Document Citation

Title	**Bergman comforts the afflicted, Meisel afflicts the comfortable**
Author(s)	Myron Meisel
Source	*Reader (Los Angeles, Calif.)*
Date	1978 Oct 17
Type	review
Language	English
Pagination	6
No. of Pages	1
Subjects	
Film Subjects	Höstsonaten (Autumn sonata), Bergman, Ingmar, 1978

Bergman Comforts the Afflicted, Meisel Afflicts the Comfortable

By Myron Meisel

Ingmar Bergman's latest, *Autumn Sonata*, confronts us with most of the stylistic and thematic attributes one must accept, with a mixture of anticipation and dread, in an Ingmar Bergman movie. So it's an Ingmar Bergman movie? Lots of closeups, two-shots, torment and anguish, laceration, humiliation, self-pity, psychoanalytic character studies, a batch of symbols. You know, okay, an Ingmar Bergman movie. That he is a great director is beyond question; that he has made more outright lousy films than any other great director is unavoidable. At this stage, debating Bergman is pointless—you accept him for what he is and experience the films on that basis. It would be easy to take potshots at Bergman on account of his new film. It would be unwise because it is rather wonderful, his best since *The Touch* (1971), and it augurs particularly well for film goers because what's new for Bergman this time out is an emotional generosity that could be the stuff of masterpieces to come.

This generosity isn't indulgent, but critical, and all the more moving and infectious for its refusal to truck with bathetic nonsense. As concert pianist Ingrid Bergman notes of playing Chopin: "You have to be calm, clear and hard." The director approaches his dramatic fireworks in the same spirit—not detached, but objective. This hasn't come easily, particularly since here, as he has done so often, the female characters are all projections of Bergman himself, essentially elaborately detailed masks for his own tortured, conflicting feelings. Yet there is a unity encompassed by the mother-daughter relationship that lends coherence to the emotional chemistry, as opposed to the hysterical schematism of the four women in *Cries and Whispers*. The inference suggests itself that while we may have had the Swedish tax authorities to blame for the depressive hopelessness of *The Serpent's Egg*, their coarse treatment of Bergman may well have brought him to the regenerating forgiveness displayed in *Autumn Sonata*.

Just as Bergman's acceptance of the 1:1.85 aspect ratio in *The Passion of Anna* marked a stylistic development, enabling him to hold his intense two-shots without untoward audience constraint, giving his closeups space to breathe, here Bergman evinces a skepticism toward the uncontrolled breast-beating of his tortured souls that places the anguish in a healthy perspective. This is signalled early on when Liv Ullmann's husband (Halmar Bjork), a sympathetic, comically peripheral character, addresses the audience directly, telling us about his wife, who is framed in the background, oblivious, as focus pulls slightly in and out on her. It is the direct address of the director, and because the husband, too, is his surrogate, he provides a convenient relief from relative objectivity and sanity throughout.

The story concerns a reunion after seven years' separation of mother Ingrid Bergman, a concert pianist neglectful of family in pursuit of career, and Liv Ullmann, her ungainly daughter, who lives far from the madding crowd in Norway. (If I neglect the spastic, dying daughter, played by Lena Nyman, it is out of the same spirit of charity Bergman encourages us to display. She is shamelessly trumped up as a symbol too blatant for anyone to respond to.)

Bergman astutely communicates the intractable quality of parent-child relationships. Before Ingrid arrives, we see Liv as thorough-goingly competent, remote, sensible, bovine old Liv. Yet the moment mama walks in the door, Liv regresses. She becomes a daughter, still confused by turbulent churlishness, eternally stillborn resentments, long latent immaturity. It's not much different for Ingrid. While her timing and composure remain enviable, she is plainly uncomfortable, claustrophobic, her interior rhythms disrupted. Neither woman knows quite what to do or how to behave around the other, and never will. For though we may change, and with us our relationships, the near-permanence of the parent-child relationship evolves in its own snail's time. After seven years, you can't help but pick up where you left off. The relationship brooks no tolerance of separate development; it has its own dynamic, its own perverse rigidity, parents haunted by unknown sins, children dogged by unresolved feelings.

The lengthy climax of *Autumn Sonata* is a confrontation scene in which Liv elaborates in excruciating detail the pain, indignities and unhappiness she has suffered at her mother's selfish hands. These frank soliloquies, tortured and interminable, are a Bergman hallmark, the occasion for thespian fireworks and psychoanalytic revelation. When he and the performers are good, the acting validates the overelaborated and overwrought explanations. With a precision born of that special cruelty of the wounded, Liv lays into mother Ingrid for a terrible history of neglect, selfishness and desertion. She has a beef and has suffered intensely, yet once the floodgates of recrimination open during that sleepless night, a strange, intriguing transmutation occurs. Liv is not seeking expiation, but revenge, to punish as methodically as possible her mother at a time when she is most vulnerable. Our lovable Liv, in Bergman's inspiration, has become the heavy, flailing her mother unmercifully.

We cannot sympathize with anything Ingrid Bergman has done to her children. The flashbacks to scenes of rejection and humiliation ensure that. These flashbacks resonate with immediacy because they are shot as vivid memories, not as narrated descriptions of wrongs past. So Ingrid takes it as her mother's duty, and she can't, won't, doesn't strike back. It is her turn to receive in some measure the suffering she has unwittingly, callously caused. Yet we sympathize wholeheartedly with this monster, because we see she is not a monster at all, but a human being as limited and pained as her daughter. And her daughter is now to be as culpable for her savaging of her mother as mother is responsible for the pain of her daughter. That is why no one must be, or can be blamed.

This is Bergman's extraordinary coup: While we hear about what a victim Liv has been, and believe it, the person we see being victimized is the sinning mother. Inevitably, the only possible response is one of forgiveness, of an undifferentiated charity. The golden rule understood in a profoundly meaningful way is negative: "Do *not* unto others. . ." I don't truck much with the intricate psychological explanations; they are just so much material that would remain undigested didacticism save for the sublime intensity of the players' delivery. But Bergman here has gone far beyond mere compassion, which in his films has always veered parlously close to self-pity. Forgiveness is all when pain is inevitable; all we can do is to spare what pain we can. That's a lot.

There are many small artistic wonders in the film unusual to Bergman. Watch Ingrid and Liv as they listen to the other speak, especially in the soliloquies where the viewer's attention tends to fix on the speaker: You'll see some surprising reactions. Only a director as susceptible to periodic charges of technical incompetence could score as tellingly as Bergman does with a simple cutaway, yet his cuts to the husband during the long night's peroration do more than temporarily release the pressure on the audience—it comments benignly that all can go better, if not right. After Ingrid beats an understandably hasty retreat the next day, Liv characteristically blames herself for driving her away. But she writes a letter of reconciliation, which is read to the audience by the husband. It will not cure the pain or hurt; no one knows better than she that nothing does. It does extend the gift of forgiveness, in hope of its return. It makes for a beautiful ending, tentative yet purgative.

Early on, Liv asks her husband if one ever stops hoping. Without much reflection, without interrupting his own bemused, preoccupied manner, he rejoins, "No, I don't think so." The line earns an inward smile, by suggesting, however clumsily, that Ingmar Bergman has found that being glum about the intractable suffering of the individual heart can be as opaque as black on black. Now he says, bracingly, things don't have to get worse before they get worse.

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