “my declaration of love for life,” and he explains that it was made in response to a friend who had asked why a man who finds life “so wonderfully rich and entertaining” has always made such “serious, depressing, black films.” Bergman's project, then, is to leave his admirers with something hopeful and solid to hold onto—a “wisdom piece.” This is generous and humane, and what is perhaps most moving about *Fanny and Alexander* is the compassion that Bergman finally seems able to manifest for *himself*. The film's noble, elegiac quality has to do with self-tolerance.

Bergman understands that to put the pieces back together properly he must short-circuit modernism altogether; he must use Romantic terms. The Romantics also explored the fragmented nature of experience, but their fragments were neat ones—solid dualities like “art and life,” “body and soul,” “good and evil”—broken pieces of crockery that a skillful mender might, with a steady hand, repair. Romanticism clings to the idea of re-imposing the order, while modernism has given up. In *Fanny and Alexander*, Bergman has taken the classic Romantic text on “splitting,” Kierkegaard's *Either/Or*, and embodied it in the most opulently literal manner. The Ekdahls are the sensuous/aesthetic pole of the dialectic, the *Either*. The Vergérus household—Bishop Vergérus, his sadistic mother and sister, and a maid and cook who seem to have come to Sweden straight from a Marat-Sade audition—are the “moral” pole of the dialectic, the *Or*.

The Bishop consoles Emilie Ekdahl after her husband Oscar dies of a stroke while playing the Ghost in *Hamlet*,



The Ekdahls celebrate the christening of their new babies in the rosy finale to Fanny and Alexander.

and she is seduced by his hardness, by the exigency of his desire—an exigency that is missing in her own milieu. He asks her to marry him, to come to him with no baggage from her former life, and her children, Fanny and Alexander, are forced to come empty-handed too. They are thus brutally uprooted from their paradise of big-breasted nursemaids and magic lanterns and treacle sandwiches, to be abused and imprisoned—literally, I'm afraid—in the bishop's stone tower.

Fanny is just a cipher, a witness, and she doesn't count for much in the story. But Alexander and his stepfather play out an Oedipal melodrama together. *Hamlet* is the subtext here—which is perfectly Romantic. There is also a wise old Jewish moneylender who spirits the innocents away from their wicked stepfather in a chest; there is Oscar's ghost (who bears a disconcerting resemblance to Adolf Hitler); there are statues that move; a mummy that glows; a mad epicene named Ishmael who lives in a closet and reads minds; death wishes that come true in slow motion; and a murky, turbulent river that flows outside the bishop's palace, and also beneath the theater—the dark stream of the unconscious.

This makes a splendid catalogue of Romantic *idées reçues*. It also makes a splendid inventory of Ingmar Bergman's fantasies as a boy—a sensitive, passionate boy like Alexander, trapped in a gloomy Swedish parsonage and humiliated by a clergyman father. For Bergman's childhood *was* anachronistically "Romantic." He did endure the Or and escape, through Art, to the Either.

F*anny and Alexander* ends on a note of almost sublime sweetness: a great pink and white banquet scene; babies lofted in the air and kissed; the horrid stepfather dead;

Alexander curled up in his sailor-suit, in his grandmama's lap. There are intimations that this moment may be fragile and transient, perhaps even illusory, but we are left with a glow. It is Bergman's paean to wholeness. As such, it seems to be a great personal achievement. Furthermore, anyone who has wrestled with the angel all his life is richly entitled to seek, at the age of sixty-five, a blessing. He was tortured as a child; he escaped by dint of courage and imagination; he has made forty-three films in forty years; he has had six wives and nine children; he has lived in exile, been sick unto death, fearful unto loathing, as well as having had the strength and charm to find life "rich and entertaining."

But if Bergman is wonderfully clear about his experience, the terms of that clarity remain banal. They are the clichés of Northern Romantic literature, unmediated by any irony, set before us as if they were perfectly fresh, and able to convey a powerful message about life's fullness. Perhaps Bergman is still so close to them that he can't gauge what they *don't* mean on the screen. Or perhaps his sense of freedom—his "joy," his "love for life"—is still provisional. Contrivance is often a symptom of the yearning for, but the inability to achieve, a real integration.

My own hunch is that in short-changing the character of Fanny he has flinched from something very painful and essential in his own experience. *He* was the younger sibling, the "witness." And an evasion so basic has to have an impact on a story ostensibly self-revealing. In an autobiographical work you have to make your reckoning with the losses absolutely honest, and you have to make your reconciliation with them, if there is to be one, plausible and moving for strangers. Nothing is more difficult. And in this, Bergman fails for me. □